

An Agile Musicology: Improvisation in Corporate Management and Lean Startups

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Abstract

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The last decade of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of publications that use jazz as a metaphor for corporate management, arguing that in the contemporary knowledge economy, jazz is superior to the symphonic model that governed mid-century factory floors. As the literature on the jazz metaphor, and organizational improvisation more broadly, continued to develop into the twenty-first century, another managerial methodology became widely adopted by entrepreneurs: agile. While agile is yet to be fully theorized as an improvisatory practice, agile shares several core tenets with the models promoted by organizational improvisation scholars, including the use of small teams, an emphasis on feedback, and an openness to change.

In this dissertation, I argue that agile methods, and the adjacent lean methodology, are inherently improvisatory and that understanding them as improvisatory offers opportunities not only for their deployment within growing businesses, but also for adoption at-scale in large corporations. I draw on an array of disciplinary perspectives, including management science, organizational studies, musicology, and critical improvisation studies, as well as a wide range of sources, from peer-reviewed journal publications to trade manuals. Each chapter builds upon the former: a substantial and critical review of the jazz metaphor literature is followed by a dissection of its main themes under a musicological lens; after securing the foundations of organizational improvisation, the next chapter reveals the improvisatory nature of agile and lean startup practices and links them to concepts discussed within the jazz metaphor literature. Drawing on insights from large-scale improvisatory musical practices, the final chapter reveals how improvisation, as a set of practices shared between corporate management and agile methodologies, provides avenues for agile to be scaled up as startups grow or for its widespread adoption within established companies.

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Introduction

On Monday, January 28, 2019, I sat down to finally start writing—putting down words on the page—the prospectus of this dissertation. Upon opening my computer, I find an email that informs me that my startup, Predictive Cyber Protection, received \$75,000 in non-dilutive capital from the United States Air Force. Following the Lean Startup methodology taught in the defense-adjacent incubator out of which the startup grew, we were to validate the market and applicability of a cybersecurity diagnostics system that we’ve been working on alongside the Army Research Lab. I drop my plans for drafting the prospectus, alongside the bootstrappy plans for market validation, and set about building out the infrastructure for receiving the funds and, perhaps more crucially, starting to look for the best ways to deploy them. This moment, and the subsequent weeks, forced me to internalize that carefully crafted plans do not allow for disruptions and must be abandoned in order to seize opportunities. I needed to embrace change and accept the new set of (advantageous) conditions, I needed to gather and judge feedback from my environment and the people around me, and I needed to make decisions and enact them—in short, I needed to improvise.

This sense of improvisatory action continued to manifest in a variety of ways throughout this process of market validation. Initially my co-founder, Jonathan Ford (no relation), and I thought that the market opportunity would lie in financial services or healthcare—sectors in which cybersecurity is critical—yet, over many interactions with would-be customers, we learned that these industries are limited in their appetite for working with small companies like Predictive and are tied down by stringent regulation. New information gathered from frequent unvalidated hypotheses such as these forced reorientations toward new possibilities, which had to be rigorously tested and, upon eventually finding an avenue forward. After numerous failures, learnings, and pivots, we eventually settled on two segments: cybersecurity insurance and defense. Throughout this customer discovery

process, I was struck by how reliant I am on collaborating with people inside and outside the business and how this practice of close listening allowed me to rapidly make and revise decisions that would, in turn, have a measurable impact on our local environment, immediately necessitating another round of information-gathering, judgement, and decision-making.

The nimbleness that this agile approach afforded was enabled by the small size of the founding team—Jonathan and myself, along with the inventor of the tech—as well as by how regularly, seamlessly, and deeply we communicated with each other, despite being in three different cities (this was a fortunate pre-covid primer on remote work). As we brought on more people, in either formal or informal roles, I felt the nimbleness decline slightly and started to think that this would continue to be the case as the company grew to a size that typically demands a structure more hierarchical than we had at the three-person outset. We exited before the situation of crystallization came to be, but even the small decrease in agility instilled in me a curiosity in how team size, and to a certain extent leadership style, would impact the improvisatory behavior that had benefited our company in its days of nascency.

At the same time, I was reading articles and books in organizational studies in which the authors promote styles of managing large corporations that draw on the musical and social conventions of jazz. They contrast jazz to classical music, particularly the symphonic form which includes trappings like an indisputable (and possibly tyrannical) leader in the form of a conductor and the practice of reading and executing carefully notated scores. Instead of following such a rigid and hierarchical model of organization and an unbending sequence of planning and execution, both perfected on factory floors in the mid-twentieth century, they argue that jazz-like forms of adaptation and flexibility are better suited to the turbulent environment of the late-twentieth- and early twenty-first century. A shift in the type of work that many employees do, from repetitive tasks that animate assembly lines to the creative work carried out in the contemporary knowledge

economy, scholars who advance the notion of the jazz metaphor recommend flatter organizational structures with leadership and decision-making power distributed among team members, similar to how musicians alternate solos in a typical bebop performance.

The early phases of my research into organizational improvisation, which led up to the state of preparedness to start writing on that Monday morning, remained at a theoretical level of understanding the pervasive nature of improvisation in business leadership, but the jolt of an unexpected opportunity and the series of improvisatory steps and agile approaches necessary to make the most of it, turned my attention to the practical side of understanding founding and building a business as an elaborate process of improvisation. Alongside the connection between theoretical and practical understanding of organizational improvisation, my experience in navigating the turbulence of entrepreneurship while reading books and articles from the 1990s and early 2000s that suggest jazz as a metaphor for managing large corporations in particular also focused my attention on the paucity of discourse that casts the process of lean starting-up as improvisatory. I saw an opportunity to connect the discourse on organizational improvisation, initially developed as an intervention for big, hierarchical companies, to the discourse on the lean startup methodology and its sister-methodology of agile. Agile, which rose to prominence in software development circles and was subsequently translated into a set of entrepreneurial practices during the 2000s and early 2010s, was similarly untheorized in terms of improvisation. Business writings in the late 2010s brought the configuration full circle, as large firms that came up in pre-agile days were encouraged to adopt agile methods at scale in order to reap the benefits that led to the disruptive startups that utilized agile from the start.

In this dissertation, I demonstrate the improvisatory underpinnings of corporate management in its instantiations in both large, established firms and in agile-native startups in order to propose an understanding and theoretical framework for managerial practices in the twenty-first

century. I begin by analyzing the discourse on organizational improvisation, particularly in its iteration as the jazz metaphor for business, that recommended managers to take an improvisatory approach to leading their companies through increasingly turbulent environments. The jazz metaphor presents a particularly interesting case since it positions the genre somewhere between fully precomposed symphonic music and, on the other end of the improvisational spectrum, freely improvised music not based on any precomposed material, indicating that jazz, with its musical and social conventions, serves as a useful point of balance between freedom and constraint. Casting my gaze toward the freer side of the spectrum, I then turn to improvisation in startups and how the discourse around entrepreneurship—in its agile and lean formulations—relies on tenets found in the literature on organizational improvisation as well as in that of critical improvisation studies. While understanding agile and lean as improvisatory practices is a useful end in itself, as it provides models for enacting possibly counterintuitive ideas such as embracing failure, the larger benefit of seeing these methods as inherently improvisatory lies in the subsequent transferability to large firms, which can be led in improvisatory ways, in order to achieve agile at scale. I conduct this transfer in part by extending the musical imagery proposed by the jazz metaphor toward freer forms of musicking that allow large groups of improvisers to coordinate and collaborate and argue that these forms provide a better model than the small-group jazz metaphor for corporate management in the twenty-first century.¹ After working through each component of the configuration—organizational improvisation in large companies, improvisation in agile startups, and finally improvisation as a means to scale up

¹ Throughout this document, I use “model” and “metaphor” somewhat interchangeably: both terms signal the transference and application of concepts from one domain of thought to another. Physicist and banker Emanuel Derman contrasts this pair of terms to “theories” and states that “models are metaphors, *relative* descriptors of the object of their attention that compare it to something similar already better understood via theories.” “Metaphors, Models, and Theories,” *Quarterly Journal of Finance* 1:1 (2011): 109. My choice of interchangeable usage follows the loose convention found in much of the jazz as metaphor/model for business management discourse. It should be noted, however, that not all the authors use the two terms in such an interchangeable way and, where appropriate, I specify their usage.

agile in large companies—I provide actionable recommendations for managers, encouraging viewing contemporary business practices and leadership principles in light of improvisation so as to access the advantages that agile brings to small and large firms alike.

By its nature as a transitive project, this dissertation is deeply interdisciplinary. I draw heavily on and actively extend the discourse on organizational improvisation, as specialism of management science. I critique the same discourse from the perspectives of musicology and critical improvisation studies. Most of the organizational improvisation literature is from the business press and on the few occasions that musicologists have opined, they have been disparaging. While the current musicological document is not wholly devoid of disparagement, I do try to take a more complementary approach, using the literature from one disciplinary field to understand and expand that of the other. A similar approach is evident in my application of critical improvisation studies to discourses around management science and entrepreneurship. The aim in this interdisciplinary approach is to enrich each of these disparate domains of knowledge by bringing them into dialogue with each other. In this sense, organizational improvisation studies is sharpened by my musicological critique and subsequently expanded in a musicologically informed manner. The inclusion of private sector areas under the wing of critical improvisation studies broadens its scope; an important step for a nascent field that still centers disproportionately on the arts. Yet the most significant intervention of this project is in infusing contemporary management science and the entrepreneurship discourses with precepts and concepts drawn from critical improvisation studies. In particular, agile and lean startup practices benefit tremendously from being cast in an improvisatory light, not only for the advantages that it offers founders and developers, but also because it reveals a way in which agile can be scaled in established companies.

Chapter outline

After a short overview of the document as a whole, this introduction proceeds to a methodological section that describes the ways in which sources are used, as well as considering the in-between status of some of the sources in defining them as primary or secondary sources. I also present a view on improvisation that demonstrates its ubiquity in everyday life, as opposed to being limited to the arts, and provides a working definition of improvisation by thinking through one of the core binaries by which the practice is frequently defined.

The first chapter is a thorough review and analysis of the discourse on organizational improvisation, with the jazz metaphor at its center. The chapter is divided into three rough sections. The first, covering the period from 1989 to 1998, includes the first notable articles that introduce and develop the idea of using jazz as a metaphor in the business sphere. The second stage, what I call the maturation, details several streams into which applications of the metaphor subsequently split. Some authors, such as Mary Crossan, Claudio Ciborra, and Steve Leybourne, disentangle themselves from jazz as such as the foundational metaphor and opt instead for “organizational improvisation,” yet organizational improvisation is heavily informed by and heavily informs scholarship on the jazz metaphor in the limited musical sense. Whereas the discourse in the first and second stages is dominated by scholars in the fields of business and organization, the third stage includes more voices from the musicological community. Indeed, the musicological critique of the jazz metaphor forms the basis of the delineation of the third stage, along with the chronological position of this scholarship, appearing since 2013.

The second chapter focuses on five particular themes that emerge from the organizational improvisation literature: the (false) dichotomy between jazz and classical music; didacticism pertaining to jazz theory; a strategically circumscribed view of jazz, which carries a particular set of affordances and limits; the jam session model; and improvising through crisis. I also reflect briefly

on the scant deployment of free jazz in the organizational improvisation discourse, positing that its strategic erasure presents a missed opportunity to maximize the benefits of what improvisatory thinking can offer corporate managers (I seize this opportunity in a later chapter). What emerges from an investigation of the various themes is an overarching attempt by jazz and organizational improvisation scholars to more closely align management practices with the environment within which they take place. Many authors remark on the increasingly turbulent corporate environment, prone to crises and disruption, and the methods that these writers promote deal with ways in which to navigate such an environment. First among these methods is the creation of smaller working groups with more decentralized leadership structures than those typical of mid-twentieth-century organizations. Flexibility is further promoted by a relaxation of the adherence to a strict plan, not only in times of crisis, but also when innovation is key.

After two chapters on improvisatory corporate management in large firms, the third chapter turns to startups and the current best-practice methods that entrepreneurs employ to build their businesses: agile and lean. I make explicit their improvisatory nature. With this baseline of understanding of the practice of contemporary entrepreneurship, particularly in its agile and lean instantiations, as inherently improvisatory, I extend the discourse on organizational improvisation to include these types of business types and methodologies by illuminating the parallels between agile, lean, and the principles explicated in the two preceding chapters. After a very quick historic overview of agile's and lean's respective histories and their convergence, the chapter is organized to highlight four principles central to agile and lean that I find either particularly improvisatory or resonant with core elements from the jazz metaphor or organizational improvisation discourses. They are people-centricity, embracing change, efficiency and speed, and learning and failure.

The fourth chapter works toward a model of scaling agile, typically used in small teams and businesses, to large corporations by using the improvisatory underpinnings of both large-company

corporate management and agile startup methods as a bridge. In an extension of the organizational improvisation discourse, it draws on musical models of large-group improvisation and argues that these genres provide critical insights for scaling up small-team managerial and business development practices in big companies.

In the conclusion, I provide five recommendations for twenty-first-century managers. The recommendations pertain to understanding management and agile business development as improvisatory practices, leadership styles that draw on and encourage improvisatory behavior, and methods of forming teams that allow for beneficial modes of collaboration and coordination.

Who is this for?

Each chapter has a particular audience in mind. Chapter 1 is primarily for myself in that I needed to ground myself in the extant literature on organizational improvisation before finding ways to expand and enhance it. Yet it also serves as a compendium of the discourse that emphasize the jazz metaphor and lays out the material on which I, or others, can build new understandings and applications of improvisation to organizations. The second chapter is for the musicologists. In it, I approach several themes found in the jazz metaphor discourse from a musicological perspective in order to elucidate the assumptions and suppositions on which the metaphor relies. It reveals that, in many cases, organizational scholars who promote the jazz metaphor for corporate management do not engage extensively on musicological sources and draws attention to some instabilities in their theoretical foundations that support their notions of how jazz relates to other genres. The foremost comparison is to classical music, which draws on what I reveal to be strawmen and false dichotomies; as well as occasional oppositions to forms of improvisation that fall outside a strategically crafted definition of jazz that imposes arbitrary limits to the swing, bebop, and, to a lesser extent, postbop subgenres.

Chapter 3 turns away from large-company corporate management literatures in order to focus on more recent discourses on entrepreneurship and practices recommended to startup founders. I move away from music-related understandings of improvisation and instead draw amply on critical improvisation studies—scholars in this emerging field form my first envisioned audience for this chapter. While critical improvisation studies has firm roots in the study of improvisatory musical practices, its true value, at least to me, is in the wideness of its church and the drive to incorporate non-artistic forms of improvisation into its domain. This chapter follows that path, emphasizing the improvisatory nature of starting up, particularly in its agile and lean forms, as it is portrayed in foundational trade manuals. My second envisioned audience is entrepreneurs who are navigating the tumultuous, uncertain, and failure-filled environment in which startups find themselves. The aim here is to give these founders tool and mindsets to understand the throws of building a new business in light of improvisation, supplying them ways of approaching counterintuitive ideas such as embracing change and failure, and reinforcing ideas around people-centricity, efficiency, and learning that easily fade into the backs of minds in the continual striving toward entrepreneurial success.

The final chapter as well as the recommendations are for agile-at-scale practitioners. I return to a more musically-focused approach in order to build on prior discourses around improvisatory corporate management, yet augment them with learnings from understanding agile as a robust form of improvisatory behavior. Some of my findings and subsequent recommendations are in the realm of mindsets, similar to those found in the previous chapter, but others, particularly those around leadership of agile teams or teams of agile teams are of a more practical and actionable bent, in the hopes that these recommendations will be implemented by managers who work toward incorporating agile practices into their firms, large or small.

Methodological considerations

The topic of this dissertation is inherently interdisciplinary. It not only crosses disciplinary boundaries so often upheld within the humanities, but also reaches into the schools of thought often associated with professional training. This type of disciplinary segregation is demonstrated, for example, by the separation of schools within a single university into research schools that award degrees like MAs and PhDs, and professional schools that award degrees like JDs, MPAs, and MBAs. A crossing from one domain to another entails far more than a difference in subject matter—although that is certainly included—but also in a different approach to the subject matter at hand. As evidenced by the perpetuated structure of institutions of higher learning, crossing these disciplinary boundaries poses a methodological challenge. It is therefore one of the aims of this study to provide a bridge between approaches typically used respectively in professional and academic schools; this bridge, I hope, expands the prospects, if not the definition, of interdisciplinary research in my primary discipline of training.

My investigation into the understandings and practices of improvisation in the corporate world comprises three parallel methods. The first is an extensive review of the literature written on improvisation in management, with a particular focus on writings in which the authors draw on musical metaphors to demonstrate the utility and applicability of improvisation in the workplace. This review and subsequent thematic untangling fall into the genre of academic discourse analysis, which linguist Ken Hyland explains thusly: “Interest in academic discourse has therefore emerged as part of attempts to reveal the specific rhetorical practices of academic persuasion. Analysts seek to discover how people use discourse to get their ideas accepted and at the same time how this works to construct knowledge and sustain and change disciplinary communities.”² My research on the jazz

² Ken Hyland, “Academic Discourse,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Discourse Analysis*, eds. Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 174.

metaphor shows how rhetorical practices like the use of metaphors, as well as false dichotomies, shape the academic—and ostensibly practically implementable—discourse around organizational improvisation.

Most jazz metaphor authors write from the side of the business world, often with a limited understanding of both the practice of improvisation and the sizable and growing literature on improvisation in musicological research, not to mention knowledge emerging from the relatively young field of critical improvisation studies. My literature review therefore takes a critical stance toward the narrow conception of improvisation reflected in the body of management literature. The overview of this literature also reveals that certain repertoires of music are preferred. Authors often cite only a small number of musicologists, such as Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson with their repertoire focus on bebop, as opposed to other forms of improvisatory music-making, and favoring of ethnographic methods, rather than drawing on their theoretical approaches to improvisation.³ Taking into account that no project can engage with all possible repertoires or sources, the second phase of the literature overview, presented in chapter 2, interrogates the reasons as to why authors limit themselves to *these* specific domains.

The second approach, most evident in chapter 3, is used to bring together two concepts taken from twenty-first-century small business development—agile and lean—and critical improvisation studies. By combing through the literature on agile business practices, much of which is found in informal sources like manifestos, blogs, and trade manuals, I emphasize the components of this approach to business and product development that resonate with the theoretical understandings of improvisation in both the corpus of musicological work and critical improvisation

³ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

studies. Similarly, I tie the central tenets of the lean startup methodology, including continual market feedback and rapid product iteration, to musicological paradigms of improvisation. What emerges through these comings-together is that entrepreneurship functions in ways very similar to free improvisation, thereby giving founders a set of mental tools that foster a deeper understanding of the process of starting up.

Musical practices become central to the exploration of the implementation of agile at scale in chapter 4. Whereas the first three chapters draw heavily on existing literature of both business and improvisation studies, the final chapter draws on musical art-making practices in order to propose a framework that allows for the agile practices often used in startups to be used in larger organizations. This agile-at-scale model necessarily moves beyond the bebop jazz models that have been used since the 1990s, into the realm of large-form free improvisation. To a certain extent, this practice—that of transmitting information about musical improvisation to management operations—forms part of the organizational studies literature that I critique in chapter 2. However, I believe not that the body of existing literature on improvisatory management is obsolete, but rather that it needs updating in order to reflect the rapidly changing market conditions of the twenty-first century.

Challenges with dealing with sources

In conducting a study that mostly engages in the analysis of recent discourse, I encountered some difficulty in categorizing sources as either primary or secondary as both source types contribute to the overall discourse that serves as the object of study. Typical markers of primary sources—age and publication venue—turned out not to be foolproof metrics. Most of the publications are recent, dating back only about thirty years with some emphasis on sources from the last ten years, particularly in the later chapters. What the categorization ultimately comes down to is

my usage of them and I try to indicate where sources are used in a primary manner, as a source of novel ideas, and where they are used as commentary on or extensions of earlier—if only by a few years—sources, which I would interpret as secondary usage. Some sources are mixed-type in that they document and comment on earlier material, while also proposing new ideas. This is particularly prevalent in the first two chapters on the jazz metaphor.

My sources are found in a wide range of publication venues, with ambiguities present here as well. While journal articles frequently imply secondary sourcing, many of the ones I use in chapters 1 and 2 are indeed the vessels that carried the jazz metaphor into being. Yet they sometime do serve secondary functions, such as when they are in the form of state-of-the-field articles. I use these typically-academic sources extensively in chapters 1 and 2, as they pertain to organizational science—the field that nurtured the growth of the jazz metaphor and organizational improvisation more broadly. Throughout the dissertation, I draw on musicological materials, as well as sources in critical improvisation studies in order to clarify ideas around improvisation; these sources tend to fall squarely into the category of academic publishing typified by formats like journal articles, dissertations, and books and book chapters from academic publishers. In chapters 3 and 4, which focus on agile startup practices and agile at scale, respectively, I also draw on publications in the *Harvard Business Review*, which sometimes blurs the boundary between academic and popular presses.

Portions of the jazz metaphor discourse similarly blurs lines between academic articles and the popular business press; by means of example, Frank Barrett repackaged ideas published in the journal *Organizational Science* in 1998 in a 2012 pop business book.⁴ Barrett's jazz metaphor business

⁴ Frank J. Barrett, "Coda: Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 605–622; *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

book has precursors dating back to the mid-1990s.⁵ In the realm of entrepreneurship, manuscript-length trade manuals serve as the authoritative sources on the lean startup methodology and Customer Development model, both of which feature strongly in chapter 3.

In addition to trade manuals, chapter 3 also relies heavily on the *Agile Manifesto* as a primary source. This is a one-page website, with one notable clickthrough to the *Agile Principles*, that has had been in exactly the same state since at least 2002.⁶ Even in its sparse form, this webpage remains the focal location for agile software development, as well as the methodology's expansion into business development.

Similarly, webpages have become the primary means that management consultancies distribute content—I use this material in chapter 4 in order to showcase the extant discourse on scaling agile. These firms, renowned for their discretion and strict client confidentiality, have increasingly been publishing content freely online rather than in academic journals. Consultants have long published ideas in venues like *HBR* and one firm has their own journal, *The McKinsey Quarterly*, in which articles appear. Yet since the mid-2010s, they have been making some materials freely available online (in the form of “McKinsey Insights,” which is also available as a free app, for example) in order to contribute to industries beyond just their set of clients—they call this “practice-building”—and also serves as a means to attract new clients: if a CEO learns about agile at scale from a consultancy publication, she might consider picking up the phone to purchase a large-scale agile transformation project from said consultancy. While these web-based documents have

⁵ John Kao, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (New York: Harper Business, 1996; for a more recent instance of the jazz metaphor in the popular business press, see Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2010).

⁶ I determined this stability by using the Wayback Machine Internet Archive to find the earliest instance in which the site had been archived. <https://web.archive.org/web/20020310012955/https://agilemanifesto.org/> (accessed October 4, 2021). The one difference is that the landing page now lists the dozens of languages—from Afrikaans to Yoruba—into which the *Manifesto* has been translated.

different underlying aims than, say, a peer-reviewed journal article, they do provide relevant information on the problems and solutions that business leaders face and enact, and therefore serve as useful carriers of discourse around agile and agile at scale, at both the primary and secondary levels.

The complicated mixture of source types, from Oxford University Press books to one-page websites, contributes to the ambiguities in how these sources are to be deployed. However, this array, with its concomitant ambiguities, contributes to the richness of the study by taking into account the various sources of discourse and the avenues and voices through which discourse travels, and also highlights the important points of contact where these channels intersect. Such intersections—like the intersections of scholarly fields in an interdisciplinary manner—demonstrate the complexities of the flows of information as it congeals into discourse.

Towards a working definition of improvisation

In order to delimit the parameters of this study, it is necessary to provide some sort of baseline understanding of improvisation. While alighting upon a precise definition of improvisation is a concern that many organizational scholars have,⁷ this is not necessarily a concern that I share. My avoidance of a set definition follows what George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut determine to be the “futility of drawing boundaries around the critical study of improvisation,” and that they “defer definitions in order to allow the scholarly conversation to wander into unforeseen areas.”⁸

⁷ See for example the attempt in Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation: What, When, How, and Why,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 1:3 (1999): 301–310, 307; the local classicus for defining improvisation in much of this discourse is Christine Moorman and Anne S. Miner, “The Convergence of Planning and Execution: Improvisation in New Product Development,” *Journal of Marketing* 62:3 (1998): 1.

⁸ George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, “Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol 1, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13. Indeed, “improvisation” itself etymologically stems from the Latin term ‘*improvisus*,’ which literally means

Indeed, I imagine that this dissertation might be the exact kind of unforeseen area to which they refer and, in the spirit of allowing the scholarly conversation to wander beyond this document, even heuristic boundaries should be seen as soft, porous, and highly permeable.

Should the reader insist on a hard and fast definition of improvisation, I would refer them to George E. Lewis's formulation of improvisation as comprising indeterminacy, analysis of conditions, agency, judgement, and choice.⁹ This five-part understanding of improvisation is preceded in Lewis's oeuvre by a three-part definition and a four-part. In an early version, an "emerg[ent] new definition of improvisation," he only includes indeterminacy, listening, and agency.¹⁰ Lewis later both generalizes and expands this definition. Firstly, he substitutes "listening" with "analysis of conditions," thereby applying the principles of auditory perception and cognitive processing to the other senses in order to extend improvisation beyond musical contexts. One of pianist and improviser Vijay Iyer's definitions of improvisation, complementary to that of Lewis, also highlights the analysis of conditions, construing the practice as "real-time interaction with the structure of one's environment [i.e. conditions]" through "moment-to-moment sensory guided [i.e. analysis] actions [i.e. agency]."¹¹ Secondly, to the early tripartite definition, Lewis adds a fourth component—choice.¹² Into the latest, five-part definition of improvisation Lewis adds judgement between analysis and choice and summarizes his conception as such:

"unforeseen." Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24.

⁹ George E. Lewis, "Is Our Machines Learning Yet? Machine Learning's Challenge to Improvisation and the Aesthetic," in *Machinic Assemblages of Desire: Deleuze and Artistic Research 3*, eds. Paulo de Assis and Paolo Giudici (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021), 122.

¹⁰ George E. Lewis, "Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance," *Parallax* 13:4 (2007): 116.

¹¹ Vijay Iyer, "Beneath Improvisation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Concepts in Music Theory*, eds. Alexander Rehding and Steven Rings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 768.

¹² George E. Lewis, "Foreword: Who is Jazz." In *Jazz Worlds/World Jazz*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman & Goffredo Plastino (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xxii.

we are all agents, operating in a fundamental and continuous condition of indeterminacy, where we cannot fully know what will happen next; we analyse our environment for clues as to where we are and to seed judgements as to where we are headed—an activity which is itself improvised in that same condition; and finally, we make a choice ... indeterminacy, agency, analysis, judgement, and choice—will be found in any improvised act whatsoever, artistic or not ... the condition of improvisation is permanent, quotidian, and as ubiquitous as contemporary critical methods allow us to assert.¹³

It is this quintipartite comprehension of improvisation that forms the kernel from which my understanding of the phenomenon is grown.

I should note, however, that the primary aim of this document is not to provide a sophisticated theorization of what improvisation *is*, but rather to apply the concept to heretofore “unforeseen areas” in order to demonstrate the utility of the concept in fields and functions beyond the arts. This *application* of the concept of improvisation requires it to remain malleable as it crosses from one supposed disciplinary domain into another.

In much of the literature on improvisation, there is a tendency to contrast it to what it is not. In organizational studies, this frequently reads as a dichotomy between the process of planning and executing and the process of simply adapting to the environment without plans. In historical musicology, this dichotomy manifests as one between composition (and its subsequent faithful performance) and improvisation. One reads in *Works and Worlds of Art* that “to improvise is not to compose”¹⁴ and in Igor Stravinsky’s *Poetics of Music* that the musical *work* is “the fruit of study, reasoning, and calculation that imply exactly the converse of improvisation.”¹⁵ It should also be noted that, in these oppositions and mutually exclusive understandings of the two methods of artistic production, one finds an ideological power imbalance in which, in Nicholas Cook’s phrasing,

¹³ Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122.

¹⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 64.

¹⁵ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (New York: Vintage, 1947), 138.

“improvisation is composition’s other, a ‘marked’ and hence subordinate term.”¹⁶ Without doubt, this ideology stems from and, by means of a powerful feedback loop, reinforces racial and racist ideologies in which Black and Indigenous musics are said to rely heavily on improvisation while art music of the West is placed in the superior position of study, reason, and calculation, with the implication that (the music of) the Other is uneducated, unreasonable, and characterized by guesswork, sloppy estimation, and randomness. Indeed, a text on pre-independence India insists that “Indian music is almost entirely a matter of improvisation,” and continues to crow that “Art is not, never has been, and never can be, a matter of improvisation,”¹⁷ thereby excluding the oppressed Other from the realm of true art.

Fortunately, in the years since the Indian independence, this opposition has been interrogated and, as is often the case with dichotomies, recontextualized as a spectrum, of which the two (asymptotic) endpoints are the original poles of the opposition. Jeff Pressing claims that “There is a continuum between the extreme hypothetical limits of ‘pure’ improvisation and ‘pure’ composition.”¹⁸ Cook maintains that composition can, in no small part, be described as reworkings and transformations of what Pressing describes as “referents,” which are the germs from which *improvisations* grow.¹⁹ Improvising guitarist Derek Bailey recounts a panel discussion that illustrates the blurred line between improvisation and composition:

In 1987, seven musicians [Cecil Taylor, John Zorn, George Lewis, Misha Mengelberg, Butch Morris, Gerry Hemingway, and Bailey himself], all closely associated with improvisation, took part in a public discussion staged as an adjunct to a series of concerts. Inevitably, the first subject up for consideration concerned the relationship between improvisation and composition. After forty minutes of collective incoherence and mutual misunderstandings,

¹⁶ Nicholas Cook, “Making Music Together, or Improvisation and Its Others,” *The Source* 1:1 (2004): 10.

¹⁷ Beverley Nichols, *Verdict on India* (London: J. Cape, 1944), 134.

¹⁸ Jeff Pressing, “Cognitive Processes in Improvisation,” *Advances in Psychology* 19 (1984): 346.

¹⁹ Cook, “Making Music Together,” 19.

the predominant view to emerge was that there is no such thing as improvisation, or, if there is, it is indistinguishable from composition. Furthermore, composition, should there be such a thing, is no different from improvisation. Having established that, there didn't seem to be anything else to discuss.²⁰

Continuing the line of argument that posits a lack of true distinction between music based on executing composed material and music based on improvisation, Bruce Benson creates a ladder running from an almost complete lack of improvisation or the perfect reproduction of a musical composition, to an almost complete saturation of improvisation, or the absence of any type of source material. On the lowest rung, Improvisation₁, “consists of ‘filling-in’ certain details that are not in the score [tempo, timbre, attack, etc.]. . . . No matter how detailed the scores may be, some—and often much—improvisation of this sort is *necessary* simply in order to perform the piece.”²¹ On Benson's highest rung, Improvisation₁₁, “the tradition is itself improvised upon. Any practice of discourse involves such improvisation.”²² Here it is important to note that, like the image of a simple ladder, the rungs touch neither the floor (a complete lack of improvisation) nor the ceiling (a complete saturation of improvisation). Cook cites a claim by Alfred Schutz that collapses the ladder approach: “there is no difference in principle between the performance of a string quartet and the improvisations at a jam session of accomplished jazz players.”²³ This notion, particularly in the “in principle” caveat, is echoed by Benson when he states that “the difference between the various

²⁰ Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: It's Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 140.

²¹ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 26, emphasis original. Benson uses subscript to denote rungs on the ladder of improvisation, with the lowest number being the least improvisatory. A similar sentiment around the necessity of improvisation in the performance of precomposed work is expressed by Ed Sarath: “even interpretive performance of repertory [...] might be considered as a species of improvisation. For even in works entirely composed, performers will have some degree of creative options through volume dynamics, inflection, tempo [etc.]” “A New Look at Improvisation,” *Journal of Music Theory* 40 (1996): 21.

²² Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 29–30.

²³ Alfred Schutz, “Making Music Together: A Study in Social Relationship,” in *Alfred Schutz: Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*, ed. Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964), 177. Quoted in Cook, “Making Music Together,” 5.

forms of improvisation is far more *quantitative* than *qualitative*,”²⁴ as well as by Bailey: “improvisation is present *to some degree* in almost all musical activities.”²⁵ The idea here is that the string quartet and the jam session cats are all, in principle, on the ladder of compulsory improvisation in performance.

Taking the notion that improvisation is an ever-present factor in musicking to the non-musical improvisations that Lewis’s recent definitions—with its emphasis on analysis of conditions rather than listening—of improvisation allow, it stands to reason that improvisation is ubiquitous, to one degree or another, in all human activity. Moreover, it is through this ubiquity that understandings of improvisation can be transferred from artistic practice, where they have historically been theorized, to everyday practices. Indeed, Bruce Johnson maintains that “jazz has in significant respects more in common with, and is therefore better understood in relation to, *non-musical improvisational practices* than with non-improvisational musical practices.”²⁶ Even further back, Gilbert Ryle opens his seminal essay on improvisation by claiming that improvisation is not some virtuosic activity only associated with the expertly witty or innovative. Rather, improvisation is “shared in very different degrees, in very different forms, and with very variable frequencies by all non-infantile, non-retarded, non-comatose human beings.”²⁷ At the extreme (although not an unreasonable one), Iyer suggests that “everything we do is improvisative.”²⁸ Not only is improvisation ubiquitous, but the quotidian forms, perhaps especially the non-artistic ones, might be more interesting to study: pianist and revered improviser Misha Mengelberg maintains that “The sort of improvisation I am

²⁴ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 30, emphasis original.

²⁵ Bailey, *Improvisation*, 66, emphasis added.

²⁶ Bruce Johnson, “Jazz as Cultural Practice,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, eds. Mervyn Cook and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 103, emphasis added.

²⁷ Gilbert Ryle, “Improvisation.” *Mind* 85:337 (1976): 69.

²⁸ Iyer, “Beneath Improvisation,” 768.

interested in is the sort that everyone does in their lives. They improvise in taking six or seven steps to the door, scratching their heads with one or two fingers.”²⁹ Critical improvisation studies authorities Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz similarly emphasize the importance of the study of improvisation outside its art-making forms; they claim that “As a universal, generalized practice that is articulated in a myriad of distinctive and specific ways, and as a fundamental response of how we encounter the world around us, improvisation has something to teach us about other such social practices.”³⁰ Since improvisation appears ubiquitously in “familiar and unaugust” guises³¹ and has much to teach about how people relate to each other and their environments, it is critical to understand how improvisation manifests in non-artistic practice like corporate management and agile startups.

²⁹ Quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation*, 132. See also Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122.

³⁰ Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Co-creation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 13.

³¹ Ryle, “Improvisation,” 69.

Chapter 1:

The Discourse on the Jazz Metaphor for Corporate Management

To provide a baseline for the following chapters, this discourse analysis reviews the literature that outlines the development of thought around jazz as a metaphor for corporate management, primarily within the discipline of organizational studies. As will become clear, and to demonstrate the size of the total literature, “Jazz as a metaphor for organizing is not new. With over 1300 citations (according to Google Scholar [in 2016]), the jazz metaphor has been used to understand several elements of management,”¹ including leadership, strategy, product development and marketing, intragroup interaction, change management, and crisis management.

While vast, there are almost no clear academic genealogies in the discourse on the jazz metaphor, although there are several touch points—loci to which a significant amount of subsequent scholarship refer. I highlight those in this analysis, rather than aiming to reach all 1,300 citations. Still, while the lineages are not neat, several themes emerge in this body of literature, and I note how the authors under discussion engage in dialogues with one another in developing these themes. In this chapter, it should be noted, I merely highlight the themes as they emerge; in the next chapter, I analyze several themes in greater depth, revealing their underlying rationales for being included in the jazz metaphor for corporate management, while critiquing their inaccuracies and misconstruals of jazz music, jazz history, and jazz practices.

The value of this chapter lies in its comprehensiveness. However, this comprehensiveness came at the regrettable cost of conciseness. The reader should be apprised that this chapter is quite long and that, despite my attempts to alert readers to the relevance of each segment to the overall

¹ Steve Diasio, “Not All That Jazz! Jamband as a Metaphor for Organizing New Models of Innovation,” *European Management Journal* 34 (2016): 125. In a 2021 replication of the exercise, “jazz metaphor” yielded only 1080 hits.

thread, that thread might be lost from time to time. My hope is that the format of the chapter is seen as a necessary means to achieve two ends: to create a compendium of the written discourse around the jazz metaphor for management,² which would be of use to later scholars conducting further research; and to paint a detailed picture of the organizational improvisation discursive landscape. This landscape contains elements like organizational structure, leadership style, and approaches to change and failure that will be expanded in later chapters of this dissertation. It is therefore important to have a clear understanding of the ecosystem out of which my later interventions grow and I highlight the moments in the chronology in which germinal elements first appear and note their continued development within this discourse.

This analysis of the literature is divided into three rough sections, corresponding to what I would label as three stages in the development of the jazz metaphor. The first, covering the period from 1989 to 1998, includes the first notable articles, all by organizational scholars, that introduce the idea of using jazz as a metaphor in the business sphere; this period culminates in a special issue of *Organizational Science* dedicated to Jazz Improvisation and Organizing. I dedicate a considerable portion of the literature review to this origin story and this early-days stage of the discourse.

The second stage, which I call the maturation (the long 2000s, as it were), details several streams into which applications of the metaphor subsequently split. Some authors disentangle themselves from jazz as a foundational metaphor, opting instead for “organizational improvisation,” yet organizational improvisation is heavily informed by and heavily informs scholarship on the more

² Despite my broad claim of comprehensiveness, this study remains focused on written material. A complementary body of discourse exists in the form of workshops given to leaders in companies by consultants (see the segment on Mark Laver’s work below). I have to exclude this discourse from the present document due to restricted access to the sources: firstly, consultants and workshop facilitators understandably tend to keep their materials confidential; secondly, ethnographic study of these workshops was complicated by confidentiality demands from the companies that hire these consultants, as well as by the covid-19 pandemic that limited access to physically shared workspaces during the time of writing. An ethnographic study of jazz management workshops would be well worth pursuing in a time and place in which scholars have greater access to the relevant spaces and actors, and I hope that this comprehensive presentation of the written material informs such a study in a way that future scholars find orienting, grounding, and fertile.

specific jazz metaphor. Whereas the literature in the first stage tends toward the optimistic and self-congratulatory, authors in the second stage are more critical of prior formulations of the metaphor and are quick to point out deficiencies in earlier scholarship. However introspective these second-stage organizational scholars might be, they usually forge ahead with their own applications of the newly-tweaked metaphor.

Whereas the literature in the first and second stages are dominated by scholars in the fields of business and organization, the third stage, running from 2013 onward, includes more voices from the musicological community. Indeed, the musicological critique of the jazz metaphor forms the basis of the delineation of the third stage. My three-stage partition carries all the issues that surround any sort of periodization; walls between stages are to be seen as porous and permeable.

Before proceeding to work my way through the discourse that describes and promotes the jazz metaphor for corporate management, I would be remiss if I did not first draw attention to three articles that already provide thorough overviews of the literature up to their respective points in time. The first, by Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche, provides a review and categorization of some of the literature in the first stage. They are particularly interested in the definitions that prior scholars use in their formulations. The terms “improvisation” and “bricolage” each get a table with definitions quoted from the literature³ as well as the conditions in which improvisation tends to take place. In my review of the literature prior to Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, I avoid rehashing these definitional arguments, following Steve Leybourne’s assessment that “it seems inopportune to revisit the mass of early literature in the way that [Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche] have already done.”⁴ At several points in their overview, they point out the flaws and

³ Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation: What, When, How, and Why,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 1:3 (1999): 303–306, 307.

⁴ Stephen A. Leybourne, “Improvising within Management: Oxymoron, Paradox, or Legitimate Way of Achieving?” *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy* 2:3 (2007): 226.

fissures in prior scholars' work. This overview might therefore be considered the frontrunner in the second stage of jazz metaphor literature.

The second stage is bookended by the second and much later attempt at consolidating the scholarship on the jazz metaphor and organizational improvisation more broadly, from the perspective of organizational scientists Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose.⁵ Taking the third-stage analogous position to Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, Ken Prouty leads the musicological overview critique against the jazz metaphor in his review.⁶ I draw heavily on several of Prouty's arguments the next chapter. In a way, my discourse analysis brings their respective literature reviews up to date, with the last section picking up where Prouty's left off. The final section of my analysis emphasizes the musicological *response*, like that of Prouty, to these organizational science positions on improvisation.

1.1 Early days (1989–1998)

This section outlines the origins and initial development of the jazz metaphor. The overview of the ostensible first jazz metaphor for corporate management article presented here is lengthy, but it highlights the fact that many of the core components of the metaphor, including the need for constraints, dispersed leadership structures, and indeterminate environments, appear from the earliest formulations.

⁵ Allègre L. Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose, "Organizational Improvisation: A Consolidating Review and Framework," *International Journal of Management Review* 17 (2015): 437–459.

⁶ Ken Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor," *Jazz Perspectives* 7:1 (2013): 33–55.

The first article that advances the idea of jazz in particular as a model for corporate management was published in *Communications Research* in 1988 by David Bastien and Todd Hostager.⁷ To aid their analysis, they “instructed Bastien [here referring to one of the authors’ father, who plays bass in the video] to point out and explain the important organizing and communicative behaviors.”⁸ The central question they aim to answer is how the musicians navigate the “turbulent task environment” that characterizes jazz and, ostensibly, the contemporary business environment.

Two solutions are identified: musical structures and social structures. With regards to the former, the authors maintain that “The structural conventions specified by jazz music *theory* consist of the cognitively held rules for generating, selecting, and building upon new musical ideas, including rules for proper chords, chordal relationships, and chordal progressions.”⁹ Bastien and Hostager’s emphasis on musical rules is an extremely influential step that is replicated by almost all organizational scholars in the first two stages of the jazz metaphor literature, as seen below. I discuss this emphasis and its implications at length further below. Here, Bastien and Hostager prioritize rules of harmony.

Another musical structure, in addition to (harmonic) theory, is the use of songs or standards in performance. The authors note that songs are even more restrictive since they dictate the harmonic progressions to be used (either to be played or to be innovated upon); however, harmony

⁷ David T. Bastien and Todd J. Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” *Communication Research* 15:5 (1988): 582–602. A reprint of the 1988 study appears as “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” in *Organizational Improvisation*, eds. Ken N. Kamoche, Miguel Pina e Cunha, and João Vieira da Cunha (London: Routledge, 2001), 13–26. The authors also published another article reframing the same data, “Cooperation as Communicative Accomplishment: A Symbolic Interaction Analysis of an Improvised Jazz Concert” (1992): 92–104. In the 1988 article, they analyze a video recording of a live jazz performance and stress the fact that the quartet did not rehearse beforehand. A musician, they note, is selected on grounds of “general level of professional competence and, in particular, to his ability to play traditional jazz songs” (i.e. standards), 585.

⁸ Bastien and Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” 585.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 586–587, emphasis original.

might supersede songs in terms of structuring power in that “Group jazz based on chordal theory” (more commonly referred to as modal jazz) does not require songs in order to be structured. For the benefit of the uninitiated, the article includes an appendix that explains harmonic rules, starting with the equal twelve-part division of the octave and ending with a description of a C6 chord; furthermore, the appendix also includes a rundown of the AABA song form.¹⁰ With the presence and workings of these rules laid down, Bastien and Hostager can proceed to argue that “Musical innovation in jazz is thus neither entirely random nor entirely determined; new musical ideas are invented, adopted, and implemented through rules of for musical grammar.”¹¹

Musical structures provide constraints for the performance to unfold. A second source of constraints stems from behavioral norms and communicative codes associated with the jazz tradition. These norms, like musical structures, help with the seamless integration of the musicians, even in the context of a “zero-history group” like a pickup band. Significantly, the behavioral norms include a “nominal leader” who “communicates each song and the key in which it is to be played,” which implies a rather top-down leadership order.¹² Fortunately for the rest of the group, “At one point or another during the performance, each musician gets an opportunity to be the soloist.”¹³ These two approaches to leadership structures in jazz—the bandleader model and the everyone-solos model—remain in place in subsequent writings on the metaphor, although, the flatter system of sharing leadership and decision-making power becomes the form of choice. Like the emphasis on rules, the new models of leadership are discussed in more detail below.

¹⁰ Ibid., 600–601.

¹¹ Ibid., 587.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 588.

In the conclusion, Bastien and Hostager link both the musical and social structures of jazz to the realm of business by pointing out that “As in group jazz, the social task environment for many modern organizations is basically turbulent and only marginally predictable... Individuals in these organizational circumstances face uncertainly similar to that experienced by jazz players during a collectively improvised performance.”¹⁴ By reconstruing the musical structures as “shared knowledge,” they argue that the same types of constraining structures that make it possible for a zero-history jazz combo to play together also allow a modern corporation to navigate the volatilities and ambiguities of the business environment.

The theme of constraints also features prominently in Lee Tom Perry’s 1991 article on “Strategic Improvising.” He maintains that improvisation is “by no means a haphazard process... Instead, it should be accepted as a process governed by both freedom and form.”¹⁵ This characteristic of improvisation allows senior leaders to create “vision-guided competitive strategies” in that long-term goals can be set—and kept in sight—while short-term steps can progress with more flexibility to make use of current conditions and opportunities. The form keeps the vision straight, while the freedom finds the best path to a goal.

A further advantage of this approach, Perry claims, is that more people in an organization can participate in the process of strategizing. The author emphasizes the divide between the upper-echelon strategists and the managers who execute the strategy; rank-and-file workers are excluded from consideration. Yet, giving these managers the freedom to make incremental adjustments grants them greater ownership of the strategy: “Strategic improvising blends both strategy formulation and

¹⁴ Ibid., 598.

¹⁵ Lee Tom Perry, “Strategic Improvising: How to Formulate and Implement Competitive Strategies in Concert,” *Organizational Dynamics* 19:4 (1991): 51.

implementation by encouraging the people who do the work to strategize.”¹⁶ Furthermore, asking the managers (the people who implement the work) to improvise *while* they’re doing the work collapses the time difference between planning and execution, which are typically done successively.¹⁷ This trope—conflating planning and doing—appears explicitly or implicitly in almost all later writings on organization improvisation. One way of illustrating this conflation is by contrasting jazz to classical music.

Perry presents one of the earliest oppositions between jazz and classical music in the jazz metaphor literature. At times, his construal comes off as somewhat ignorant: for example, he argues that “Jazz is a unique musical form because it is composed while performed,”¹⁸ thereby effacing many other genres of improvised music. However, simplifications such as “traditional musical format leaves little to the imagination”¹⁹ are rampant in the subsequent literature on using jazz as a metaphor for organizing business.

One of the aims of this oppositional move is to position jazz as a fresh alternative to whatever previous models of management or strategy businesses had used. Perry provides an example of one of these old(-hat) models. Rather than using the standard analytical tool called SWOT (through which one creates a two-by-two matrix with internal/external on the one axis and

¹⁶ Ibid., 54.

¹⁷ In the successive model, planning typically takes place wholly separate from execution: long-term plans are created by the senior leadership, behind closed doors or at a distant corporate retreat; the plans are then brought to those who are to execute them, who frequently do not have the opportunity to influence the plans. Plans are often crafted long before their final implementation and do not leave much leeway for deviation from the plan as laid out. In large corporations, these plans (stereo)typically have 5-year time horizons; in startups, these types of aspirational business plans, given to prospective investors, project the sales that the new firm will make in the next few years to show that it will soon be profitable and generate returns. See chapter 3 for the improvisatory antidote to entrepreneurial business plans.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹ Ibid., 51, where “traditional” here implies classical music, rather than other genres that might be understood as “traditional.”

positive/negative on the other, filling in Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), strategists should modify the tool to adapt to higher levels of unpredictability.

	Positive	Negative
Internal	<u>S</u> trength	<u>W</u> eakness
External	<u>O</u> pportunity	<u>T</u> hreat

Fig. 1.1. Unmodified SWOT analysis framework.

The modification Perry proposes, however, does not seem to address this problem, but rather posits a strategic expansion, framed as flexibility, which, one assumes, a more jazz-like mindset affords:

“strategic thinking requires the flexibility to go both ways—either capitalizing on strengths [the traditional approach] or strengthening weaknesses [the intervention].”²⁰ Perry presents another common jazz-metaphor topic here: risk. He claims that this modified SWOT method is “risk-approaching rather than risk-avoiding.”²¹ Although it is mentioned only in passing here, later organizational improvisation scholars dedicate far more space to risk and the benefits of taking risks in their writings. The jazz metaphor allows authors to argue for the benefits of approaching—or, better yet, embracing—risk, demonstrating the benefits to which risk-taking can lead, while also downplaying the failures as opportunities for further benefit.

A final thematic element should be pointed out. Perry opens the article by invoking Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke and argues that strategic thinking can be illustrated “by switching gears somewhat—from military science to jazz improvisation.”²² Military analogies and metaphors in the world of business predate any formal scholarship on management; indeed, the term “strategy”

²⁰ Ibid., 57.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 51

derives from military use.²³ However, with that quotation, Perry establishes an explicit connection between the two fields; this connection remains strong in more recent literature on organizational improvisation. While many parallels between military science and improvisation are drawn in later writings, one particular comparison stands out in Perry: the advantage of small groups to maximize flexibility and speed of response. He argues for the use of “special forces units, emphasizing quick strike capacity over numerical superiority.”²⁴ This dynamic, small-team organizing structure also resonates with the small-group conventions of jazz combos, although Perry leaves that point for later authors to make.

The use of a SWOT analysis, according to Alan Neilson, is to identify a strategic space to fill. Neilson proposes several metaphors that address this filling exercise, starting with a jigsaw puzzle, which he deems “clearly unsatisfactory” because it cannot account for “the increasingly dynamic nature of competitive environments in which organization adaptation and learning become key attributes which are needed to maintain a competitive position.”²⁵ Like Bastien and Hostager, Neilson identifies the turbulent environment that business leaders need to navigate, and adds a level of derivation in claiming that this environment is becoming *increasingly* dynamic. And like Perry, Neilson finds traditional modes of analysis, like SWOT, outdated.

Neilson’s next metaphor, competitive ice skating, is more open to the dynamism of this environment. Like military metaphors, sports metaphors are also staples in corporate management

²³ See Peter F. Drucker, “The New Society of Organizations,” *Harvard Business Review* 70:5 (1992): 102. Bartleby, the pseudonymous management columnist at *The Economist*, notes the limits of transferring managerial ideas from the military to business, claiming that “The differences between leading in the armed forces and leading a business come through more strongly...than the similarities. Most obviously, the use of lethal force tends not to be a big feature of corporate life. The stakes are much lower, and the calculus of risk is therefore just different. ... War and work are not the same.” “Into Battle They Don’t Go,” *The Economist*, October 30, 2021.

²⁴ Perry, “Strategic Improvising,” 56.

²⁵ Alan Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit: All That Jazz,” *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal* 13:5 (1992): 3.

discourse;²⁶ as shall be seen in Chapter 3, the difference between relay races and rugby forms the foundations of the agile (business) development methodology. That said, Neilson finds the ice-skating metaphor lacking as well, since competitive ice skating requires rehearsal and, while dynamic, is not particularly adaptive.

Neilson settles instead on the metaphor of the jazz band. While jazz-combo playing is similar to ice skating in that the members work together toward a common goal, jazz musicians rely more on listening to each other than rehearsal, as to achieve “Adaptation [that] takes place within real-time as the performance is underway.”²⁷ Another benefit of intra-group awareness is that “No heavy or oppressive leadership is required.”²⁸ This flattened structure ties in with the alternating-solos model of leadership first suggested by Bastien and Hostager, as well as with Perry’s call to decentralize the decision-making power throughout the organization.

Neilson makes an interesting move in his article. Rather than selecting an older form of jazz such as swing or bebop—genres deified to the point of bitheism in much of the jazz management literature—he opts for “a group of musicians who have formed themselves into a band to perform free-form jazz.”²⁹ However, this does not work out for the hypothetical band. Bob the band leader notes in a Socratic dialogue that they had to temper their music down to suit audience desires and ameliorate the resultant economic realities of the band. Although interaction not only with other band members, but also with the audience, provides a useful avenue into an expanded conception of

²⁶ In her critique of the use of business metaphors, Leigh Buchanan, former editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, “largely eschew[s] the many, many works on war and sports. Fish in a barrel, [she] figured.” “No More Metaphors,” *Harvard Business Review* 83:3 (2005): 19; see also Freek Vermeulen, “Stop Comparing Management to Sports,” *Harvard Business Review* June 2, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/06/stop-comparing-management-to-sports> (accessed July 10, 2020).

²⁷ Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit,” 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

listening and analysis of conditions, the audience usually only appears in the jazz metaphor literature to claim that “free-form jazz” is alienating and therefore not a good metaphor on which to rely.³⁰ Nevertheless, Neilson’s disparaging of a freer genre of jazz echoes in later writings on the jazz metaphor that use more traditional forms as their basis.

John Kao’s 1996 book, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*, represents the first monograph-length application of jazz to business practices. This gives Kao the opportunity to work through many of the concepts already noted in the early articles, as well as to provide some new ones. Like Neilson, Kao also warns of the “chaos” associated with free jazz: he notes that, even though “in so-called free jazz, an innovation of the sixties and seventies, jazz musicians work within a structure,” if musicians take too many liberties with that structure, “If it’s too obscure, we perceive nothing meaningful from the chaos.”³¹ Musicians have to walk a tightrope tense with the paradox between structure and chaos. It should also be noted that *Jamming* is a trade manual rather than a publication in an academic journal; the target audience for Kao is practicing managers who are likely to be averse to the type of chaos that Kao (correctly or incorrectly) ascribes to free jazz.

A good way to summarize Kao’s text is to focus on the lists of tensions that he believes drive the improvisatory nature of jazz; he maintains that “Jazz is called improvisational because it doesn’t try to resolve [the following] tensions”:³²

- The established (tradition, powers that be, status quo) in tension with the new.
- The need for form in tension with the drive for openness.
- Critical norms and standards in tension with the need to experiment.
- The security of the familiar in tensions with the lure of the unknown.
- Responsiveness (responsibility) to the group in tension with individual expressiveness.

³⁰ One might ask whether special forces units with quick strike capacity are not also alienating to their intended audiences.

³¹ John Kao, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (New York: Harper Business, 1996), 34.

³² *Ibid.*, 32–33.

- Discipline in tension with freedom.
- Power in tension with desire.
- Established theory in tension with persistent experimentation.
- Expertise in tension with freshness, naïveté.

These tensions might be condensed into four paradoxes later in the book (from a larger set).³³

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| • Safety | Risk |
| • Individual expressiveness | Group integrity |
| • Liberty | Discipline |
| • Free form | Structure |

The “lure of the unknown” is critical for Kao and his emphasis on innovation.³⁴ He argues throughout the book that innovation can only happen if risks are taken to venture into the unknown. The risk, however, is cushioned, at least in a jam session, by the fact that “there are no mistakes”³⁵ in jazz, and like Perry, goes on to draw a contrast with classical music. Indeed, these kinds of non-mistakes might even be the impetus of a journey of innovation.³⁶ Perhaps the bigger risk is *not* taking risks. Indeed, Kao threatens “companies that aren’t willing to take its risks are not long for this fluid, protean, constantly challenging world”³⁷ and that improvisation is the way to

³³ Ibid., 160–161.

³⁴ Although innovation and improvisation are sometimes used interchangeably in this literature, innovation is not the same as improvisation. The reason that I include innovation in my discussion is because Kao constantly draws parallels between innovational business practices and the improvisatory practices of jazz musicians. This is even more apparent in Kao’s later *Innovation Nation: How America Is Losing its Innovative Edge, Why it Matters, and What We Can Do to Get it Back* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

³⁵ Kao, *Jamming*, 38.

³⁶ Making the direct link to jazz, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt and Shona L. Brown maintain that “Mistakes occur because systems at the edge of chaos often slip off the edge. But there is also quick recovery and, like jazz musicians who play the wrong note, there is the chance to turn mistakes into advantages.” *Competing on the Edge: Strategy as Structured Chaos* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 1998), 28. The notion of transforming failure into success, which is more thoroughly developed as it pertains to entrepreneurship in Chapter 3, has been termed “improvisation *impromptu*” by Lydia Goehr, “Improvising Impromptu, Or, What to Do with a Broken String,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol 1, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 470.

³⁷ Kao, *Jamming*, xix.

embrace these risks: “Escaping the stagnation of the status quo, of the risk-free life, is part of the exhilaration of jamming—in music and in business. The choice is stark. Create or fail.”³⁸

With risk mitigated by a mindset of jamming, in which there are no mistakes, only opportunities, business leaders can get ahead of both the status quo and a constantly changing world, a theme that frequently recurs in Kao’s text. He devotes considerable space changes such as advances in information technology and novel ways of rearranging office spaces, both to better facilitate communication among workers.³⁹ He refers to the business world of today (i.e. the today of the mid-1990s) as being marked by “prosaic demands,” “constant change,” and chaos and of being “turbulent, ‘spacey,’ and endlessly demanding of the new, the experimental, the faster, the better, and the cheaper,” while also taking the opportunity to take another swing at classical music by adding that this world “is not a concert-hall environment.”⁴⁰ Like jazz-metaphor authors before and after him, he proposes improvisation as the key skill in navigating this unstable landscape, maintaining that “In today’s climate, the captains of industry have no choice but to effect change while their vessels are at sea,”⁴¹ and that these captains are “being asked to stretch and grow—to jam—to help their companies improvise in today’s rapidly evolving global economy.”⁴²

However, even though the world is unstable and indeterminate, Kao reassures his readers from the outset of the book that jamming and jazz are “not formless self-indulgence or organizational anarchy. The music follows an elegant grammar, a set of conventions that guide and

³⁸ Ibid., xx.

³⁹ Although not central to Kao’s overarching arguments, he too notes the positive outcomes of the flatter hierarchical structures that are facilitated in open-plan offices. Ibid., 60–68; 78–85.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 67, 52, 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

⁴² Ibid., 95; it also appears on 98.

challenge our imagination.”⁴³ Many of the tensions and paradoxes quoted above deal with this pervasive notion that jazz is both flexible and structured. The opposition is, of course, the same as the constraints-freedom pairing seen in Bastien and Hostager and Perry. And it is perhaps this oppositional pairing that serves as the driving force of the 1998 special issue of *Organizational Science* on Jazz Improvisation and Organizing, to which I now turn.

Rather than stay with a narrow focus on jazz as the locus of improvisation, Karl Weick, in the Introductory Essay to the 1998 special issue of *Organizational Science*, argues for a generalization of the improvisatory aspects of jazz to other improvisatory settings.⁴⁴ Indeed, later in the issue he claims that “We’re not touting jazz. We’re touting improvisation... Jazz is a convenient illustration of how it works, but so are [other forms of improvisation.]”⁴⁵ While this might be true for Weick, other contributors seem to be touting jazz, as shall be seen later in this chapter. Before continuing, it should be noted that Weick serves as a sort of theoretical sensei to many of the writers of organizational improvisation. His early work uses responses to crises such as wildfires and airplane crashes to demonstrate the benefits of improvisatory thinking and to show that plans and protocols often do not withstand the volatilities of reality.⁴⁶ Crisis settings validate the utility of organizational improvisation. His subsequent task is to emancipate improvisation from crisis management and to note its applicability in what might be termed “normal times.” And while improvisation as a necessary response to calamity is frequently cited in the jazz management literature, authors, such as

⁴³ Ibid., xvii.

⁴⁴ Karl E. Weick, “Introductory Essay: Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 543–555.

⁴⁵ Mary Jo Hatch and Karl E. Weick, “Critics Corner: Critical Resistance to the Jazz Metaphor,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 604.

⁴⁶ See Karl E. Weick, “The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38:4 (1993): 628–652; “Prepare Your Organization to Fight Fires,” *Harvard Business Review* 74:5/6 (1996): 143–148; “The Vulnerable System: An Analysis of the Tenerife Air Disaster,” *Journal of Management* 16:3 (1990): 571–593.

those in the 1998 *Organizational Science* issue, advocate for improvisatory mindsets for general management.

In the Introductory Essay, Weick works through some definitions of improvisation, including dealing with “the un-for-seen and unprovided-for” (crisis management) and “composing extemporaneously, producing something on the spur of the moment,”⁴⁷ but continues to clarify that improvisation is not an ex-nihilo practice, citing ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner and bassist Charles Mingus; indeed, the Mingus quote is pervasive in the jazz metaphor literature: “you can’t improvise on nothing; you’ve gotta improvise on something.”⁴⁸ Since there is, by necessity, something upon which to improvise, Weick settles on defining improvisation recursively as an embellishment that “increasingly feeds on these embellishments themselves.”⁴⁹ In his list of practical prescriptions for organizations, he notes that they should have “Rich and meaningful sets of themes, fragments, or phrases on which to draw”; and that these sets should be agreed upon as “minimal structures for embellishing.”⁵⁰ The notion of the necessity of minimal structures is similar to that of constraints in that it provides some limitations on what is allowed within a particular practice, as seen in the writings of Barrett discussed below.

Improvisation, defined as using layers of embellishment, Weick argues, can be likened to language acquisition and use. Citing some of the well-worn clichés, for instance, how jazz is like a conversation,⁵¹ allows him to assert that

⁴⁷ Weick, “Introductory Essay,” 544.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Barry Kernfeld, *What to Listen for in Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 119; see also Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 492. Weick cites the quote in his “Introductory Essay,” 545–546.

⁴⁹ Weick, “Introductory Essay,” 546.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 552.

⁵¹ For a compendium, see Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); for an opposing view, see Benjamin Givan “Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation,” *Music Theory Online* 22:3 (2016).

Managerial activities, which are dominated by language and conversation, often become synonymous with improvisation. . . . Like jazz musicians, managers simultaneously discover targets and aim at them, create rules and follow rules, and engage in directed activity often by being clearer about which directions are not right than about specified final results. Their activity is controlled but not predetermined.⁵²

His final, resolute assertion is that

improvising is close to the root process in organizing and that organizing itself consists largely of the embellishment of small structures. Improvising may be a tacit, taken-for-granted quality in all organizing that we fail to see because we are distracted by more conspicuous artifacts such as structure, control, authority, planning, charters, and standard operating procedures.⁵³

To aid his broadening-out of improvisation and how it can serve as the root process of organizing, Weick also refers to other sites of improvisation such as psychotherapy, medical diagnosis, and, in line with prior literature, military combat. If improvisation can be found in these disparate activities, it stands to reason that the practice is prevalent in other spheres, such as corporate management, as well. Citations from Gilbert Ryle—“virtually all behavior has an ad hoc adroitness akin to improvisation”—and Mary Catherine Bateson—“Improvisation can be either a last resort or an established way of evoking creativity”—drive home the point that improvisation is ubiquitous and can be drawn on to serve a variety of needs.⁵⁴

While the *Org Sci* issue is nominally dedicated to jazz, one other article draws on a non-jazz form of improvisation: theater improv.⁵⁵ In a manner analogous to jazz proponents’ tactic to present

⁵² Weick, “Introductory Essay,” 549.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 553.

⁵⁴ Gilbert Ryle, “Improvisation,” *Mind* 85:337 (1976): 69–83, paraphrased by Weick, “Introductory Essay,” 546; Mary Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1989), 4, quoted in Weick, “Introductory Essay,” 550. Also see Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver, *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013 [1972]).

⁵⁵ Mary M. Crossan, “Improvisation in Action,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 593–599. Crossan has an earlier co-authored article in which the group of authors do draw on jazz as a model, in addition to theater improv: Mary M. Crossan, Henry W. Lane, Roderick E. White, and Leo Klus, “The Improvising Organization: Where Planning Meets Opportunity,” *Organizational Dynamics* (Spring 1996): 20–35.

the symphony orchestra as a straw man, Mary Crossan contrasts traditional theater, with scripts, props, and directors, to improvised theater. The unscriptedness serves the same function as the lack of fully fleshed-out sheet music in erasing planning and closing the gap between composition and execution: “There is no script. There is no planning. Everything happens in real-time and is totally spontaneous.”⁵⁶ She makes the link between the spontaneity of improv theater and managerial activity by citing management guru Henry Mintzberg’s 1973 *The Nature of Managerial Work*,⁵⁷ which, according to Crossan, “document[s] the extraordinary amount of managerial activity that [is] spontaneous in nature.”⁵⁸ She also cites a later Mintzberg study, which depicts realized strategy as a combination of intended (or planned) strategy and emergent strategy.⁵⁹ Mintzberg provides the following illustration:

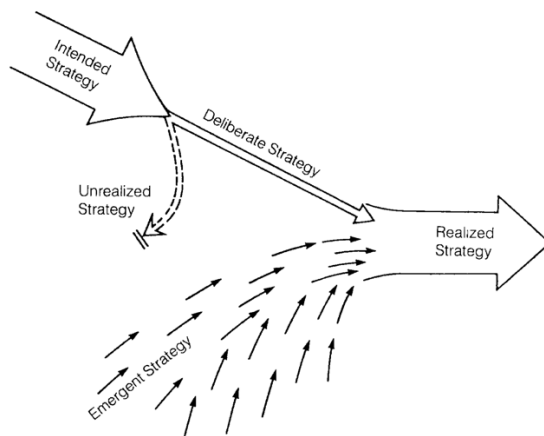


Fig. 1.2. Deliberate and emergent strategies.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Crossan “Improvisation in Action,” 594.

⁵⁷ Henry Mintzberg, *The Nature of Managerial Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); a condensation of this text appears in Henry Mintzberg, “The Manager’s Job: Folklore and Fact,” *Harvard Business Review* 53:7/8 (1975): 49–61.

⁵⁸ Crossan, “Improvisation in Action,” 595.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 595 – 596.

⁶⁰ Henry Mintzberg, “The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps for Strategy,” *California Management Review* 30:1 (1987): 14.

The emergent component of the strategy, as the little dynamic arrows seem to indicate, demands an approach that is “more intuitive, action-oriented, spontaneous, in-the-moment, bottom-up, and ongoing.”⁶¹ The in-the-moment or real-time factor is critical because, and here Crossan uses a by-now familiar trope, asserting that “the cycle time for innovation is shortening” and therefore “time-based competition has become an important consideration for management.”⁶²

Crossan uses the same transposition as Weick in shifting improvisatory musical behavior into the realm of improvisatory language usage, while continuing to argue that linguistic limits serve as (one of) the essential constraints in which theater improvisers work: “Perhaps the most important factor is the structure in which the improvisation takes place, since the structure imposes the grammar through which the actions are interpreted. ... The most obvious structure the audience imposes is the structure of language.”⁶³ The implication here is that the structure makes the action comprehensible to the audience. Furthermore, “audiences of improvisation are tolerant of some mishaps. ... Improvisation requires some tolerance of error” but, fortunately, “Different structures provide different tolerances.”⁶⁴ In this assertion, Crossan skillfully weaves together two common threads in the jazz management discourse, namely structure and failure.

While authors like Perry, Kao, and Weick provide actionable checklists or practical to-dos near the ends of their respective articles, Crossan is the first organizational scholar we encounter that proposes a workshop model. In this model, improv consultants work with executives to teach them both the value and foundational skills of improvisation. She argues that theater improv is a better

⁶¹ Crossan, “Improvisation in Action,” 596.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 595.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 598.

model than jazz improvisation because “The skills to engage in jazz improvisation are unavailable to many people and hence improvisation has been perceived as too distant to apply directly to organizations. Whereas the skills of listening, communication, and story-telling are available to everyone, making improvisation in theatrical terms more than a metaphor,”⁶⁵ i.e. practical for managers. When using theater improv as a basis, these consultants use “exercises that were originally designed to develop the improvisational capability of actors. Theory and practice are bridged through improvisational workshops.”⁶⁶

Although this dissertation does not focus on consultancy/workshop models that use either jazz or theater improv as a basis, it is certainly worth mentioning that they continue to supply an interesting source of income to improvising actors and jazz musicians alike. Like trade manuals by authors like Kao, these workshops are an attempt to bring improvisatory management thinking closer to the intended audience of corporate executives, thereby driving more impact than what academic scholarship tends to achieve.⁶⁷

I do not review all the sections in the special issue, a number of which concern meta-reflections on the improvisatory organizing of the Vancouver Academy of Management Jazz Symposium, the event that served as the catalyst for the special issue. However, two more authors deserve mention since they emphasize the *jazz* part of the metaphor.

In her introductory remarks to the Symposium, Mary Jo Hatch sets the scene for the jazz-management event and the subsequent jazz-management journal publication:

⁶⁵ Ibid., 594.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ See the discussion of Mark Laver, “Improvise!(TM): Jazz Consultancy and the Aesthetics of Neo Liberalism.” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), near the end of this chapter.

If you look at the list of characteristics that are associated with the 21st century organization, you find concepts like flexible, adaptable, responsive to the environment, loose boundaries, minimal hierarchy. When you look at the list of a second, if you're interested in jazz, you recognize that all of those ideas could as easily be associated with a jazz band as a 21st century organization. And so the idea of comparing these two worlds seems like a sensible one.⁶⁸

Hatch continues to argue for the utility of using metaphors to elucidate concepts and enhance understanding, yet she cautions against superficial use of metaphors. Hatch lays the charge that “Much use of metaphor in organization studies never gets beyond acknowledging a single aspect of a metaphoric association,” which goes against the fact that “A good metaphor analysis assumes that if two things, like jazz and organizing, are related in one way, they will be related in other ways as well.” I find her self-awareness and willingness to engage with aspects of metaphor usage that are brushed over in most other metaphor-reliant jazz management literature commendable, especially since these traits are rarely adopted by subsequent scholars. In particular, while many jazz management authors tout the accessibility of the metaphor (and, as seen above, the proponents of theater improv claim that their model's accessibility even exceeds that of jazz), Hatch notes that “all metaphors imply some form of exclusion because not everyone will resonate with or agree with their implied comparisons.”⁶⁹

In a concerned email, appended to the special issue, she addresses elitism and sexism, two of the exclusions found in the jazz metaphor discourse. These exclusions, her detractors rightly point out, plague both sides of the metaphor, jazz and upper-level management. She counters the elitism argument with a suggestion that managers, like jazz musicians, should all intently listen to each other, not only to themselves (upon which the elitism argument ostensibly rests). This slight broadening of the circle of inclusion is seemingly sufficient.

⁶⁸ Mary Jo Hatch, “Jazz as a Metaphor for Organizing the in the 21st Century,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 557.

⁶⁹ Hatch and Weick, “Critics Corner,” 603.

The reality of the male-dominated jazz scene undergirds the charge of sexism and the charge that the jazz metaphor might bring such male domination into the already male-dominant field of management. Hatch makes the interesting move of essentializing (with caveats) male as competitive and female as collaborative, and then claims that “jazz is as collaborative as it is competitive,”⁷⁰ thereby usefully creating a world of gender equality. This surface-level disarming certainly leaves much to be desired, but at least she is willing to engage with the allegations of sexism that surround the jazz metaphor.

By contrast, Hatch finds charges of racism “largely absent in the organizational discourse surrounding the metaphor, though it is a major critique raised within the jazz community.” This critique, she continues, “rests on the inescapable irony that jazz was originally developed by blacks in the southern U.S. as a countercultural form of expression by an oppressed minority, and has since been appropriated over and over again by white music producers, musicians, and audiences all over the world who sometimes forget or ignore its history and racial roots.”⁷¹ An irony that does seem to escape her is that the jazz *metaphor* is indeed another such appropriation by white *organizational scholars*—all 12 of the contributors to the 1998 special issue on Jazz Improvisation and Organizing present as white.

An apt culmination of both the *Organizational Science* issue, as well as this Early Days section, can be found in Frank Barrett’s “Coda - Creativity and Improvisation and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning.”⁷² This was the first article I read on the jazz metaphor for

⁷⁰ Ibid., 602.

⁷¹ Ibid., 601. Indeed, the perhaps-strategic neglect of the cultural origins and significance of jazz can be seen in much of the jazz metaphor literature. Any discussion of the cultural components of jazz is largely absent from the discourse. See the discussion of the 2013 special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* below for a musicologically informed critique.

⁷² Frank J. Barrett, “Coda: Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 605–622. Barrett replicates and expands several of the ideas presented in this

corporate management, which was fortuitous since it provides a microcosm of much of the early literature on the jazz metaphor and presents or re-presents themes that continue to resonate in subsequent writings on organizational improvisation. I therefore spend quite some time working through it in the pages below.

Barrett's work, in this article as well as in a dialogue with clarinetist Ken Peplowski,⁷³ focuses heavily on the (minimal) constraints under which jazz musicians work, and includes some of the tropes already noted in earlier scholarship. After setting up the dichotomy between classical music and jazz, where classical musicians have to rely on scores and jazz musicians do not, he then adds the caveat that although "There is a popular misconception that jazz players are inarticulate, untutored geniuses, that they have no idea what they are playing as if picking notes out of thin air,"⁷⁴ "Jazz improvisation is a loosely structured activity in which action is coordinated around songs"⁷⁵ and that "Learning to play jazz is a matter of learning the theory and rules that govern musical progressions,"⁷⁶ emphasizing the regulations that constrain jazz performances. In a perhaps simplified version, the public dialogue with Peplowski, Barrett is even more forceful: "One of the themes we want to talk about is that jazz is actually very structured; it's not just a matter of pulling notes out of thin air. ... jazz is guided by a non-negotiable framework that constrains what the

"Coda" in a 2012 trade manual; without adding any substantial new ideas. *Yes to the Mess: Surprising Leadership Lessons from Jazz* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

⁷³ Frank J. Barrett and Ken Peplowski, "Minimal Structures within a Song: An Analysis of 'All of Me,'" *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 558–560.

⁷⁴ Barrett, "Coda," 606; he also includes the Mingus quote in Barrett and Peplowski, "Minimal Structures within a Song," 558.

⁷⁵ Barrett, "Coda," 611.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 606.

soloist can play”⁷⁷ and that “Jazz is a rule-bound activity.”⁷⁸ In the public setting, in which he is addressing a room full of practitioners, he perhaps has to put in more effort to dispel the myth of *ex-nihilo* improvisation.

In the Coda, Barrett takes a more nuanced approach, outlining some of the benefits and potential risks of these structures. Like Bastien and Hostager, Barrett notes that coordinating devices such as the structures of songs, as well as their surrounding conventions (and their ubiquity in the jazz scene), allow musicians to quickly get together and play without having to hash out the particulars before or during their performance. Indeed “Everyone knows where everyone else is supposed to be, what chords and scales players are obliged to play. These minimal structures allow them the freedom to express considerable diversity.”⁷⁹ However, he warns that structures might become comfortable and that that comfort (or complacency) inhibits creativity in jazz bands and organizations alike. He argues at length for disrupting the patterns and habits that become structures themselves.

In both the Coda and the dialogue with Peplowski, Barrett explicates the technicalities aspects of harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and formal structures of songs in a manner similar to the appendix to Bastien and Hostager’s early article. Barrett further bolsters this demonstration of expertise by claiming in-group status—in the article, “I also draw on my own experience as a jazz pianist” and continues to list highlights of his performing career,⁸⁰ as well as, in the dialogue, performing live with Peplowski. His emphasis on the primacy of structure is initially strong: “To

⁷⁷ Barrett and Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song,” 558.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁷⁹ Barrett, “Coda,” 612; see also Barrett and Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song,” 559.

⁸⁰ Barrett, “Coda,” 605.

play outside of the chord changes is to break a rule. You can't do that."⁸¹ However, he backs away from such a hardline stance when Peplowski points out that "you can take any bad situation and make it into a good situation."⁸² This recalls Kao's stance that mistakes, if they are believed to exist, can be turned to opportunity in performance by retroactively recontextualizing a wrong note to make it seem intentional. Barrett also sees the pedagogical value of errors, accepts them as a necessary byproduct of exploration and risk-taking. However, the acceptance of errors does have its limits; Barrett admits that "there are cases in where errors are intolerable."⁸³ The tension between acceptable failures, from which there is something to be learned, and unacceptable failures animates much of the managerial and entrepreneurship discourse that emerge after the turn of the millennium.

Barrett also discusses of the importance of "hanging out" in the jazz community, since it allows musicians to learn the social conventions of the scene.⁸⁴ However, musical conventions are also learned through hanging out: "Central to learning jazz is the institution of the jam session, in which musicians get together to play extemporaneously."⁸⁵ The jam session, and jamming more generally, is another link to the work of Kao, who also emphasizes the informal acculturation found in communities of practice, be they jazz scenes or organizations.

⁸¹ Barrett and Peplowski, "Minimal Structures within a Song," 559.

⁸² Ibid. Peplowski, however, also backtracks a little: "But the best musicians still have a sense of structure, and are still able to play within a structure that the audience can recognize ... and that's what makes it music instead of noise" Ibid., 560, ellipsis original.

⁸³ Barrett, "Coda," 620.

⁸⁴ For a discussion on the importance of hanging in the New York jazz community, see Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin' the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 71–72.

⁸⁵ Barrett, "Coda," 616.

No jazz metaphor microcosm would be complete without a section on flattening hierarchical structures. While Barrett for some reason believes that alternating leadership and the practice of turns to solo are “overlooked,” these are, in fact, well-rehearsed tenets of leadership in organizational improvisation. However, what Barrett adds is an emphasis on followership. He maintains that for the egalitarian model of alternating leadership, “it is necessary that people take turns supporting one another. The role of accompaniment, or ‘comping’ is a very active and influential one: it provides a framework which facilitates and constrains the soloist.”⁸⁶ Comping also relies on another key tenet: listening. Barrett contrasts listening to not only not engaging (which results in “bad jazz”), but also silencing. He argues that silencing can be avoided and, harkening back to Perry’s arguments about distributed decision-making power, that “The deceptively simple practice of taking turns creates a mutuality structure that guarantees participation, inclusion, shared ownership without insisting on consensus and its unintentional hegemonic consequences.”⁸⁷ Listening, when supported by followership, goes beyond giving people a chance to be heard, but also gives them the agency to have an impact of the course of action.

While not wholly unprecedented, the practice of referring to musicological sources stands out in Barrett’s article. Most notably, he cites Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz* and Derek Bailey’s *Improvisation*. However, rather than engaging with their theoretical work, Barrett disappointingly uses these texts merely as compendia of quotations by jazz musicians. Whereas his links to musicology are thin, Barrett is clear as to *why* jazz is a useful model for management. The Coda opens and closes with descriptions of a changed and constantly changing environment. Since, “The mechanistic, bureaucratic model for organizing—in which people do routine, repetitive tasks, in which rules and

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 617.

procedures are devised to handle contingencies, and in which managers are responsible for planning, monitoring and creating command and control systems to guarantee compliance—is no longer adequate”⁸⁸ and “Given the unprecedented scope of changes that organizations face and the need for members at all levels to be able to think, plan, innovate, and process information, new models and metaphors are needed for organizing.”⁸⁹

Improvisation, Barrett argues, fills this gap. And, like Crossan’s reference to Mintzberg’s writings on the actual work of managers, he maintains that business leaders already improvise frequently, even if this goes unacknowledged, unintentionally or otherwise. He argues that in facing the demands of the mechanistic models, “Managers often attempt to create the impression that improvisation does not happen in organizations,” yet continues to claim that “To pretend that improvisation is not happening in organizations is to not understand the nature of improvisation.”⁹⁰ The task of jazz metaphor scholars, then, is to enhance the understanding of improvisation among members of their managerial audiences so that they may realize that, firstly, are already improvising and, secondly, that there is true value in that improvisation.

The value an improvisatory approach to business, according to Barrett and the other organizational scholars in the preceding pages, is wide-ranging and essential to adapt to an ever-changing business environment. Outdated business models and analytic tools need to be replaced by more appropriate approaches, in a way summarized by a late 2010s meme depicting Dave Chapelle saying “modern problems require modern solutions.” Classical music is set up as the old solution, sometimes with a reference to management giant Peter Drucker’s suggestion that leaders should be

⁸⁸ Ibid. 620.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 605.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 617.

like orchestral conductors⁹¹ and jazz as the modern one. Furthermore, jazz is a good model since it relies so heavily on improvisation—as does management, these authors point out.

According to Barrett, the improvisatory nature of jazz affords the organizational flexibility and adaptability that businesses need to navigate the complex competitive landscape. However, readers are reassured that the adaptation should not be understood as being overly flexible, since the alternative model (jazz) is still based on strict rules. Yet, although there is structure, risk remains. But this risk should be seen as an opportunity to be embraced rather than a threat to be feared since mistakes can be turned around in an improvisation-focused mindset.

Finally, the alternating-leadership structures of small-group jazz combos, transposed to management contexts, allows more participation and ownership of decision-making, thereby flattening the hierarchical organizational structures commonly found in corporations. In the following pages, jazz management authors of the next generation reiterate and reinforce these arguments, in addition to making new ones, as the much-hailed turn of the millennium arrives. Their uptake and development of these arguments indicate a salience in the jazz metaphor discourse and, as I show in later chapters, notions of decentralized leadership and accepting and embracing the ever-changing environment manifest in the parallel discourse around twenty-first-century entrepreneurship. Understanding these ideas as they are introduced, advanced, and expanded in the jazz metaphor discourse is therefore essential for my later intervention of bringing the entrepreneurial and jazz metaphor discourses together.

⁹¹ See for example Barrett, “Coda,” 605; Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper, 1954), 341–342; as well as the next chapter in this document.

1.2 Maturation

In this subchapter, I provide an overview and analysis of the next phase of the literature on the jazz metaphor for corporate management. This phase spans a sixteen-year period, roughly between 1999 and 2015. The review is bookended by two metastudies, each of which provides a snapshot of the state of the literature up to that point. The first, by Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche,⁹² serves as the starting point of the maturation phase in the development of the jazz metaphor in that it takes stock of the publications that emerged during the period that I term the early days in the previous subchapter. I consider their consolidation of the then-extant literature as the first step in such a process of maturation. This subchapter ends with another consolidation, from 2015, by Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose,⁹³ which provides an overview of the literature since Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, and attempts to categorize approaches to organizational improvisation by degree and scope (this includes non-jazz forms of improvisation, although they admit that jazz is the undoubtedly front-running metaphor of choice). Whereas Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose discuss a total of almost 200 publications, allowing a commendably broad view of the literature, I opt to home in on fewer pieces in the following pages. Between these two bookends, then, I provide deeper analyses on representative articles that illustrate various understandings and applications of the jazz metaphor. Although, like the rest of the chapter, this subchapter focuses on the jazz metaphor, many of the articles under discussion fall into the broader category of organizational improvisation, while both drawing on and informing the jazz metaphor discourse.

⁹² Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation.”

⁹³ Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose, “Organizational Improvisation.”

Overall, as shall be seen, the literature published during this period of maturation continues to emphasize the importance of minimal structures and the tension between freedom and constraints, as well as the belief in the utility of such tensions. Other tensions—or frictions—include those between competition and collaboration, as well as that between collectivism and individualism that emanate from the flatter leadership structures for which jazz metaphor proponents advocate. However, there is a move away from the strict models of jazz that form the foundation of the metaphor. While some organizational scholars remain close to the traditional swing/bebop styles of jazz, others turn to other styles of jazz, including free jazz, or wholly different musical, or, indeed, artistic traditions as sources of metaphoric inspiration.

There are more calls for categorizing different types and different *degrees* of improvisatory managerial behavior; authors frequently use continua or matrices to represent these levels of improvisation. I show some illustrative examples below. A central theme in this bloc of scholarship is that of time and temporal constraints. Authors position improvisation as a solution to the demands of a fast-paced business environment in that it narrows the time between planning and execution; a precursor of this thinking can be seen in Crossan's work. This aspect of improvisation finds a home in discussions on crisis management and dealing to with sudden market shocks. However, many authors also praise both the innovative potential and the everyday utility that improvisation affords to business practitioners, asking managers to consider improvisation as more than a contingency measure, useful only to steer the firm back to the original plan.

My discussions of this era of publications are arranged in a somewhat chronological fashion, although other considerations—such as the work of a single author or work within a particular business segment—often muddle the straight line running from 1999 to 2015. I begin by discussing the work of Miguel Pina e Cunha and his cloud of collaborators; then follows the work by Claudio Ciborra. Turning to the business segment approach, I discuss various incorporations of

improvisation into the literature on marketing, leadership, and innovation. Near the end of the subchapter, I return to the work of a single author: Steve Leybourne. Each author presents material and develops ideas around organizational improvisation that reveals some assumptions about jazz, which I discuss in the next chapter; or introduces or progresses notions on which I build in my own expansion in the two chapters after. I conclude the current subsection with the 2015 overview of the literature on organizational improvisation in order to summarize the discourse produced during this phase of maturation.

1.2.1 Cunha et al.

Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche break up the then-extant literature on organizational improvisation into three stages. During the first, authors like Bastien and Hostager, Weick, and Barrett draw primarily on jazz as the grounding metaphor to generate “a systematic list of characteristics and facilitators of improvisation that can be transposed to organizational settings.”⁹⁴ The second stage, according to Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, provides a slightly more empirical approach and moves away from arts metaphors, focusing instead on the temporal characteristics of improvisation, regardless of the field in which it is observed. The third stage sees a return of first-stage authors, addressing some of the questions that the second-stagers posed, still upholding jazz as the gold standard.

The authors proceed to outline the conditions in which (organizational) improvisation takes place. The notion of using improvisation as a contingency measure is strong in their claim that “An organization improvises when it faces an occurrence it perceives as unexpected, for which it does not possess any kind of preplanned course of action, and which is perceived as requiring fast

⁹⁴ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 300.

action.”⁹⁵ However, they do not limit themselves to associating improvisatory action with crises, but also acknowledge that many organizational improvisation scholars, as seen in Weick for example, note that the environment in which the organization finds itself might necessitate improvisation even in the absence of a particular crisis: “the higher the speed of the environment framing the organizations, the higher the likelihood of it taking improvisational activities.”⁹⁶ While the crisis model deals with improvising away from an unexpected internal weakness or external threat, Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche also point out the theme of taking advantage of an unexpected internal strength or external opportunity through improvisation, which recalls Perry’s extension of the SWOT analysis tool. Improvisation becomes a method not only for regaining a position of normalcy after a shock, but also for moving beyond what was previously thought possible. In both cases, speed is critical.

However, in their overview of the literature, Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche find that certain conditions need to be met for improvisation itself to be possible. These conditions have been discussed in the preceding subchapter, but it is worth pointing out the broad categories. The first is “an *experimental culture* [that] results from a set of values and beliefs that promote action and experimentation—as opposed to reflection and planning—as a way of understanding and dealing with reality.”⁹⁷ This includes tolerance for errors and the possibility of learning from them. A second condition is the much-discussed tenet of having minimal structures, creating a suitable balance between the freedom to deal with an unexpected situation or to reach an innovation, and the constraint that integrates the improvisatory feat into the overall operations of the organization.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 314.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 317.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 318, italics original.

Several other factors also influence organizational improvisation, including leadership structures, particularly rotating leadership, as can be seen in the alternating solos model, or serving leadership, which emphasizes support or, in jazz parlance, comping, and organizational configuration, which includes elements of group size and resultant relationships among group members, as well as individual competencies, both technical and creative. Throughout the article, the authors carefully present tables that show where in the body of literature discussions of each these factors appear, while also demonstrating how pervasive these themes are.

A central goal of Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche's stock-taking is to find some sort of stable definition of improvisation. They note that the concept is often left undefined in many organizational improvisation sources and that there is extremely little agreement among the sources that do provide a formal definition.⁹⁸ They posit the following definition of improvisation: "the conception of action as it unfolds, drawing on available material, cognitive, affective and social resources."⁹⁹ Their subsequent discussion divides ideas of improvisation into two categories: temporal convergence between action and execution, as proposed by Christine Moorman and Anne Miner¹⁰⁰ and making do with whatever is available, which is often termed bricolage.

Moorman and Miner's construal of improvisation serves as an important touchpoint in subsequent discourse on organizational improvisation; their understanding of improvisation, therefore, warrants a brief aside. While the authors initially acknowledge the importance of planning, they note that there are some situations in which improvisation becomes unavoidable: the by-now familiar settings of fast-paced, competitive, and turbulent environments for which prior plans prove

⁹⁸ Cf. My discussion of approaching a definition of improvisation in chapter 1.

⁹⁹ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, "Organizational Improvisation," 302.

¹⁰⁰ Christine Moorman and Anne S. Miner, "The Convergence of Planning and Execution: Improvisation in New Product Development," *Journal of Marketing* 62:3 (1998): 1.

insufficient. In particular, they declare that “Observers typically assume that composition or planning occurs first and is followed at later time by implementation or execution. In improvisation, the time gap between these events narrows so much that, in the limit, composition converges with execution. Therefore, the more proximate the design and implementation of an activity in time, the more that activity is improvisational.”¹⁰¹ Alongside uncertain environments, the authors measure levels of organizational memory and information flow in order to identify conditions in which improvisation, as they have defined it, leads to positive outcomes. They find that both memory and information are necessary for impactful improvisation, but that excesses in either can stifle improvisation by either limiting innovation by too-strict reliance on old methods through memory, or by overloading improvisers with too thick a stream of information. Since these two factors, memory and information, might slow a process down, there is a limit as to how much is useful; improvisation, conceived as a convergence of planning and implementation, serves to quicken the pace of organizational responses to environmental stimuli.

The Moorman and Miner definition of improvisation is very influential, yet holds three particular points of value for Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche. It shows that improvisation is 1) deliberate, 2) extemporaneous, in that it cannot be planned for, and 3) “that improvisation occurs during action,”¹⁰² which has the implication that the correctness of the action can only be judged retrospectively. The temporal benefits of improvisation (like speed) lend themselves well to the deployment of improvisation during crisis situations that require rapid responses. Improvisation, then, serves as a method to deal with a scarcity of time.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁰² Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 309.

By contrast, the bricolage understanding supports the use of improvisation to overcome scarcities of (other) resources. This usage of the term bricolage draws heavily on Claude Lévi-Strauss's framing of myth in terms of bricolage: "The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. It has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task at hand because it has nothing else at its disposal."¹⁰³

Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche point out that bricolage is sometimes used interchangeably with improvisation, but suggest that it is merely a subset—synecdoche rather than synonym. Bricolage adds an element that the temporal dimension does not: the aptness of the action to the situation at hand. They cite Weick's definition of bricolage as "us[ing] whatever resources and repertoire one has *to perform the task one faces*."¹⁰⁴ Following both Lévi-Strauss and Weick, Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche emphasize that an organizational bricoleur is not simply drawing on material resources, but also cognitive, affective, and social ones. Cognitive resources refer to "the set of mental models held by the individual members of the organization,"¹⁰⁵ which through the emotional systems of affective resources become scaled to larger parts of the organization in the form of social resources like group dynamics and formal and informal protocols of interaction. While bricolage is

¹⁰³ "Or, le propre de la pensée mythique est de s'exprimer à l'aide d'un répertoire dont la composition est hétéroclite et qui, bien qu'étendu, reste tout de même limité ; pourtant, il faut qu'elle s'en serve, quelle que soit la tâche qu'elle s'assigne, car elle n'a rien d'autre sous le main." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plan, 1962), 26; translation from French by George Weidenfeld.

¹⁰⁴ Karl E. Weick, "Organizational Redesign as Improvisation," in *Organizational Change and Redesign*, eds. George P. Huber and William H. Glick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 352, quoted by Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, "Organizational Improvisation," 306, emphasis theirs.

¹⁰⁵ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, "Organizational Improvisation," 309.

set aside from the temporal understanding of improvisation, it should of course be noted that the resources that a bricoleur might lack can be converted into time and vice versa.¹⁰⁶

In their “Issues for Research” section, Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche note that the literature on organizational improvisation might have been leaning too heavily on jazz as the foundation of its metaphor, or, in their construal, “are still too excessively wedded to jazz theory.”¹⁰⁷ They note that there has been an attempt to shift away from the jazz metaphor, notably in the second stage of the discourse (this sometimes drew on the improv theater metaphor, as developed by Crossan). However, the third stage saw a return of the primacy of jazz in the literature. After acknowledging some of the richness of jazz as a foundational concept, they warn that “jazz threatens to become a blind spot in organizational improvisation theory.”¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, they echo Crossan’s argument that jazz improvisers rely on a high level of technical competency, which might be seen as a barrier in the process of transferring improvisatory thinking from theory, as proposed in the literature, to practice, as enacted in organizations. Organizational scholars, therefore, need to consider other forms of improvisation that might be more easily transferable than the traditional models of jazz proposed during the early period of research into organizational improvisation.

Staying within the realm of jazz itself, Michael Zack calls for a considerable expansion of what falls under the umbrella of the genre label. He provides a one-paragraph crash course of jazz history that includes music improvised or written after 1960 in order to contextualize the limited view of jazz espoused by the authors of the 1998 *Organizational Science* issue: “Proponents of

¹⁰⁶ A simple example is hiring more workers: money, a material resource, is converted into more worker hours; an inverse example is that time can be spent on building the social resources in the organization by increasing interactions among workers, etc.

¹⁰⁷ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 332.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

particular jazz idioms,” Zack maintains, “can become quite entrenched in their own worldview.”¹⁰⁹ He creates a four-step ladder of improvisatory behavior: classical music, with minimal to no improvisation; traditional jazz/swing (“constrained within strong structure,” as noted by Barrett and Peplowski); bebop, which sees extensive improvisation in which the harmony can be altered; and postbop, marked by maximal improvisation, in which “content and structure emerge.”¹¹⁰ Bebop and postbop, Zack argues, have far more to offer organizational practice than the structure-heavy approaches to organizational improvisation advocated by prior authors; indeed, he claims that “if we accept the job-shop view of improvisation, then we may be selling short the jazz metaphor and the notion of improvisation in general.”¹¹¹ He aims to stretch the forms of improvisation to freer forms of jazz, breaking away from the dedication to swing and bebop understandings of jazz as the foundation for the metaphor.

Four years after their overview of the field, the same trio of Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha take up the gauntlet that they threw down. They present alternatives to the jazz metaphor, including Indian music, music therapy, and role theory, while also acknowledging that there are more nuances to be extracted from jazz by considering freer forms of jazz, i.e. those beyond, in their phrasing, the “‘swing/trad jazz’ genre”¹¹² on which the metaphor typically depends, as argued by Zack and critiqued by myself in the follow chapter. They remind that “there are many forms of jazz, with concomitant degrees of improvisation, each providing different sets of implications for organizational improvisation.”¹¹³ However, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha maintain that “While the

¹⁰⁹ Michael Zack, “Jazz Improvisation and Organization: Once More from the Top,” *Organization Science* 11:2 (2000): 229.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹¹² Ken N. Kamoche, Miguel Pina e Cunha, and João Vieira da Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation: Looking Beyond the Jazz Metaphor,” *Journal of Management Studies* 40:8 (2003): 2047.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 2024.

robustness of the jazz metaphor is not in question, earlier research on improvisation in fields other than music performance (including management) suggests that there is more to improvisation than current research on jazz improvisation allows for.”¹¹⁴

Before moving into these alternate forms of improvisation and highlighting their benefits and contrasting them to jazz, they point out a few reasons why jazz has been the predominant genre on which organizational scientists focus. I find their investigation informative in how it points to the undergirding practices that support the metaphor’s usage, frequently by contrasting these practices to similar or dissimilar manifestations in non-jazz forms of improvisation, yet they do not fully critique the assumptions on which the metaphor rests. Nevertheless, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha firstly note that many of the authors are jazz musicians themselves, or have acquainted themselves reasonably well with the genre and made the link to organizational studies. Taking this into consideration, alongside the predominance of jazz in the organizational improvisation discourse, they “expect this state of affairs [this predominance] to persist into the foreseeable future.”¹¹⁵ Secondly, jazz is identified as “the social phenomenon in which improvisation is more salient [in western societies].”¹¹⁶ The social aspect is significant in group settings such as organizations, and jazz provides a useful tension between collaboration and competition. These group dynamics are moderated through flexible leadership models like the jazz convention of alternating solos and providing accompaniment. Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha reiterate another tension: the fact that minimal structure (through its manifestations in jazz standards) is shared among members of the

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 2031.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 2047.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 2024.

group. The minimal part encourages risk-taking that comes with “dealing with the unknown”¹¹⁷ while, the structure part keeps the group together, “without inviting chaos.”¹¹⁸

While also based on minimal structures, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha point out that Indian music differs considerably from jazz in terms of group dynamics. Competition is valued above cooperation and, as a result, “Leadership, considered one of the cornerstones of jazz improvisation, is almost absent in Indian music.”¹¹⁹ The competitiveness also extends the riskiness of the activity, beyond that associated with the indeterminate settings in which improvisation takes place. For the authors, Indian music presents a more individualistic scenario of improvisation in which coordinating leadership is absent; the model “may be appropriate for self-directed, competitive and high-performing teams”¹²⁰ rather than groups that require constant supervision and/or leadership.

Jazz and Indian music share the characteristic of minimal structures on which performers build improvisations. By contrast, improvisatory therapy “has no explicit ground on which to improvise.”¹²¹ Again in contrast to the aforementioned pair of genres, music therapy does not rely on technical prowess in playing instruments; rattles and drums are used instead, thereby overcoming the obstacle pointed out by Crossan regarding the difficult transfer from musical improvisation theory to organizational improvisation practice. Music therapy does, however, rely heavily on a

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 2029.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 2048. Recall Kao’s similar avoidance of chaos.

¹¹⁹ Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2033. They continue to argue that, broadly speaking, this is a result of the competitive nature of Indian music, as opposed to the more cooperative ethos in jazz, which requires coordination mechanisms or roles within the group. For details about differences between Indian music and jazz, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha draw on Avery Sharron, “Time and Space Bias in Group Solidarity: Action and Process in Musical Improvisation,” *International Social Science Review* 58:4 (1983): 222–230. However, in a conversation with Derek Bailey, Viram Jasani describes an alternating leadership model in raga playing that seems to be very similar to that presented in bebop jazz. Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: It’s Nature and Practice in Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 6.

¹²⁰ Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2044.

¹²¹ Ibid., 2035.

hierarchical leadership structure: “The leader plays a pivotal role by generating all the initial ideas and facilitating participation. ... This differs from the case of jazz where the notional leader [if there is one] is essentially a first-among-equals.”¹²²

However, in discussing improvisatory role theory, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha note that “Improvisation is unlikely to take place where an imbalance of power exists. If no one has a strong power advantage,” like the leadership models used jazz and unlike those found in music therapy, “then there is no authority to impose roles, and thus the degree of role improvisation is likely to be higher in situations where that power exists.”¹²³ Furthermore, flatter leadership structures also encourage participants to take on different functions within the group: “If the balance of power is dynamic rather than static, allowing leadership to rotate among group members, individuals will be motivated to vary the way they act... Depending on the configuration of roles, leadership might function in a way similar to jazz (where roles rotate), or may be absent (as in Indian music.)”¹²⁴ Role theory, by design, focuses on interaction among the various members of the group, thereby highlighting once more the social aspects of organizational improvisation.

Role theory differs from the discussed musical genres in that it does not view improvisation as an art-making or presentational phenomenon. Instead, the improvisers work in a more ad hoc and necessitated manner. Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha maintain that

In organizations, improvisation is generally not deliberate. It is most triggered by the perception of a problem that has to be tackled hastily. ...managers tend to prefer planning and routinization to improvisational/emergent behavior... This means that they will tend to improvise when they do not have time to plan—thus, the problem to be tackled must demand fast action in order to trigger improvisational behavior.¹²⁵

¹²² Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2036. They draw their ideas about leading participatory music therapy from J. Scott Southworth, “Improvisation for Nonmusicians: A Workshop Approach,” *Journal of Creative Behavior* 17:3 (1983), 195–205.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 2039.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2041–2042.

This focus on the temporal dimension of improvisation fits in with the crisis model. In terms of the crisis model, then, role theory presents a better model than jazz, in which improvisation is used not as the means to an end, but as an end in and of itself.

In discussing three alternatives to jazz as potential foundations on which to base metaphors of organizational improvisation, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha aim to demonstrate the fact that improvisation is not the monolith that may be inferred from the jazz-heavy organizational improvisation literature. Instead, they encourage managers to be flexible in their approach and, while remaining open to improvising when applicable, being sure to select the best-suited model of improvisation. By broadening the range of types of improvisatory practices available and discussing their respective benefits and characteristics, business leaders can fit improvisation to an even wider array of circumstances, be they crises that demand rapid action or more generally to foster cultures in which improvisation is welcomed.

Aside from *types* of improvisation, Miguel Pina e Cunha is also interested in *degrees* of improvisation. In the 1999 review of the organizational improvisation literature, he (alongside his two collaborators) points out an early passage from Weick's Introductory Essay to the 1998 *Organizational Science* issue that builds a ladder, similar to the one by Bruce Ellis Benson noted in my introduction, running from "interpretation" through "embellishment" and "variation" to finally alight upon "improvisation."¹²⁶ Although not exactly parallel, Cunha, in a collaboration with Steward Clegg, Arménio Rego, and Pedro Neves, calls for a partition of organizational improvisatory behaviors, where the degree of improvisation is predominantly determined by the organizational

¹²⁶ Weick, "Introductory Essay," 544, quoted in Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, "Organizational Improvisation," 310. Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, "Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation" also makes reference to degrees of improvisation, drawing on Zack, "Jazz Improvisation and Organization," 232. Cf. Benson, Bruce Ellis, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26–30. Cf. the section that moves Toward a working definition of improvisation in the introduction to this dissertation.

milieu and desired outcome of the activity. In particular, these authors demonstrate the categories of improvisation employed within management paradigms of the twentieth century. Their first category of organizational improvisation is “ad-hoc,” of which the essence is “ingenious responses to unique problems that hopefully will not be necessary in the future—as the problem that required the improvisation should be fixed and the ad-hoc improvisation vanishes with the problem.”¹²⁷ These unique problems often have an air of crisis around them, and with that comes the temporal pressure to make do without planning or other steps that would delay a response. Ad-hoc improvisation may occur in many settings, yet Cunha et al. make a weak tie to what they call “pre-modern management,” i.e. the managerial practices that did not yet undergo the optimization of so-called scientific management.

Modern management, exemplified in Frederick Taylor’s 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management*,¹²⁸ is characterized by the imposition of standards and systems that prefer planning to improvisation. Since improvisation is seen as a transgression of the hard rules imposed by modern management, participants engage instead in covert improvisation. Cunha et al. maintain that “the elimination of improvisation may, however, be more fiction than fact: improvisation can be suppressed from formal processes but not extinguished in real actions.”¹²⁹ This claim supports the notion of improvisation as ubiquitous and reveals the contrast between the ideals of modern, scientific management and the reality of organizational improvisation.

Improvisation in pre-modern and modern managerial contexts has negative connotations. In such settings, there is an implication that improvisation only exists because more rigid systems are

¹²⁷ Miguel Pina e Cunha et al., “Organizational Improvisation: From the Constraint of Strict Tempo to the Power of the *Avant-Garde*,” *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23:4 (2014): 365.

¹²⁸ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1911).

¹²⁹ Cunha et al., “Organizational Improvisation,” 366.

either not in place or not sufficient to deal with expected or unexpected problems. Improvisation is seen as a way to return to a stable and systematized status quo. By contrast, “provocative improvisations” and “managed improvisations” seek to push organizations beyond the status quo. In the former category, managers introduce small shocks in order to expel conformity and complacency.¹³⁰ In managed improvisation, organizational space is dedicated to improvisations in order to develop innovative products. Cunha et al. note that in fast-paced business environments, like technology startups fueled by highly mobile venture capital, “improvisation may be particularly valuable due to the depth and speed of creative destruction. Semi-structured organizations may be more successful in these classically Schumpeterian environments [characterized by creative destruction] than purely organic or mechanistic forms.”¹³¹ The semi-structuredness balances the tension between constraint and freedom already amply discussed. While the utility of managed improvisation is well-touted in the literature, such as in the work of Kao, Cunha et al. poses a simple provocation in their “questions for further research” section: “Is a managed improvisation still improvisational?”¹³²

Even though the four categories of improvisation (if they are indeed all improvisational) have different aims and are employed in different contexts, Cunha et al. conclude that “all these improvisations share the quality of *planning as executing* with the available resources,”¹³³ thereby reinvoking the dual nature of improvisation that Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche identified in their initial review of the organizational improvisational literature.

¹³⁰ In the jazz metaphor discourse, although not here, this type of improvisation is frequently demonstrated by accounts of Miles Davis’s hiring, rehearsal, and performance practices which sought to innovate through constant destabilization.

¹³¹ Cunha et al., “Organizational Improvisation,” 367.

¹³² Cunha et al., “Organizational Improvisation,” 368.

¹³³ Ibid., 370, emphasis original.

In their article on organizational improvisation and time, the Cunhas, here alongside Mary Crossan and Dusya Vera, also propose different shapes of improvisation, based on the amount of time available, on the one axis, and the uncertainty of the environment on the other.

Uncertainty\Time pressure	Low	High
Low	Planning	Ornamented improvisation
High	Discovery improvisation	Full-scale improvisation

Table 1.1. Scenarios of improvisation in organizations.¹³⁴

An abundance of environmental certainty and time obviates the need to improvise since managers can perform careful analysis, formulate thorough plans, and subsequently implement them perfectly. Yet if any these factors shrink, improvisation becomes necessary. Discovery improvisation refers to the practice in the positive sense, very similar to managed improvisation just noted. While “Experiments usually involve an iterative cycle of steps to design, build, run, and analyze,” when using discovery improvisation, “as environmental turbulence increases, these steps start to overlap and occur simultaneously.”¹³⁵ It is significant to note that this form of improvisation does not take place in situations of temporal scarcity.

By contrast, ornamented improvisation is focused solely on dealing with time pressure, not straying too far away from the plans and protocols previously put in place. While the lack of time makes planning impossible, the clarity of the environment requires only adaptation, rather than innovation. Full-scale improvisation is employed when the dual scarcities of time and certainty

¹³⁴ Crossan et al., “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” *The Academy of Management Review* 30:1 (2005): 133.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 134; the concept of iterative cycles will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3.

coexist in a given situation, such as during a crisis or in a particularly turbulent environment.

Crossan et al. warn that “Firms that persist in planning under these conditions find themselves frustrated by the simultaneous pressure to act and the inability to understand what is going on around them.”¹³⁶ Full-scale improvisation, then, is another way of returning to the realm of stability.

These different forms of improvisation, the authors maintain, are ways to bridge competing understandings of time and the resultant behaviors in corporations. They make distinctions firstly between clock time and event time and secondly between linear time and cyclical time.¹³⁷ Each pair contains a set of seemingly irreconcilable parts (time cannot be thought of as simultaneously linear and cyclical), yet Crossan et al. propose that since these opposing forms of conceiving and experiencing time coexist in complex organizations, there is a *need to reconcile them*. They characterize cyclical time as being past-oriented, in that the past recurs and is therefore a useful point on which to focus. They characterize linear time as being future-oriented, in that the future will be different from the past, so it is no use looking toward the past to divine the future. Thus, improvisation “helps to synthesize linear and cyclical times because it is a process in which past and future blend together in a deep experience of the present.”¹³⁸ Crossan et al. go on to explain that “The improvisational process enables individuals and groups to draw on their potential capacity to access the past (without intending to repeat or replicate it) and to enhance and enrich action through a future-oriented vision and a unique collective experience of the present. This is seen in jazz

¹³⁶ Crossan et al., “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” 134.

¹³⁷ I am not defining these four concepts here since their use is fairly intuitive; for more details, see Crossan et al., “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” 134–136 and 138–139.

¹³⁸ Crossan et al., “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” 139.

improvisation: group members bring a rich repertoire of musical skills and memory and seek to enhance it through the collective experience of composing and playing in the moment.”¹³⁹

Turning to the other pair of times, Crossan et al. note that, even in time- and certainty-scarce situations, clock time is a useful feature to incorporate alongside event time, which focuses on phenomena that unfold in indeterminate environments. They identify a tension that an organization might face: “If adherence to the plan can chain individuals to the past, discarding the plan can wreak havoc on scheduling and coordination.”¹⁴⁰ The solution is to rely on the familiar idea of minimal constraints that keeps some aspects of planning in place, while also allowing flexibility to deal with any unforeseen events that may arise.

1.2.2. Claudio Ciborra

Claudio Ciborra, who focuses his organizational theorization on information system management, rails against clock time, claiming that “ordinary management [is] trapped in an objectified conception of time” and that “Improvisation is at odds with such a troubled and anxious relationship with the clock.”¹⁴¹ Whereas Crossan et al. find that clock time might still be a useful construct when combined with improvisatory behavior, Ciborra makes a more definite divide between clock-based and event-based realms. Using a geographic metaphor, Ciborra maintains that “Plans and methods belong to the high ground dominated by the notion of space, where time is clock time (as the fourth dimension complementing the ones of three-dimensional physical space). It is in this space that the flow diagrams, and the activity and sequence maps, are currently

¹³⁹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 137.

¹⁴¹ Claudio U. Ciborra, “Notes on Improvisation and Time in Organizations,” *Accounting, Management and Information Technologies* 9 (1999): 92.

expressed.”¹⁴² These standard managerial tools, like SWOT analyses discussed in the previous subchapter, stand in contrast to the tools that he proposes, namely improvisation and bricolage. These tools “can hardly be hosted by (find a meaningful context in) the large, chilly spaces of the high ground. ... They belong to the opaque, shapeless (boxless) world of the swamp, where time is fluid and out of joint.”¹⁴³ Improvisation and planning, for Ciborra, do not even inhabit the same metaphorical space. Furthermore, in his choice of characterizing the spaces, Ciborra seems to emphasize the moral aspect of the planning/improvisation dichotomy, at least in the minds of traditional managers or managerial theorists, by referring to planning as occupying a “high ground” and improvisation trudging through the “swamp.”

The high ground also has the characteristic of being universal—it is everywhere, and therefore nowhere. Ciborra warns that this separation inhibits real-world application: “Management agendas look and sound practical, but they are deceptively persuasive. They cannot be translated into effective action, being highly simplified and based on sweeping generalizations and abstractions (such as ‘strategy,’ ‘utility,’ and ‘infrastructure’).”¹⁴⁴ The separation, however, not only takes place in metaphorical space, but also in actual time in the standard unfolding of strategize-then-implement critiqued by Moorman and Miner and many other organizational improvisation scholars. Ciborra fleshes out the strategizing process:

According to [the traditional business strategy literature’s] perspective, management should first engage in a strategy formulation process that is purely cognitive: key success factors and distinctive competencies are identified through the appraisal of the environment, its threats and opportunities, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the organization [SWOT analysis]; next, these factors and competencies are translated into a range of competitive

¹⁴² Claudio U. Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 92.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

strategy alternatives; then, once the optimal strategy has been selected and laid out in sufficient detail, the implementation phase follows.¹⁴⁵

In a perspective that appears remarkably early in the development of the organizational improvisation literature, Ciborra condemned the fact that this progression does not unfold in the way prescribed by the old management tomes, at least not in the adoption of information systems.¹⁴⁶ The lack of predictable unfolding, and therefore the ineffectuality of planning, manifests not only the adoption of information systems, but also in their development; this motivates the central intervention in entrepreneurship discourse that grew out of software development, as I demonstrate in chapter 3.

Also early in the trajectory of organizational improvisation studies, Ciborra defines improvisation as having both temporal and resource-use aspects: “Improvisation is situated performance where thinking and action seem to occur simultaneously and on the spur of the moment. ... In improvising, features of a situation are ‘suddenly’ framed and combined by the actor, so that they become resources at hand for intervention. ‘During’ the suddenness of the problematic situation, the problem solving strategy and the deployment of resources for implementation precipitate into a burst of action.”¹⁴⁷ Although not cited in the literature immediately following it, Ciborra’s construal of improvisation anticipates that of Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 34–35.

¹⁴⁶ Claudio U. Ciborra, “From Thinking to Tinkering: The Grassroots of Strategic Information Systems,” *ICIS 1991 Proceedings* (1991): 285.

¹⁴⁷ Claudio Ciborra, “Improvisation and Information Technology in Organizations.” *ICIS 1996 Proceedings* (1996): 369. See also *Labyrinths of Information*, 35–36, 51. Ciborra has other formulations of a similar description or prescription of improvisation: “management have to enact the context while they act, make choices and envision strategies. ... As improvisers and ‘bricoleurs,’ they stay creative in the face of surprises because they are accustomed to operate in chaotic conditions and pull order somehow out of the resources and routines at hand.” Claudio U. Ciborra, “The Platform Organization: Recombining Strategies, Structures, and Surprises,” *Organizational Science* 7:2 (1996): 115.

¹⁴⁸ In reference to Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche’s call for more focus on non-jazz forms of improvisation, it should be noted that Ciborra is more aligned to a broad view of improvisation than one situated in jazz. However, like Weick, who takes a similar approach to the practice, he does use jazz in order to briefly illustrate some points about improvisation;

Reformulations of the temporal component of improvisation appear frequently in Ciborra's work, "highly contingent upon emerging circumstances; unifying design and action; quick, sudden, and extemporaneous."¹⁴⁹ Many scholars suggest improvisation as a means to increase the speed of responses to rapid and frequent environmental shifts; speed is the component of improvisation that makes improvisation necessary in crisis situations. However, Ciborra cautions against focusing on the "quickness" of improvisation. He notes that, in the literature, "Extemporaneity is reframed as simultaneity and quickness, which it obviously is not."¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, citing Weick and recalling Barrett, he warns that an emphasis on speed might suppress improvisatory behavior by encouraging managers to fall back on pre-scripted routines and methods that may or may not be appropriate to the situation at hand.¹⁵¹

In order to deal with crises (although he uses the euphemism "surprise"), Ciborra proposes a "platform organization,"¹⁵² a concept whose characteristics are worth quoting at length since the model encapsulates many of the organizational improvisation dictates:

a chameleon-like organization conceived as a laboratory for rapid restructuring. The platform turns out to be an unorganized source of productivity in the high-tech industries, because of its intrinsic potential to generate efficiently new combinations of resources, routines, and structures which are able to match turbulent market circumstances. ... Its most distinctive attributes are its flexibility, movement, and transformability arising from the intersecting, penetrating, and collating of different organizational arrangements, such as the network, the matrix, and even the hierarchy. It is simultaneously fragmented and intertwined, and thus may be the only form capable of surviving in a high-tech industry where a monolithic, rigid business identity is not able to cope with the frantic pace of technological change. In contrast to any traditional (static) form, we have here the

see for example "Improvisation and Information Technology in Organizations," 372; or "Notes on Improvisation and Time in Organizations," 79. Cf. Hatch and Weick, "Critics Corner," 604.

¹⁴⁹ Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 154.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 156; this also recalls Moorman and Miner's warning about reliance on memory, which can stifle improvisatory behavior when it leads managers back to prepared actions rather than novel solutions.

¹⁵² See Ciborra, "The Platform Organization," 103–118; and *Labyrinths of Information*, 119–152.

celebration of all the qualities of the random, the apparently incidental, the seemingly oppositional, as well as the surprising. ...

The platform is a model which turns upside down our beliefs about what is structural and permanent in the strategy-structure dyad, as well as what is subjective, informal, and ephemeral. It does so simply because its job is of a particular nature: to handle frequent, sudden, and radical changes, not just in products, markets, and technologies, but in the very business identity and industries to which it belongs at that moment in time. Specifically, its purpose is to support managers facing frequent surprises: events which appear to be incomprehensible and inconceivable, as they represent fundamental disjunctures, where existing frames, assumptions, and values fall apart, and organizational problem solving and design of ad-hoc initiatives lack a meaningful context.

The platform is powerful because it embeds the potential for action. It seeks out the intrinsic dispositions of resources so that they can be recombined when needed more quickly and effectively. In the platform strategy, action and structure coalesce as an entity designed for coping with surprises.¹⁵³

Rather than proposing improvisational speed as the solution to crises and turbulent environments, Ciborra envisions an organization that combines and recombines its resources to face the situation with which it is currently faced. In particular, this organization is well-placed to deal with situations that go beyond shifts in areas in which managers expect frequent change, such as markets and products. Indeed, the seismic shifts to which Ciborra refers here remind of what Weick has termed a “cosmology episode”—events of such calamity that “people suddenly feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that people suffer from the event and, at the same time, lose the means to recover from it.”¹⁵⁴ Such events require not only speedy response, but a wholesale reconceptualization of what the organization can do and how its resources can be deployed.

Although the Foreword of his magnum opus states that “This book is an emergency toolkit for us to use in crises,”¹⁵⁵ Ciborra emphasizes that improvisation is not only to be used in times of

¹⁵³ Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 121–122.

¹⁵⁴ Karl E. Weick and Diana L. Coutu, “Sense and Reliability,” *Harvard Business Review* 81:4 (2003): 88.

¹⁵⁵ Kristen Nygaard in Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, v.

crisis; indeed, the author of the Foreword continues to state that crises are “a fairly normal state for our projects.”¹⁵⁶ Ciborra does point to the instances of improvisation in times of crisis (such as those described by Weick), yet admonishes that “one should not conclude that improvisation is just an individual or collective antidote to panic and disruption in emergency situations. If this were the case, its role would be confined to the design and implementation of ad hoc organizations in emergencies or disasters. We submit, instead, that improvisation belongs fully to the everyday economic behavior.”¹⁵⁷

Economic behavior here is broadly construed. However, in his work on information systems, Ciborra tends to focus on the design and implementation of new software and hardware. Throughout his work, he details instances of “hacking, improvising, tinkering, applying patches, and cutting corners [that] seem to punctuate ubiquitously the everyday life of systems.”¹⁵⁸ Examples include the serendipitous creation and development of the Internet from ARPANET,¹⁵⁹ the implementation of intranets in medical firms,¹⁶⁰ and product development in computer hardware companies.¹⁶¹ With regards to networks, he notes that “Paradoxically, in this highly uncertain situation, the most favourable approach seems to be no plan/no strategy—just let the web development and use unfold. The process is not mature enough to be managed; it is still in a discovery stage, and as such is nurtured and cultivated by the senior management of the marketing

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ciborra, “Notes on Improvisation and Time in Organizations,” 80.

¹⁵⁸ Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 42–43.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 79–82.

¹⁶¹ Ciborra, “The Platform Organization,” 105–111.

division.”¹⁶² Since these scenarios cannot be managed through planning, it is imperative that managers accept the practice of improvisation instead.

Ciborra’s greatest contribution to the literature on organizational improvisation is perhaps his demonstration of the ubiquity of improvisation in everyday corporate activities. His work on the improvisatory nature of new product development has laid the groundwork for several other scholars to investigate how firms approach marketing and innovation. I turn first to literature on marketing; later in this section, attention is paid to the literature focused on innovation.

1.2.3 Business segments: marketing, leadership, and innovation

Drawing on Neilson’s emphasis on satisfying the audience, noted in the previous subchapter, Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay argue that a jazz band have similar goals as a marketing manager trying to find an appropriate match between the company and the market. As I later show, this feature is particularly important in startups as well, and has to be established even before a startup sells its first product. Dennis and Macaulay claim that “the jazz group practices strategic fit. It identifies and responds to the needs of its audience in an interactive and continual process.”¹⁶³ Analogously, they argue, “In terms of market orientation, improvisation allows an organisation to react quickly through the creation of original solutions based around a central strategy to better satisfy customer needs.”¹⁶⁴ This improvisatory fit between company and customer (market orientation) can take place at a variety of levels in the organization. Like Crossan et al., Dennis and

¹⁶² Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 80–81.

¹⁶³ Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay, “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 11:3 (2003): 180.

¹⁶⁴ Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay, “‘Miles ahead’—Using Jazz to Investigate Improvisation and Market Orientation,” *European Journal of Marketing* 41:5/6 (2007): 609.

Macaulay present a two-by-two matrix to demonstrate the different levels of improvisatory behavior that can take place in an organization.

Market orientation \ Improvisation	Low	High
Low	One size fits all (plan)	Improv through alternatives
High	Single-level improv	Multi-level improv

Table 1.2. The improvisation/market orientation matrix.¹⁶⁵

Crossan et al. focus on the uncertainty of the environment itself, while Dennis and Macaulay prioritize the firm’s responsiveness thereto, couched as market orientation. In settings of low responsiveness and low improvisation, organizations simply stick to the central plan, regardless of changes in customer behavior or needs. Low market orientation (low responsiveness to the market) can be tempered with improvisatory actions conducted by frontline workers in proposing alternatives to adapt to the needs of the market.¹⁶⁶ However, these alternatives are planned out—since the plans have alternatives built in, they are not improvised as such. Nonetheless, Dennis and Macaulay categorize this type of action as “high improvisation.” When middle managers have some limited space for improvisation, this falls into the authors’ “single-level improvisation” category, but they caution that these managers should “only make decisions that do not radically deviate from the strategic plan and [that this] will have a limited impact on the organization’s resource base.”¹⁶⁷ Instead, improvisation should permeate all levels of the organization and decision-makers at all

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 612.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 613.

levels should orient themselves toward to market, but “Obviously any creative decisions that have strayed too far from the main strategy will be able to be adapted and amended to fit back into the overall plan.”¹⁶⁸

Dennis and Macaulay mirror their insistence on not veering too far away from the central plan by using a particular form of jazz as their model. Although they acknowledge that jazz performances vary, they provide a didactic description (prescription?) of “one relatively common approach,”¹⁶⁹ which follows a traditional bebop form of intro-head-solos-head, while the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic features of the jazz standard undergird the improvised sections, as well as standard functional roles for frontline and rhythm section instruments. Dennis and Macaulay note two threats associated with straying too far away from the tune. Firstly, “Creative dissonance occurs when a musician ‘over improvises’ and moves away from the harmonic foundation of a piece. Often this is termed as cacophony and can alienate the listener.”¹⁷⁰ The alienation of the audience, in organizational terms, means that customers are dissatisfied and therefore cease patronizing the business, indicating a failure on the part of the marketing manager. Secondly, when the jazz musician “obscure[s the] harmonies the piece loses its identity, which can [also] have a negative effect on the audience.”¹⁷¹

Like many others, Dennis and Macaulay pit jazz musicians (“jazzers”) against orchestral musicians (“readers”). They maintain that classical musicians merely interpret the music, noting that “The key element of improvisation i.e. composing whilst playing, is entirely lost.”¹⁷² What they

¹⁶⁸ Dennis and Macaulay, “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” 183.

¹⁶⁹ Dennis and Macaulay, “Miles Ahead,” 615.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 619.

¹⁷¹ Dennis and Macaulay, “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” 181.

¹⁷² Ibid.

regard as a key element of improvisation is, of course, a callback to the Moorman and Miner convergence definition discussed earlier. Dennis and Macaulay seem to apply a double standard in comparing jazz to classical music. As just noted, they emphasize the importance of maintaining the identity of a jazz piece by staying within its harmonic bounds; by contrast, they criticize orchestral music in that “the results may be still be nice music but they will always lead to the same piece of music. If an audience’s tastes change, the orchestra is not in a position to change with them.”¹⁷³ The authors do not seem to consider that jazz audiences’ tastes might change to an extent in which the ostensible identity-defining harmonic patterns of the piece are seen as outmoded as well.

Aside from the lack of improvisation, they also disparage orchestra musicians’ reliance on conductors and of the conductor’s sole decision-making power, returning us to the important question of leadership style and decentralization. Dennis and Macaulay contrast this centralized leadership approach to that illustrated by the jazz metaphor, “one that emerges from the whole band and necessitates that though improvisation each player is his own composer and conductor.”¹⁷⁴ They term this model “quasi-autonomous leadership,” and recommend its adoption in companies because it “helps to develop a culture in which departmental members are empowered to make their own decisions,” although they reiterate their caution that “these must be in line with [the] organization’s marketing strategy and corporate objectives.”¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, while Dennis and Macaulay promote the distributed leadership of jazz groups, their idealized description of how jazz unfolds also includes the frontline jazz player as taking on some central leadership. They maintain that in addition to carrying the tune, the frontline player is also responsible for “communicating key instructions to

¹⁷³ Ibid., 182.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 184.

¹⁷⁵ Dennis and Macaulay, “Miles Ahead,” 618.

other members of the group. The frontline player may also have a further leadership role in terms of looking after the administration of the band and gig; choosing the material and selecting the running order prior to the performance.”¹⁷⁶ In addition to essentially setting the artistic strategy in a way very similar to that of the maligned conductor, Dennis and Macaulay’s frontline player also has a disciplining role: “the frontline player can communicate instructions to the other members of the group to tone down the improvisation, alter the volume or even shorten a piece.”¹⁷⁷ Broadly speaking, and evidenced by internal inconsistencies, Dennis and Macaulay’s integration of the jazz metaphor into marketing strategy is riddled by false dichotomies between and gross generalizations about jazz and orchestral music, as well as their respective performance traditions and leadership models. I untangle these dichotomies and generalizations in the next chapter.

Remaining on the topic of leadership, Paul Newton, in targeting a readership of school principals, also argues for the jazz convention of rotating leadership; he maintains that “Leadership through accompaniment means that leaders must become followers when the demands of the task and the talents of others dictate.”¹⁷⁸ Newton’s focus on accompaniment reminds of Barrett’s notion of followership. Both authors emphasize that there is ample creative and improvisatory potential in comping and that soloing is not the only way to contribute to an improvisatory effort; indeed, good followership can prompt great soloistic leadership. However, Newton still believes that there is the need for a central leader, at the heart of the alternations, whose role is of “gathering the ‘players’ together, providing the stage, setting the tempo, developing a structure for distributed leadership,

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 616.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 620.

¹⁷⁸ Paul M. Newton, “Leadership Lessons for Jazz Improvisation,” *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 7:1 (2004): 97. Although aimed at leaders in the education sector, Newton’s article is frequently cited in organizational studies and marketing literature that promote the jazz metaphor.

and providing appropriate accompaniment to ensure the growth of collective efficacy,¹⁷⁹ as well as selecting the tunes that the band is to play. This conception of the functions of a leader is clearly very similar to that of Dennis and Macaulay's frontline player. Furthermore, much of this leadership work is preparatory; Newton leans into the idea of preparation even further.

Indeed, one of his central arguments is that leadership and improvisation alike can be taught and that it is not the result of divine inspiration or special talent. Preparation through learning and practice, Newton maintains, is key to both leadership and improvisation, and he laments that "The element of improvisation which is most often overlooked is preparation."¹⁸⁰ As the surrounding discourse analysis clearly demonstrates, Newton is perhaps a little too zealous in his assessment of preparation being overlooked. He is not as cautious as others with regards to the risks around preparation and over-preparation and charges that "Leaders should find ways to identify clichés, common elements, and common vocabulary in as many different settings as possible and imitate, borrow, or steal other approaches. It is the saturation of good ideas from other sources and the unique context of each organization that creates its original approach,"¹⁸¹ casting some of the terms typically understood as negative (clichés, stealing) in a more positive light. Newton's encouragement to draw on a broad range of sources not only points to tradition, but also to the other players in the group. By rotating leadership, the axial leader stands to learn through followership, thereby improving both their leadership ability and their improvisational skill.

Returning to marketing, in contrast to Dennis and Macaulay, who warn against free jazz as it might alienate audiences, Steve Oakes argues for the inclusion of the freer forms of improvisation in

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 94; see also 85.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 86.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 92.

jazz-based metaphors aimed at marketing managers. Defending less traditional styles of jazz against the charges of audience alienation laid down by Neilson and Dennis and Macaulay, Oakes maintains that

While some consumers like highly predictable music, others are attracted to more unpredictable forms. Likewise, while there is a substantial market for pre-packaged services that are highly predictable, standardized, and low in divergence, many consumers view such services in a negative way as the antithesis of customization, and prefer the surprises offered by a culture of spontaneity.¹⁸²

Oakes constructs a continuum of jazz guitarists that go from minimal embellishment to the more experimental improvisations of Derek Bailey in a manner similar to Benson's ladder of improvisatory music-making, as well as the degrees of improvisation, for example by Zack.

However amicable his engagement with Bailey's free improvisations, Oakes remains wedded to the notion of freedom within tight constraints. Along similar lines, he cites research that shows that pre-planning (as opposed to real-time improvisation) has financial benefits, yet continues to maintain that improvisation has its place in the realm of marketing, particularly in turbulent environments and in industries with rapid product development cycles¹⁸³—both conditions that have received plenty of coverage in the jazz metaphor discourse. Furthermore, he recalls Dennis and Macaulay's category of improvisation-through-alternatives by arguing for a more flexible model of customer service that features "empowerment" as a key feature of improvisation: "In the same way that improvisers are liberated from notated music, empowerment allows contact personnel in service organizations to be liberated from formal scripts, thus enabling them to be creative in dealing with customers rather than 'doing things by the book'."¹⁸⁴ While notated music, usually tied to classical

¹⁸² Steve Oakes, "Freedom and Constrain in the Empowerment as Jazz Metaphor," *Marketing Theory* 9:4 (2009): 480.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 478.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 468.

music, is frequently derided in the literature, Oakes points out that big-band-based jazz, which he terms “traditional jazz” as opposed to the “modern jazz” of bebop, also relies on notated music, as well as conductors.¹⁸⁵ While it is unclear why Oakes considers bebop, a genre of the 1940s, as “modern,” particularly in light of his acknowledgement of Bailey’s musical contributions, I find his trenchant observation that big bands do indeed share many characteristics with the much-derided symphony orchestra rare and welcome.

Whereas Dennis and Macaulay underscore paying close attention to the audience, Morris Holbrook places the emphasis on listening within the group, pointing to careful teamwork; and, more specifically, listening to oneself. Indeed, he maintains that there is an “inherent tension between artistic integrity and audience appreciation” and asks “How, then, can we possibly reconcile the demands of *artistic creativity* with the dictates of *service dominance* [market orientation, customer centricity, etc.]?”¹⁸⁶ Holbrook then argues that improvisers might consider themselves to be the most important customers and that catering to one’s own tastes is perhaps the best course of action. At the same time, like Neilson, Kao, and Dennis and Macaulay, Holbrook notes that “Pleasing oneself as the relevant target customer for one’s own creative output does little to advance one’s audience popularity, mass acceptance, commercial gain, or bank account,”¹⁸⁷ which flies in the face of what Holbrook’s target audience of marketing managers are tasked to do.

Throughout his mammoth 2007 article, Holbrook uses technical aspects of jazz to demonstrate disparate points related to business and marketing. Examples include using harmonic

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 470.

¹⁸⁶ Morris Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor: An Expanded Conceptualization of Music-, Management, and Marketing-Related Themes,” *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* 2:3-4 (2007): 274, italics original.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 275.

substitutions as an analogy for substituting members on a team¹⁸⁸ and using chord extensions to think through product development: “By analogy with marketing strategy, one should feel free to add embellishments (e.g., a moon roof on an automobile) as long as these do not interfere with more basic functions (e.g., protecting passengers from rain showers).”¹⁸⁹ Holbrook takes a very didactic approach to explaining the theoretical underpinnings of jazz to neophytes, questioning how much non-musicians, particularly non-musician organizational scholars can actually gain from engaging with jazz or musicological texts that assume knowledge on the part of the reader. In terms of musicological texts, Holbrook notes the centrality of Paul Berliner’s *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* in the jazz metaphor discourse,¹⁹⁰ yet Holbrook does incorporate more musicological sources than most of his fellow jazz metaphor proponents.

While some of Holbrook’s arguments that hinge on harmonic practices commonly found in some genres of jazz often seem stretched, he makes a compelling argument for “seeking the principles behind building one’s own creative solutions, rather than merely copying those of others—in short, the importance of finding the conceptual keys to developing a differential advantage or competitive edge.”¹⁹¹ Such an analytical stance mirrors competitive strategy giant Michael Porter’s claim that “The essence of strategic positioning is to choose activities different from rivals’.”¹⁹² By taking a look under an organization’s hood, similar to delving into the technical aspects of jazz, Holbrook argues that one can identify the activities that differentiates that

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 236.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 251.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 210. Dennis and Macaulay also point this out, chiding their peers for “over-reliance” on this text. “Miles Ahead,” 614.

¹⁹¹ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 261.

¹⁹² Michael E. Porter, “What is Strategy?” *Harvard Business Review* 74:6 (1996): 68.

organization from its competitors. Jazz standards themselves, Holbrook poses elsewhere, are analogous to commodities—products that do not differentiable characteristics—but recommends that improvising musicians or marketing managers have to present these products in a new way, through deviations and departures in underlying activities, suited to audience and/or customer desires.¹⁹³

Rather than following the organizational improvisational convention of placing composition and improvisation on two ends of the same continuum, Holbrook sets up a typology on which improvisation and composition are on separate axes. Furthermore, Holbrook also distances himself from the jazz metaphor's frequent insistence on small-group settings, preferring larger combinations, while acknowledging the utility and agility of the smaller groups. Using these three axes—group size, compositional ability, and improvisational ability—Holbrook plots jazz musicians according to the merit he assigns them.¹⁹⁴

The matrix runs corner to corner from Kenny G. as a solo player with neither compositional nor improvisational skill, to Duke Ellington's leadership of a big band, his compositional gift and improvisational prowess. Holbrook then translates the matrix to an organizational context, retaining size and switching out composition for planning and improvisation for innovation. "True Leaders" are those that run large organizations, plan well, and innovate regularly.¹⁹⁵ In the realm of jazz, he acknowledges the contributions of most of the points in the matrix (Kenny G. is an expected exception), yet those points in the organizational matrix closest to the solo/no-planning/no-

¹⁹³ Morris Holbrook, "The Marketing Manager as Jazz Musician," *Marketing Intelligence and Planning* 33:7 (2015): 962.

¹⁹⁴ For a summary with examples, see Holbrook, "Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor," 313.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 323.

innovation corner are derided for their inefficiency.¹⁹⁶ However, he does laud the “true leaders” in the jazz matrix, like those in the organizational matrix. Indeed, Holbrook spends a chapter on each Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, the two examples of jazz musicians he provides as illustrations of big-band/good composers/good improvisers.¹⁹⁷

As is clear from his separation of the axes, Holbrook maintains that both planning and improvisation are necessary. He echoes prior authors’ insistence on minimal structure as a space in which freedom and form coexist and are balanced by presenting a jazz version of

dialectic development in which the *thesis* that embodies rules and that shapes the expectations (the basic harmonic-melodic-and-rhythmic structure of a song) combines with an *antithesis* that violates the underlying structure (departures from the basic melody-harmony-or-rhythm in the form of improvised variations or deviations) to for a new *synthesis* that resolves the conflict between thesis and antithesis (so that the departures achieve a fit with the underlying structure in a manner that reconciles or integrates the variations or deviations into a new structure as the basis for further elaborations and extensions).¹⁹⁸

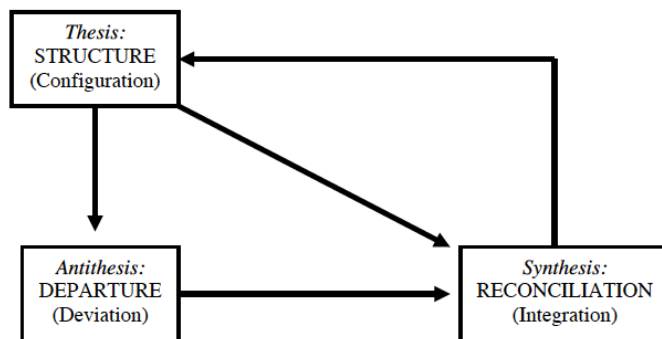


Fig. 1.3. The Dialectic of Creativity.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ Focus groups and product-planning committees receive particularly harsh treatment: a product-planning committee (team-size, planners, not innovators) “makes up in straightjacketed formality what it lacks in imagination, but it pays a heavy price in the form of inevitably uninspired ideas and blinkered insights.” Ibid., 331.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 348-359 and 361- 410.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 326, italics original; see also Holbrook, “The Marketing Manager as Jazz Musician,” 961.

¹⁹⁹ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 414.

Holbrook reflects on “One recurrent theme that pervaded [his study] refers to the connections and parallels between jazz improvisation and dynamic open complex adaptive systems and concerns the need to reconcile, balance, integrate, synthesize, or otherwise resolve tensions due to conflicting tendencies analogous to the dialectic opposition in jazz between structure and departure, order and chaos, constraints and freedom.”²⁰⁰ Many jazz metaphor scholars maintain that the tensions inherent in improvisation provide the animating force that musicians and organizations use to drive toward creative and/or innovative product-making. Holbrook presents this dialectical approach as a way for improvisers to manage these tensions.

One instance of such a dialectical approach can be seen in the work of Vera and Crossan.²⁰¹ Like Newton, Vera and Crossan emphasize the importance of preparation and training in improvisation, arguing that theater improvisation is easier than jazz to teach to managers in workshop-type settings. After conducting an “improvisation intervention” that was “provided with an external training consultant,”²⁰² Vera and Crossan find that “training increased not only the incidence, but also the quality of improvisation by improving the individual ability to rely on expertise and teamwork while improvising.”²⁰³ However, their data only partially support the hypothesis that training increases the incidence of improvisation. Furthermore, they note that training might cement certain prepared solutions in the minds of managers, who fall back on these scripted responses in times of crisis, as cautioned in earlier literature. These tensions between the

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 412.

²⁰¹ Dusya Vera and Mary Crossan, “Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams,” *Organizational Science* 16:3 (2005): 203–224. This is one of the few studies that test hypotheses about organizations improvisation in a quantitative manner.

²⁰² Ibid., 209–210.

²⁰³ Ibid., 217.

advantages and disadvantages of training for improvisation falls into that animating category of improvisatory dialectics that Holbrook describes.

On the point of teamwork, Vera and Crossan argue that team improvisation, when supported by individual expertise and group trust, is more than the sum of its constituent parts of individual improvisation; this collective improvisation drives innovation.²⁰⁴ Team improvisation in theater, they argue, relies on rotational leadership—a model similar to alternating leadership illustrated by taking turns soloing, much-touted in the jazz metaphor discourse.

In contrast to much of that discourse, however, Vera and Crossan maintain that “the spontaneous facet of improvisation tends to be overemphasized in the extant literature. When improvisation is restricted to the ability to ‘think on your feet,’ managers risk confusing improvisation with random moments of brilliance and conclude that you either have this ability or you do not.”²⁰⁵ The argument that improvisation is teachable slots in with the overall approach of improvisation intervention workshops, as well as with Newton’s arguments. Furthermore, the emphasis on temporal contraction in improvisation, espoused by Moorman and Miner, closes off opportunities to recognize more quotidian forms of improvisation lauded by Ciborra. Vera and Crossan note that “Although much has been written about improvisation in crisis situations, where time is an obvious scarce resource and spontaneity is at a premium, improvisation has also been associated with everyday situations of discovery.”²⁰⁶ The fact that improvisation has applications in both time-constrained situations (crisis) and situations where time is not particularly short (everyday

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 204, 206–207.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 203.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 205.

discovery) points perhaps to another dialectic inherent in improvisation, or at the very least, in the organizational improvisation literature.

This dual-application of improvisation to both crises and innovation is echoed by Adrian Cho. Making an internal-external divide, he maintains that

Change may be generated from outside a team or from within, such as when someone on the team creates a problem that requires a correctional response by another person. However, not all navigational commands are issued in response to problems. Similar to jazz musicians, high-performance teams don't just react to change; they generate it themselves because they are constantly seeking to innovate and create a unique offering.²⁰⁷

Cho approaches the jazz metaphor from the perspective of a software development manager at IBM. He frequently praises hackathon-like events and information-sharing platforms with titles such as InnovationJam and Jazz, which were pioneered by none other than John Kao during his time at the multinational. Like Kao, Cho also praises the paradoxes contained in jazz and improvisation more widely and argues that “friction” is the way to balance the outer poles of these paradoxes. Friction itself is a paradox to be balanced: “Too much friction is bad, but too little is also a problem. ... The trick is to identify the optimal level of friction for each specific form of friction and learn how to adjust it.”²⁰⁸ One of the frictions that Cho, like so many of his peers, see as necessary is that of having constraints. To his credit, he takes more time to explain why rules are necessary; most of those same peers simply assume that they are, at least in the minds of the managerial readers. He advocates for “Effective rules [that] are limited to those that are necessary, that can be practically applied, and, above all, that are clearly defined, which each rule’s importance is adequately communicated,”²⁰⁹ yet cautions that “The risk of minimizing process is that it can

²⁰⁷ Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2010), 140.

²⁰⁸ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 194; see also 263.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

result in a loss of control”²¹⁰ and that “Rules provide a safeguard against chaos and anarchy.”²¹¹ Only the barest of rules should be in place in order to maximize freedom and innovation, but the rules that are in place structure, afford, and govern this freedom.

Throughout his trade manual, Cho explains the rules of jazz, keeping within the bounds of bebop performance conventions, although he does note the value of freer forms of improvisation at several points in the book. He educates readers of jazz standards, song forms, functions of instruments in the combo, and bebop and modal jazz harmony, as well as tempo, pulse, and groove. For these last durational factors, Cho takes a particularly didactic approach, instructing readers to tap beats out on tables and legs while singing words like “BE-bop” and “ba-DUM” in order to cultivate an embodied understanding of swing, syncopation, and other rhythmic devices that he tenuously ties to business contexts; one example correlates a product development schedule to groove, while the timeframe is construed as the tempo of the project.²¹² Comparisons to classical music drive many of jazz’s technical points home; at one point he compares jazz harmony to that of Mozart.²¹³

So too for Cho’s leadership recommendations. He makes use of the well-worn tactic of pitting the nimble bebop combo that alternates leadership throughout performances—and from one performance to another—to a symphony orchestra, reliant on a conductor for musical direction.²¹⁴ Jazz musicians rely on listening to each other rather than watching the conductor, Cho argues; however, this emphasis on listening brings with it limitations on group size. Cho spends a chapter on listening and notes the various sources from which pertinent data can stream, including

²¹⁰ Ibid., 255.

²¹¹ Ibid., 21.

²¹² Ibid., 207–209.

²¹³ Ibid., 38.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 137, 141–143.

competitors, customers, collaborators, and ourselves. Following Moorman and Miner, he also claims that, although information is obviously critical to good decision-making, listeners can be saturated if the flows are not controlled. He notes that one way to do so is through hierarchies, such as those found in orchestras, but that that slows down the flow of information.²¹⁵ Smaller groups, then, are more adept at the mutual listening; in the context of creativity workshops, Cho argues that “As the size of the team increases in these exercises, the level of innovation decreases.”²¹⁶ This listening also allows for greater synergies when groups remain small and members take turns leading the team, as expertise demands. It should be noted that Cho outlines some risks to the alternating leadership model. He maintains that “Clear risks are involved in encouraging everyone to take the initiative and lead. The obvious risks is that chaos may ensue if multiple people give conflicting direction...It is also important to define protocols for delegating, transferring, and initiating leadership...Another less obvious risks with on-demand leadership is the no one will lead.”²¹⁷ Non-hierarchical leadership, like the imposition of rules and use of friction, has to be carefully balanced within an organization.

Putting all of this together, Cho claims that

There are some exceptions, where larger groups of up to 20 musicians are mostly improvising, but they are typically performing a specific class of large-ensemble free jazz, and they are definitely a rarity...However, if the musicians are seeking to produce a truly collaborative creative product that can attract and retain a wide audience, they must heed the rules of engagement, such as those described in this book, even more so than musicians playing more traditional jazz styles. If they fail to do this, their musical product can easily degenerate into meaningless, self-indulgent creativity that is of interest to only a very limited audience.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Ibid., 108.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 13.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 261.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 15–16. I engage deeply with the question of large groups of improvisers in chapter 4, and I provide some successful musical models that illustrate how large-group improvisation casts light on organizational improvisation.

Audience appeal is delivered by a small group, who listen to each other closely and adhere to the conventions of the more traditional styles. These conventions, like those proposed by Bastien and Hostager, include rules that govern musical material, as well as group dynamics such as alternation of leadership among members of the group.

1.2.4 Steve Leybourne

One author remains before the bookend of this subchapter: Steve Leybourne. Like early days scholarship, his writings on organizational improvisation emphasize turbulent—particularly increasingly turbulent—environments, either externally-occurring, such as in competitive markets or high-speed industries characterized by frequent disruption by startups, such as high tech; or internal turbulence occurring within an organization. His early studies focused on the latter, looking at change management in financial institutions. Leybourne’s work differs from that of many other organizational scholars in that he turns his attention to the *perception* of improvisation, rather than the practice of improvisation itself, within these firms. He maintains that due to the fact that “environmental turbulence has contributed to the difficulties in anticipating future scenarios for organisational success, marginalising traditional ways of planning and implementing change,”²¹⁹ improvisation has become a much more accepted way of managing change from the outset, rather than regarding the practice as “a means of remedying shortcomings and repairing potential damage caused by poor planning and execution.”²²⁰

²¹⁹ Stephen A. Leybourne, “Managing Change by Abandoning Planning and Embracing Improvisation,” *Journal of General Management* 31:3 (2006): 13.

²²⁰ Leybourne, “Improvising within Management,” 233; see also Stephen A. Leybourne, “Managing Improvisation within Change Management: Lessons from the UK Financial Services,” *The Service Industries Journal* 26:1 (2006): 75; and Stephen A. Leybourne and Peter Cook, “‘Rockin’ All over the World’: Organizational Improvisation Lessons from the Music-Based Practitioner,” *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy* 9:1 (2015): 2.

Leybourne and his co-authors Gary Lynn and Morten Vendelø note the theme of crisis management (as opposed to change management) in the literature—and indeed acknowledge that “Improvisation is a necessity when dealing with disasters and accidents, both natural and man-made, because although these events can be planned for, they seldom happen as imagined,”²²¹ but insist that improvisation can be used in more quotidian settings of innovation and slower processes of bringing about organizational change.

However, like Moorman and Miner, Leybourne argues that even in more everyday scenarios, one of the chief affordances of improvising is the temporal convergence of planning and execution. This shortening of timeframes has clear benefits for dealing with turbulent environments, where rapid responses are required on multiple fronts. He gives two illustrations, one internal, one external: “the temporal pressures on change managers to deliver solutions to business problems, or to improve processes, mean that change managers attempt to reduce delivery times by moving away from the original plan”; and “because of the speed with which new products have to be developed to keep abreast of competitors, requirements change in scope and nature during the development and implementation cycles.”²²² The need to change product features during the development process is a key feature of the agile methodology (discussed in chapter 3), making Leybourne’s link between this need and improvisatory flexibility particularly timely.

Along with Peter Cook, Leybourne also takes the opportunity to contrast the utility of improvisation (and the model of improvised music) to the outdatedness of the symphonic management model, echoing Kao in claiming that “The orchestra analogy is useful within organisations when the organisational environment and product/service mix is simple and stable

²²¹ Steve, Leybourne, Gary Lynn, and Morten Thanning Vendelø, “Forms, Metaphors, and Themes: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Organizational Improvisation,” *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23:4 (2014): 354.

²²² Leybourne, “Improvising within Management,” 91.

and where staff expectations of work and its meaning are consistent.”²²³ In the absence of consistency, plans cannot be implemented *as planned* and managers have to turn to improvisation in order to deal with the internal and external instability.

Managers across various functions have come to accept improvisation. Leybourne conducted interviews with around 100 managers and includes excerpts in support of improvising in the workplace from project managers, change managers, and those in charge of IT systems. Interestingly, he finds that improvisation is particularly embraced by auditing and compliance departments—departments typically considered to be limited in their capacity for improvisation due to regulatory constraints.²²⁴ This stands in contrast to received wisdom about which business units and functions are susceptible to improvisatory behavior (product development, marketing, sales) and which should aim to avoid it (finance, legal, compliance), and demonstrates that improvisation could be adopted throughout an organization. However, one financial manager did claim that “improvisation sounds a bit scary to me, I have to say, from an accountant’s point of view.”²²⁵ This apprehension points to a critical factor in Leybourne’s interlocutors’ acceptance of improvisation: improvisation needs to be constrained. Leybourne concludes that “It would however be imprudent to allow all employees to improvise without limitation. Managers need to support improvisation, and therefore require it to be bounded by some kind of limiting framework.”²²⁶ Leybourne continues elsewhere to promote improvisation, but only alongside models reliant on plans:

²²³ Leybourne and Cook, “Rockin’ All over the World,” 7.

²²⁴ Leybourne, “Managing Change by Abandoning Planning and Embracing Improvisation,” 22; “Managing Improvisation within Change Management,” 83, 91.

²²⁵ Quoted in Leybourne, “Managing Improvisation within Change Management,” 86.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 86; see also “Managing Change by Abandoning Planning and Embracing Improvisation,” 23.

Indeed, it is difficult to recommend the wholesale dismantling of the traditional models of planning-based management in favour of the potential anarchy of the untrammelled and uncontrolled improvisation. Because improvisation disrupts procedures, which are assumed to be the optimal way of carrying out tasks within traditionally managed organizations, some other element of “implied” control must be present.²²⁷

As with much of the surrounding discourse, improvising managers are instructed to find and maintain a balance the tension between freedom and constraints and, again consistent with some organizational improvisation studies, this tension is construed as an animating feature, as with Kao, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, and Holbrook. Leybourne states that “These tensions trigger problem solving and the exploration of new ways of resolving uncertainty within the organization.”²²⁸

Tied to the need for a controlling structure within which to improvise is the need for improvisational skill and experience. Like Crossan, Leybourne notes that the jazz metaphor instance of organizational improvisation implies a certain technical fluency on the relevant instrument or skillset. However, he also points out that “all jazz players do not have the levels of competence required, and this is equally true of employees in organisations.”²²⁹ While training can bolster competence, as Crossan claims, Leybourne and Cook counter the expertise argument in the jazz management discourse by maintaining that “much organisational creativity is quite ordinary and does not always require or value genius level contributions.”²³⁰ This sentiment of the everyday (and perhaps the everyman) aligns Leybourne and Cook more closely with Ciborra’s understanding of organizational improvisation as a ubiquitous phenomenon performed by all members of the group, regardless of skill level.

²²⁷ Leybourne, “Improvising within Management,” 235; see also Stephen A. Leybourne, “Improvisation as a Way of Dealing with Ambiguity and Complexity,” *Graziadio Business Review* 13:3 (2010).

²²⁸ Leybourne, “Improvising within Management,” 230; see also “Managing Improvisation within Change Management,” 74.

²²⁹ Leybourne, “Improvising within Management,” 231.

²³⁰ Leybourne and Cook, “Rockin’ All over the World,” 8.

1.2.5 The other bookend

This subchapter concludes the way it started—with a review of a review article. In their meta-analysis of more than 200 articles on the subject, Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose find that even a decade and a half after Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche’s overview of the organizational improvisation literature (the bookend opening this subchapter), research has not been marked by high levels of cumulativeness. They argue that the taxonomies that do exist, many of them outlined in the tables above, tend to focus on a single type of improvisation: usually jazz, but also improvisational theater;²³¹ exceptions include Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha or Oakes, both of whom included broader ranges of musical styles into their conceptions of improvisation.

Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose also note the difficulty in managing the tension between improvisation and the limitations that Leybourne and others characterize as necessary, maintaining that “Ultimately, organizations consistently struggle to achieve a balance between countervailing forces of organizational efficiency (control) and adaptability (improvisation).”²³² This need for both freedom and form, they argue, is one of the main reasons that jazz has emerged as the primary metaphor in the organizational improvisation discourse: “jazz improvisation provides a wealth of parallels to OI [organizational improvisation]. It starts from a structure that frames improvisation but does not cage it.”²³³ It is clear that the authors here share the predominant understanding of the genres included in the “jazz” label—bebop and swing—genres characterized by their harmonic-melodic-rhythmic frameworks in which musicians, with clearly defined functional roles, can improvise. This assumption is supported by Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose’s other two reasons for

²³¹ Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose, “Organizational Improvisation,” 438.

²³² *Ibid.*, 443; see also 442.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 444.

jazz's central position in the literature: 1) proponents believe that jazz will resonate with readers, and 2) "jazz represents improvisation at its most intricate,"²³⁴ repeating a baseless idea prevalent in jazz metaphor scholarship.

Like Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche's early review, Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose's analysis also includes tables of definitions of improvisation found in the literature.²³⁵ For their own definition, they take a crisis-driven, though caveated, construal of the practice: "we define OI as the conception of unhindered action as it unfolds, by an organization or its members, often (yet not exclusively) in response to an unexpected interruption or change of activity."²³⁶ They note that some exceptions to need-based improvisation, including jazz performances and startups (see Chapter 3), yet insist that organizational improvisation is usually caused by a shock that demands an immediate response that differs from already-laid-out plans.

Following the practice of drawing up typologies of organizational improvisation demonstrated in tables by Crossan et al. and Denis and Macaulay, Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose also present a typology. Their axes are group size (individual; interpersonal; organizational) and degree of improvisation (minor; bounded; structural). This matrix is very similar to that of Holbrook, although his has a third dimension: degree of composition(al skill). The cells in the matrix outline the different types of improvisatory behavior described in the extant literature:

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid., 441–442; Cf. Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, "Organizational Improvisation," 303–306.

²³⁶ Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose, "Organizational Improvisation," 440.

Degree \ Group size	Individual	Interpersonal	Organizational
Minor	Spontaneous practice	Synchronization	Space for experimenting
Bounded	Expert leadership	Yes-and	Constrained improvisation
Structural	Dropping tools	Minimal structuring	Platform organization

Table 1.3. The degree/level framework of organizational improvisation.²³⁷

Rather than arguing what each cell would look like in practice, Crossan et al. outline how it has been described in the literature, with frequent reference to scholars who did advance arguments and provide portrayals of organizational behavior (for example, “platform organization” is a Ciborran concept).²³⁸

Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose make a rare attempt to engage with musicological literature, albeit those frequently cited in the jazz metaphor discourse: Berliner, Bailey, Gunther Schuller, and Barry Kernfeld. However, they find that typologies or continua of improvisation that rely on music and musicological scholarship do not translate well to business since some are very music-specific in that they refer to genres.²³⁹ For example, they critique Zack’s four-part demarcation from classical music through swing and bebop to postbop as being inapplicable to business since business does not have similar genre categories; they do not, however, mention the levels of improvisation that Zack aims to illustrate with these genres. As shall be seen in the next short subchapter, musicologists

²³⁷ Ibid., 448.

²³⁸ Cf. Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 121–122.

²³⁹ Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose, “Organizational Improvisation,” 446.

tend to agree that the jazz metaphor, based on music, of course, is not particularly well-suited to the business realm.

1.3 Musicological responses

Even though the jazz metaphor as presented in organizational studies draws heavily on music-theoretical and -historical aspects of the genre, the metaphor's usage in that body of literature seems to have largely escaped the notice (or at least the bibliographies) of musicologists who work on jazz. The year 2013 seems to be a turning point in that regard, with a robust article on the "Jazz as Business Metaphor" by Ken Prouty, as well as a special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* dedicated to "Ethics and the Improvising Business." This latter resulted from a symposium on the same topic held in 2011, which put musicians, musicologists, management studies, and business ethics specialists in dialogue with each other. My next chapter forms part of this discourse in that it takes a critical stance on some of the themes found in the jazz metaphor discourse from a musicological perspective. It is therefore necessary to have a firm grasp on the musicological work on which I build my own critique.

While I do not discuss their work here, a few musicologists have studied the use of jazz in marketing campaigns, in which the music, they argue, imbue whatever product or service is being sold, with a certain cultural capital.²⁴⁰ As shall be seen in the next chapter, the genre's cultural capital is a strong driver for its adoption into the realm of business, be that in the segments of marketing, managerial science, or organizational improvisation.

²⁴⁰ See for example Alan Stanbridge, "From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 4:1 (2008); and Mark Laver, *Jazz Sells: Music, Marketing, and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

Musicologists writing about the jazz metaphor take issue with the applicability of the musical metaphor to nonmusical contexts and caution that the scope of music that informs the metaphor is extremely limited. Like a select few organizational scholars in the discourse examined earlier, musicologists tend to argue for a broadening of the understanding of what jazz is—a broadening beyond the stylistic bounds of traditional swing and bebop instantiations of jazz. Furthermore, as the title of the *CSI* special issue implies, these musicologists also take issue with the ethics of applying jazz to business practices. The authors hold a particular view of jazz and improvisation more broadly, which involves community-building and positive impact on human development, that they see as incongruent with capitalism, and its neoliberal instantiation of the past decades in particular.²⁴¹

This short subchapter focuses on the musicological responses to the jazz metaphor in organizational studies. I discuss Prouty's article first, since it informs much of the next chapter and frames many of the specifically musicological problems with the metaphor and the discourse around it. I then proceed to the *CSI* issue, noting the authors' various oppositions between improvisatory musicking and improvisatory business practice under neoliberal capitalism; and I conclude with a more recent text by Dale Chapman that focuses on *Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture*.

Ken Prouty, in what seems to be the first thorough musicological engagement with the jazz metaphor as presented in organizational science, lays out some of the prominent themes found in that body of literature. Broadly speaking, he sees four themes, as well as four other implicit ideas:²⁴²

²⁴¹ Neoliberalism is a frequent target in the musicological response to the jazz metaphor. However, it is critical to note that neoliberalism (alongside implicit critiques thereof) has not been absent in the jazz management discourse; rather it is hidden under the guise of the much-bemoaned "turbulent environment," which is a direct result of neoliberal capitalism, characterized by free markets, free trade and globalization, free competition, lax regulation, and minimal state interference.

²⁴² Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor," 40–41; 45.

Themes:

- The nature of jazz as a fundamentally improvisatory practice;
- The character of jazz in comparison to other musical forms, particularly classical music;
- The jam session as model for interaction;
- The nature and identity of jazz artists themselves.

Implicit ideas:

- A sense of personal affinity for jazz among the authors/practitioners;
- A sense that jazz possesses a certain identity, specifically a sense of hipness or coolness;
- Explanations of jazz for laypersons who may not be familiar with the music of its traditions;
- A generally circumscribed view of jazz's historical and improvisational practices.

In addition to discussing how each of these points are presented by proponents of the jazz metaphor, Prouty also critiques several misunderstandings or misrepresentations. For jazz to be set up as the ideal model, musical traditions that border the genre have to be dismissed for contrast, yet, Prouty maintains, this straw-manning is often misguided. With regards to the opposition to classical music, Prouty finds that “There are, of course, a number of problems with this [anti-classical music] approach, most notably a misreading of the intricacies of much classical performance,”²⁴³ while, on the other side of the improvisatory spectrum so frequently drawn, the disparaging of free jazz represents “something of a misunderstanding of the practices of free jazz, in which there is often a good deal of structure. While opinions on free jazz vary, it is certainly much more than ‘random instrument noises.’”²⁴⁴ Furthermore, on the topic of distancing traditional and venerated forms of jazz like swing and bebop from free jazz, “There is a sense of irony in these perspectives, that free jazz is not a useful model because its practitioners seemed to turn their backs on structure. Many of the arguments about fostering new ways of thinking about organizational dynamics have parallels in

²⁴³ Ibid., 43.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 47.

the free jazz players' attitudes toward common-practice improvisation."²⁴⁵ As I have done throughout the previous subchapters, Prouty notes the emphasis (and value) placed on minimal structures, the "structures" part of which flies in the face of free jazz forms, while the "minimal" part "represents only one approach to improvisation, that of a process which is highly depended on a pre-determined harmonic structure, and is based on a common-practice approach to the music."²⁴⁶

Those who promote the jazz metaphor often achieve this narrow framing of jazz by providing brief explanations of the foundational elements of jazz to the lay managerial reader; these explanations, particularly for Holbrook or Dennis and Macaulay, have both descriptive and prescriptive functions. Moreover, Prouty posits that "One might question whether jazz really is an effective metaphor in this context; as the target audience often does not know much about jazz, JABM [Jazz As Business Metaphor] advocates must address this idea by presenting jazz in what are seen to be simple, easy to understand ideas, focusing on basic elements of jazz performance."²⁴⁷ Like Zack, Prouty also argues that this circumscribed view of jazz limits the opportunities to apply jazz—and improvisation more broadly—to organizational contexts.

On the topic of group size, an integral component of the leadership and innovation models of the jazz metaphor, Prouty notes the dual construals of jazz ensemble composition: big bands and bebop combos. He finds that, although the big band model appears from time to time, there is a preference for the smaller groups in which "The strong central leader of the big band is replaced by the improvising musician of the collaborative small group, in a move that might seem parallel to jazz history's own canonical discourse of the transitions from swing to bebop."²⁴⁸ Prouty, like Oakes,

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 37.

points to the similarities between the central leader of the big band and conductors of symphony orchestras, as another reason why the big band model has not gained much traction in the jazz metaphor discourse.

However, despite all the technical aspects of jazz and the genre's conventions of minimal structures and alternating leadership, Prouty argues that the main reason that jazz is used as the foundation of the metaphor is its cultural capital. He "would suggest that the JABM, like jazz marketing, depends heavily on the sense of cultural capital that is associated with this idea, and that the JABM might work best on this level. Jazz's metaphorical applications might have less to do with any specific practices or structures in the music, and more to do with what jazz has come to *mean* in contemporary culture: a sophisticated American musical form that stands apart from the traditions of old, but is still distinct from what is common or popular."²⁴⁹ Since jazz has strong cultural connotations, management scholars (as well as the "cottage industry of musician consultants")²⁵⁰ can shape the narrative of the theoretical and historical components of the music around that imagined conception of jazz, taking liberties with musical and musicological realities in order to advance a particular model for management.

Whereas Prouty challenges the musical and historical bases of the jazz metaphor, the special issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* finds that "While this burgeoning area in management studies has focused on the ways in which improvised musical practice might serve as a model for fomenting collective creativity in a corporate environment, very little scholarship to date has addressed this area of study in the context of sociopolitical ethics that are so

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 53, emphasis original.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 50; see also 51–52.

often an intrinsic element of improvised musicking.”²⁵¹ Mark Laver, Ajay Heble, and Tina Piper, the editors of the issue and the authors of its introduction, maintain that the link between the ethical aspects of improvised music and its application to business is particularly important since, “in light of recent global political and economic developments...ethical concerns have become increasingly urgent for corporations of virtually all stripes.”²⁵²

A brief aside on that urgency. *The Economist* summarizes a recent statement from the Business Roundtable, a collection of CEOs of large American companies: “They now believe that firms should serve stakeholders as well as shareholders. They should offer good value to customers; support their workers with training; be inclusive in matters of gender and race; deal fairly and ethically with all their suppliers; support the communities in which they work; and protect the environment.”²⁵³ This shift away from prioritizing shareholders to prioritizing stakeholders is in opposition to the longstanding idea, promulgated by the father of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman, that “there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.”²⁵⁴ While *The Economist* maintains that Friedman *does* take societal ethics into account, the author continues to point out that the ethical

²⁵¹ Mark Laver, Ajay Heble, and Tina Piper, “Ethics and the Improvising Business,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), 1.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ “I’m from a company, and I’m here to help,” *The Economist*, August 24, 2019, 15. The original statement can be found here: “Business Roundtable Redefines the Purpose of a Corporation to Promote ‘An Economy That Serves All Americans,’” August 19, 2019. <https://www.businessroundtable.org/business-roundtable-redefines-the-purpose-of-a-corporation-to-promote-an-economy-that-serves-all-americans> (accessed July 3, 2021).

²⁵⁴ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 133.

component of Friedman’s statement has been eclipsed by the initial statement of increasing shareholder value in the teachings and practices of upper-level management.²⁵⁵

Laver, Heble, and Piper argue that in the context of improvised music, “Improvisation...often represents a means of sounding resistance—a kind of ‘musicking from below’ that challenges the logics of the free market economy by purposefully severing aesthetic value from exchange value,”²⁵⁶ thereby modeling a similar shift from a profit-driven shareholder focus to a broader conception of stakeholder values. They continue by charging that

a corporate use of improvisation as a model for creative problem-solving that ignores the music’s indelible sociopolitical ethic stands as a clear example of hegemonic appropriation and dilution of a provocative, subaltern cultural practice. By the same token, a corporate use of the music that pays lip service to the improvisational ethic in order to obfuscate unethical behavior in other areas...constitutes dissimulation at best; at worst, hypocrisy.²⁵⁷

The trio of editors notes that, in their special issue, there are frequent tensions between the views of the various contributing authors, which can be condensed into a disagreement on whether change is possible *within* the context of neoliberal capitalism or whether the entire system should be torn down in order for jazz—with all the social and ethical considerations that accompany its history and practice—to ethically serve as a model for business.

Part of the reason for the tensions around the place of improvisation in the corporate sphere stems from the fact that the contributors come from various backgrounds, including music and business. In one of the latter cases, Chris MacDonald writes about the similarities between musical improvisation and (ethical) crisis management. He outlines five familiar points of overlap: 1) creativity, 2) structure, 3) collaboration, 4) knowledge, and 5) confidence. Under structure, he proposes that an organization should have a “Code of Ethics,” which,

²⁵⁵ “I’m from a company, and I’m here to help,” 15.

²⁵⁶ Laver, Heble, and Piper, “Ethics and the Improvising Business,” 1.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

if taken seriously, provides the underlying structure for an organization's overall pattern of behavior—it is the unifying thread, like the melody of a musical composition. It provides the underlying structure, a structure from which crisis may force the organization to deviate, but a structure that should ideally still be recognizable as underlying its behavior even in crisis.²⁵⁸

In his portrayal of musical characteristics, such as that the melody provides the underlying structure, it seems that MacDonald might benefit from the explanations of jazz basics that his peers amply provide. Furthermore, he notes that, despite having to take the Code of Ethics seriously, “Devising a course of action that is both ethically appropriate and capable of being explained well to relevant stakeholders is going to require that decision-makers adapt to the situation and exercise some moral imagination.”²⁵⁹ It is therefore not clear how closely a decision-maker should stick to the Code, which is, perhaps, a mirror of the difficult balance between structure and freedom that plague other organizational improvisation scholars.

MacDonald admits that “The analogy between musical improvisation and ethical crisis management is not, of course, perfect,”²⁶⁰ but presents a somewhat abrasive rationale: “Perhaps most obviously, the stakes in instances of corporate crisis are generally considerably higher than they are in music.”²⁶¹ As an illustration of such high stakes as well as how the five overlaps from jazz improvisation manifest in ethical crisis management, he provides the example of British Petroleum's media response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

With this last example, musician Scott Thomson takes issue. He alleges that BP's “executive's improvisation, however, could not acknowledge, let alone reconcile, the varied desires of other stakeholders involved: those in the decimated seafood industry, those living in gulf [of

²⁵⁸ Chris MacDonald, “Crisis Management as Ethical Improvisation,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), 2.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 3.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

Mexico] communities whose health and quality of life are still compromised, those who seek better alternatives to fossil fuels, etc. *ad nauseam*.”²⁶² Thomson rails against the Friedman Doctrine of shareholder capitalism, noting that, in his corporate-minded co-publishers’ contributions, “there was no real acknowledgment in these presentations of what the benefits of such improvisations are. Or, more like, the benefit is axiomatic in a corporate of management studies context and need not be spoken: profit.”²⁶³

Thomson then turns to the adverse effect of profit-seeking on the improvised music community. He recounts the history of his improvising collective and their struggles with bar owners and landlords who would only allow them space to play if they could foot the bills—interestingly, his narrative is remarkably similar to the fictional one presented by Neilson, in an early argument *for* organizational improvisation.²⁶⁴ This incongruence between improvising musicians and improvising profit-seeking owners leads Thomson to argue that “When people from the fields of creative music and business talk about ‘improvisation,’ it is not merely that we are talking about fundamentally different things; we’re talking about one version that works to marginalize and even to eliminate the other.”²⁶⁵ Considering what Thomson believes to be unethical pressures from corporate-types on musical improvisers, he finds it equally unethical for businesses to appropriate improvisatory paradigms from music and improvising musicians.

²⁶² Scott Thomson, “‘Improvisation’ in Corporations and Creative Music: What Are We Really Talking About?” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), 1, italics original.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 2; Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit,” 4–5.

²⁶⁵ Thomson, “‘Improvisation’ in Corporations and Creative Music,” 3.

Drawing on Hatch, Weick, Barrett, Newton, and Dennis and Macaulay, as well as Louise Stoll, Dean Fink, and Lorna Earl,²⁶⁶ Nicholas Sorensen investigates six examples of how improvisatory paradigms have been drawn from jazz into business. He finds that, although far from perfect, the jazz metaphor does provide a way for business leaders to move their thinking away from the managerial models of the industrial era; he claims that

The use of this metaphor was initiated by a need to generate alternative management theories to the scientific approach offered by Taylorism in the early decades of the twentieth century. Taylor applied science to the engineering of processes and management, encouraging rigid hierarchical management structures and precise job descriptions. This approach, which is based on a reductionist view of organization, regards the whole as the sum of its parts.²⁶⁷

This shift in management styles, as has frequently been repeated, was necessitated by a business environment that is increasingly complex and increasingly fast-changing.

On the topic of leadership structures, Sorensen notes that the jazz metaphor aims to flatten the hierarchical models that characterize the Taylorist approach by alternating leadership in an egalitarian fashion. However, he makes a significant observation in positing that this aspect of the metaphor's utility "is an arguable one as it is based on an idealised view of the jazz band,"²⁶⁸ in which band members are indeed equals and in which cooperation is favored over competition. Sorensen here identifies but one of many aspects of the jazz metaphor that rests on romanticized views of jazz music and jazz practices.

Just as cooperation and competition have to be balanced, so too must the tension between structure and freedom—another well-rehearsed topic in the literature. Sorensen claims that "A key

²⁶⁶ Louise Stoll, Dean Fink, and Lorna Earl, *It's About Learning (and It's About Time)* (London: Routledge, 2003). The other authors are cited above.

²⁶⁷ Nicholas Sorensen, "The Metaphor of 'The Jazz Band': Ethical Issues for Leadership," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), 10; Cf. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*.

²⁶⁸ Sorensen, "The Metaphor of 'The Jazz Band,'" 7.

question is 'how much structure' is optimal, and how does the improviser relate to it?"²⁶⁹

Additionally, Sorensen, like Zack and Prouty, laments the limited view of jazz taken by the organizational scientists: "A strong criticism of the metaphor of the jazz band is that it is generally based on a restricted view of what jazz improvisation is, as represented by a model of performance derived from mainstream jazz."²⁷⁰ He then continues to note exceptions to the narrow conception of improvised music (such as the example of Indian music presented by Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha), yet he remains "unconvinced that switching the metaphor from one genre of improvised music to another will yield significant insights unless it is supported by an understanding of the relevant improvisational practices."²⁷¹ Like Dennis and Macaulay, he emphasizes the importance of first-hand experience of the music, rather than reliance on secondary sources.

Stepping back from the flaws that Sorensen sees within the contents of the metaphor, he also takes issue with the use of *metaphor* itself as a translating tool. He claims that "The understanding of the familiar half of the metaphor leads to a greater understanding of the unfamiliar half. Metaphor encourages exploration of the parallels between the new and the already known."²⁷² The assumption is that management is the unfamiliar half that gets illuminated by the familiar half of jazz. However, as is evident by the pervasive explanations of jazz to lay readers, jazz is not at all a familiar basis on which to build the metaphor. Sorensen continues to note that "the insights that can be derived from metaphor are limited; potentially valuable insights have to be balanced against a recognition that these insights are incomplete, biased, and potentially misleading."²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 8.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 11.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid., 2.

²⁷³ Ibid., 9.

Worse than simply incomplete, Sorensen argues that metaphors might be harmful. He states that “Metaphorical knowledge can only be one-sided and partial, showing the similarities between two areas but not the differences.”²⁷⁴ As demonstrated by Thomson’s piece, one of the aims of this special issue is to reveal exactly those differences—the ways in which improvisatory music-making and improvisatory management diverge, particularly in terms of ethics. Jazz metaphor proponents highlight the similarities and disregard the differences, maintaining an air of indifference, yet Sorensen warns that “the use of metaphor to comprehend and communicate ideas about organizations is viewed as leadership strategy and as such it cannot be viewed as ‘neutral’ or value-free. Consequently there are ethical issues for leaders who choose to work with the metaphor of the jazz band.”²⁷⁵ These ethical issues are skirted in the literature on organizational improvisation, yet a disparity in ethics is one of the key ways in which business is *not* like jazz.

Whereas Sorensen focuses on examples from academic organizational studies, Mark Laver turns his attention to a different channel linking the jazz metaphor to the corporate sphere. One of the ways in which improvising musicians have sought to supplement their incomes is by providing workshops to corporations, training them in the ways of improvisatory management. Prouty gives a brief nod to musician-consultants, who bring the jazz metaphor “into practice outside the pages of management journals.”²⁷⁶ Laver goes beyond a nod, devoting an entire article to the practice of “Jazz Consultancy,” which translates improvisatory practices from music to corporate leadership. He cites one mnemonic as representative; APRIL: Autonomy, Passion, Risk, Innovation, Listening—all concepts frequently encountered in the organizational improvisation literature.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 2.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁷⁶ Prouty, “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor,” 52.

He shares Thomson's scorn for using improvisation merely as a way to meet the goal of "expanding profit within an increasingly neoliberal capitalist economy,"²⁷⁷ which Laver finds to be extremely divergent from the goals of improvisation, which include democracy, humanity, and emancipation. He concludes that "improvisation studies and the business-oriented consulting practices and literature that deal with improvisation take more or less the same central metaphors but reach dramatically different conclusions."²⁷⁸ Furthermore, even when business leaders are convinced by consultants to embrace the broader goals of improvisatory musicking, "many corporate leaders are structurally impeded in their social idealism by the expectations of shareholders and corporate boards that the corporation will continually, exponentially increase its profit margin."²⁷⁹ Laver argues that jazz and other forms of art that serve as metaphor on which to base metaphors for corporate management might actually advance the neoliberal agenda: jazz consulting "provides *neoliberalism itself* with a fresh veneer in the form of a previously unimaginable aesthetic dimension. By adding an aesthetic valence to neoliberal policies, ABI [Arts-Based Initiatives, like the jazz metaphor] consultants and theorist help to reconfigure the goals of neoliberalism from crude economic ambitions to lofty artistic aspirations."²⁸⁰

While generally pessimistic, Laver does believe that jazz consultancy has to potential to give voice to musicians in order to bring about positive change in the minds of those who enable and thrive in the neoliberal market. He first outlines some of the aims of the approach, as well as their rationales; and then continues to note some challenges that jazz consultants face and how the

²⁷⁷ Laver, "Improvise!(TM)," 2.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 12.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 8, emphasis original.

consulting model could be changed to ensure a deeper, more meaningful transfer of ideas from improvised music to improvised business.

Laver identifies a perceived need in corporations to develop “soft competencies” like listening and teamwork because “the locus of human labour (the primary human resource the capitalist seeks to exploit) has largely shifted from the body to the mind, and consequently the balance in discourse around human capital has shifted from an emphasis on fostering physical health to an emphasis on fostering intellectual acuity and agility.”²⁸¹ The jazz metaphor provides ample analogies on listening and collaboration, boosting the mental resources that contemporary employers require of their employees. Furthermore, jazz is also associated with creativity at both the individual and group levels. The metaphor, according to the consultants, gives employees new ways to think creatively and to think about creativity; like in jazz, individual creativities combine into group—or, at the extreme, corporate—creativity which is greater than the constituent parts.

Flexibility is another loudly-touted benefit of improvisation, particularly, as organizational scholars constantly remind, in increasingly complex and uncertain business environments. Laver notes that this need for flexibility is somewhat tautological. Considering the easy flow of goods and capital in a globalized, neoliberal economy, points out that “the increased flexibility and mobility of capital on a global scale essentially *generated* the tumultuous circumstances in the global market that management theorists argue require this flexible response” that improvisation affords.²⁸² The boon of flexibility has another a dark underside in that, at least for employees, corporate flexibility unfortunately also mean insecurity. Laver claims that, in both the jazz metaphor literature and the boardrooms filled with jazz consultants, “this insecurity is framed as dynamic, aestheticized, high

²⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

²⁸² Ibid., 5, emphasis original.

risk-high reward improvisation” and that “The corporation’s obligation to its employees is therefore not so much to provide a stable life and a steady income, but rather to ensure that they have every opportunity to learn, grow, and create.”²⁸³ All the benefits of flexibility in the workplace, like the freedoms enjoyed by jazz musicians, are accompanied by job insecurity. Laver notes that “under this aestheticized characterization of the neoliberal economic regime, all labourers are expected not only to think like artists [as the jazz metaphor prescribes], but also with increasing frequency to live like artists” like those disenfranchised musicians in Neilson’s and Thomson’s stories. Here it should be noted that the term “gig economy,” which emerged since Laver’s article,²⁸⁴ alludes to jazz musicians’ employment arrangements. Like gigging jazz musicians who lives from gig to gig, those participating in the gig economy also work from job to job; furthermore, both groups value independence—the flexibility to make creative decisions—despite the concomitant personal, social, and economic anxieties.²⁸⁵ Flexibility, it seems, can be separated from insecurity by neither improvising musicians, nor improvising gig workers, nor improvising corporations.

A significant constraint that the jazz consultant faces when working to disseminate improvisational though in the corporate world is time.²⁸⁶ For workshops, consultants typically have a maximum of six hours and for longer consulting projects, the longest is three months and usually does not include staying to oversee impact or to evaluate impact. Therefore, Laver argues, the first step “in enabling improvisers (and the improvised music model) to have a real, lasting effect on corporate operations and policy is to change the terms of engagement between consultants and

²⁸³ Ibid., 7, 8.

²⁸⁴ A Google Trends analysis reveals that the term was hardly searched prior to 2015.

²⁸⁵ Gianpiero Petrilieri, Susan J. Ashford, and Amy Wrzesniewski, “Thriving in the Gig Economy,” *Harvard Business Review* 96:2 (2018): 140.

²⁸⁶ The irony of improvisers battling against time in this setting is not lost on the present author.

corporations.”²⁸⁷ Next steps include integrating improvisation into MBA programs and the like so that business leaders are accustomed to improvisation and improvisatory thinking before they enter senior positions at their organizations.

Another challenge to those that aim to implement the jazz metaphor, Laver maintains, is the fact that

business consultancy is a uniquely skewed kind of pedagogy...in that the ‘learning organizations’ are not simply students of ABI consultants—they are also clients. ... For this reason, consultants are of necessity rather circumspect in how they apply their metaphors. While their task is undoubtedly to bring new perspectives to organizations, out of self-preservation—and congruently, out of a desire to ensure that their audiences remain receptive—ABI consultants in particular are often reluctant to propose anything too drastic or dramatic.²⁸⁸

This held-back approach might explain why the proponents of the jazz metaphor are so wedded to the traditional styles of jazz and their defining structures and conventions, and why free jazz, for example, is not embraced, despite the irony that Prouty points out.

Incongruences between the metaphor and its implementation in the business realm; between the goals of musical improvisation and corporate improvisation, Laver argues, might be the most fertile ground for improving both spheres: “If there is usefulness to be mined from the jazz-business metaphor, we must consider the entire relationship in all of its elements and aspects, not just those that are most digestible or the least likely to lead to uncomfortable questions.”²⁸⁹ While opposing the jazz metaphor’s contribution to the system of neoliberal capitalism, Laver maintains that the points at which the contribution is deficient or wrought with friction might produce results that reverse the process of the system’s unethical treatment of stakeholders in its pursuit of shareholder profits.

²⁸⁷ Laver, “Improvise!(TM),” 9.

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 12.

Like Sorensen, Dale Chapman finds that the organizational scholars present the jazz metaphor as a neutral site of inspiration, ignoring the histories and narratives that surround the genre: “While the ‘jazz metaphor’ in business tends to plug a largely sanitized, abstract, and ahistorical understanding of jazz practices into its idealized market framework, jazz historiography teaches us that political volatility and the violence of racist expropriation must figure into any accurate account of the music’s embodiment of risk, its aesthetic response to a cultural environment of social antagonism.”²⁹⁰ This neat presentation, with its erasures of the political, and, indeed, violent, elements, then, unethically serves those who are either unaffected by the politics and violence—or worse, those that perpetrate them.

The link between the jazz metaphor and neoliberal ideals congeals around the view of the individual in each of these contexts. Making an analogy to the jazz’s metaphor’s ideal(ized) instrumental soloist and their impeccable technical prowess, Chapman notes “the pervasiveness of market-centered ideologies in contemporary American culture, with their celebration of heroic individualism, their privileging of dexterous risk taking in turbulent environs,” in which “the isolated market actor is forced to rely upon quicksilver intuition, a heightened attunedness to the possibilities latent within rapid economic change.”²⁹¹ Similarly, each neoliberal subject is to be an individual entrepreneur, just as each band member is to be a leader when their turn to solo comes around. Proponents of the jazz metaphor argue that adroit soloing provides an excellent template for considering the necessary risks: “Whether on the bandstand of the trading floor, the individual subject of contemporary risk is celebrated to the degree that he or she rises to this exactly standard

²⁹⁰ Dale Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 24.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 8, 35.

of performance.”²⁹² Risk and, perhaps more importantly, the overcoming thereof are features shared by jazz and the contemporary corporate sphere; jazz metaphor authors simply make the link. One of the reasons that they do so is to demonstrate that risk is not only to be celebrated, but also to be understood as manageable; furthermore, they argue that improvisation, as practiced by jazz musicians, provides an avenue for managing such risk.

The manner in which risk is managed in jazz is twofold: by relying on preexisting structures and placing the individual within a group. Chapman maintains that “As an aesthetic logic, controlled freedom [Herbie Hancock’s term for minimal structures] entails the cultivation of a tension between individual risk taking and an unplanned, decentralized group coordination.”²⁹³ The dialectic between structure and freedom is therefore intertwined with the dialectic of the individual and the collective: “What is at stake in the Davis quintet’s aesthetic of controlled freedom is an intricate set of tensions between individual and collective responsibility, a complex dialectical space that is held open, refusing resolution.”²⁹⁴ Significant to note here is, again, that the dialectic needs to remain in place, since the tension is itself a productive force in optimizing either musical creativity or profits.

Chapman’s main project is linking neoclassical jazz to neoliberal capitalism. He argues that various aspects of the genre align well with the ideology, including balancing the tension between structure and freedom.²⁹⁵ Chapman further maintains that

²⁹² Ibid., 42; Chapman makes the link explicit: “These ventures in jazz-centered management theory and practice almost invariably point to the jazz musician’s proclivity for *taking risks*.” Ibid., 35, emphasis original.

²⁹³ Ibid., 49.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 54.

²⁹⁵ Chapman provides the summary of neoclassical jazz: “The term neoclassicism has in a large part come to refer to a musically conservative, stylistically traditionalist revival in the jazz world, with its most vocal advocates celebrating a very specific range of aesthetic choices in the music. Both on and off the bandstand, the neoclassicists promote a music that emphasizes ‘straightahead’ swing feel, adherence to conventional blues-based and popular song forms, the use of primarily acoustic instrumentation, and the privileging of a stylistic vocabulary that extends (roughly) from New Orleans polyphony through to 1960s postbop.” Ibid., 6.

This sense in which jazz neoclassicism understands itself as a freedom shaped by rules has frequently been seen as attractive for those looking to translate contemporary jazz into terms of business-centered analogies, given that it suggests the ways modern corporations always walk the line between strategic flexibility and rigorous standards of performance.²⁹⁶

Adding another theme in the jazz metaphor discourse—preparation—to the emphasis on the music theoretical structures that undergird jazz performance, Chapman notes that

Many advocates of jazz neoliberalism have contended that the music is based upon a nonnegotiable set of musical fundamental (swing feeling, functional harmony, and a well-defined set of rhythmic, formal, and melodic procedures). The responsibility for navigating these fundamentals lies with the individual musician, whose years of diligent practice, study, and performance instill in him or her a virtuosic agency adequate to the music's exacting demands.²⁹⁷

However, with regards to these so-called nonnegotiable rules, Chapman warns that

in many instances, musical procedures forged in the heat of an extraordinarily turbulent cultural moment would subsequently be reinterpreted as a formalized musical language. What may initially have been conceived as a *descriptive* grammar, a means of pinpointing the internal dynamics of individual performances, becomes repurposed as a *prescriptive* grammar, imposing a rigid code of conduct upon its adherents.²⁹⁸

Chapman points out that considering the musical processes as “rules” is a profoundly ahistorical process, perpetuated by both neoclassical jazz musicians and jazz metaphor scholars alike.

Prouty, Zack, and Sorensen have all noted the effacing of jazz styles outside of that of swing and bebop. With regards to performance, Ronald Radano alleges that “Where the neoclassical model goes wrong, however, is in its presumption of telling the whole story of jazz. No need for charting the complexities of the past, it would seem, for neoclassicism, recast as a mode of interpretation, now supplies all the answers.”²⁹⁹ Mirroring some of the critiques of the circumscribed view of jazz as

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 19.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 41; recall that Barrett is a fierce advocate of this nonnegotiability.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 58, emphasis original.

²⁹⁹ Ronald M. Radano, *New Musical Figurations: Anthony Braxton's Cultural Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 270, cited in Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 11–12.

presented in the organizational improvisation discourse, Chapman, like Prouty, finds it ironic that “even as the conservatism of neoclassicism has rendered jazz palatable for the consumption of large institutional actors by putting a brake on innovation, what these actors see reflected in jazz neoclassicism is precisely a quality of nimble, dynamic, and democratic innovation that they would like to see in themselves.”³⁰⁰ One can easily include the proponents of the jazz metaphor in this category of actors. Indeed, Chapman argues that

The ease with which such “thought leaders” have appropriated jazz as a metaphor for institutional risk taking may be attributed in part to the utilities of certain *kinds* of jazz making this point. Both the renewed interest in jazz as a metaphor for democracy as well as the emergent interest in jazz as a private-sector organizational metaphor coincide with the rise of neoclassical jazz in the late 1980s and early 1990s. To understand the potential appeal of neoclassicism as a point of departure for jazz-centered organizational analogies, we might begin with the terms of the structural analogy itself. ... Such an approach is particularly appealing for theorists who wish to describe organizational practices that are themselves held in tension between nimble maneuverability on the one hand, and clear organizational constraints on the other.³⁰¹

For Chapman, then, the three main drivers of the jazz metaphor’s limitation of the definition of jazz, a similar definition to the one proclaimed by neoclassical jazz musicians and their advocates, are 1) risk, that can be managed by improvising within the bounds of 2) controlled freedom, in which improvisers, musical or managerial have to find a 3) balance between the individual and the collective.

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into these themes, as well as others that I believe motivate the selection of not only neoclassical jazz and the traditions that it venerates by scholars that advocate for organizational improvisation, but, more broadly, why jazz was chosen at all. The discourse analysis provides the baseline of how jazz and improvisation have been thought and written about in the business world and serves as an archive from which ideas about improvisatory

³⁰⁰ Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 13.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

business processes and their underlying rationales might be drawn. While the now-three-decade-long history of the field of organizational improvisation, here condensed into a single—albeit long—dissertation chapter, provides a wealth of approaches and attempts at linking jazz to corporate management, this chapter has, I hope, made it clear that there is indeed a fairly limited palette of ideas that bind these approaches and attempts together as a field beyond simply a belief in the utility of improvisation and a love for (a certain type of) jazz.

Chapter 2: Themes in the Discourse on the Jazz Metaphor for Corporate Management

In the preceding pages, I combed through the significant written sources that propose, develop, promote, and critique the jazz metaphor for corporate management. Several themes emerge from this body of work. I discuss some of these themes in the following section, providing deeper analyses for the work that these themes do to advance the metaphor's adoption and proliferation. Some of the themes have already been identified by Ken Prouty, including the opposition between jazz and classical music, which I trouble in the first subsection of this chapter. Prouty notes other "implicit ideas" within this discourse, which include explanations of the foundational elements of jazz theory; which allows authors to adopt "A generally circumscribed view of jazz's historical and improvisational practices."¹

My discussion of the theme of such a circumscribed view and the rationale behind this narrow conception and depiction of jazz as being limited to primarily bebop forms the bulk of this chapter. Another Prouty theme is using the jam session as a model.² I build on Prouty's identifications and arguments around these themes and add another that I find significant, particularly at the time of writing this document: the theme of crisis ("...so we had to improvise"), which frequently serves as a gateway to improvisatory business practices in the absence of crisis. In the conclusion, I reflect briefly on the scant deployment of free jazz in the organizational

¹ Ken Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor," *Jazz Perspectives* 7:1 (2013): 45. Two other implicit ideas are "A sense of personal affinity for jazz among the authors/practitioners" and "A sense that jazz possesses a certain identity, specifically a sense of hipness or coolness." The former I incorporate into the discussion of music-theoretical explanations, arguing that this personal affinity authorizes them to provide technical explanations; the latter I incorporate into the section on the circumscribed view of jazz, as part of the section on cultural capital.

² Ibid., 41–42. Prouty also includes as themes "the nature of jazz as a fundamentally improvisational practice" and "the nature and identity of jazz artists themselves." The former I assume to be obvious and in little need for discussion, while I incorporate aspects of the latter in the section on music-theoretical explanations.

improvisation discourse, positing that its strategic erasure presents a missed opportunity to maximize the benefits of what improvisatory thinking can offer corporate managers.

What emerges from an investigation of the various themes is an overarching attempt by organizational improvisation scholars using jazz as a model to more closely align management practices with the environment within which they take place. Many remark on the increasingly turbulent corporate environment, prone to crises and disruption, and the methods that these authors promote deal with ways to navigate such an environment. First among these methods is the establishment of smaller working groups, with more decentralized leadership structures than those typical of mid-twentieth-century organizations. Smaller teams allow for closer intragroup interaction and flexibility in adapting to changing situations, while the flatter hierarchy affords autonomy and highlights expertise. Flexibility is further promoted by a relaxation of adherence to strict plans, not only in times of crisis (when there is no plan, by definition), but also when innovation is key—which, according to these scholars, is always the case in highly competitive business environments. It is also the case in the context of startups, which I cover in the next chapter.

While these elements constitute the *what* that jazz scholars want to convey, several themes pertain to the *how*—and some themes have elements of both. Positioning jazz as an alternative to classical music, or simply drawing on the cultural capital that selected styles within the genre itself have amassed, allow these authors to legitimize the foundations of the jazz metaphor. At the same time, explanations of the intricacies of the conventions, be they musico-technical or around performance practices like jam sessions, grant writers an authoritative voice, while also bringing neophyte readers on board with them. Finally, the explanations also reassure managers that, even though the jazz metaphor advances improvisation, flexibility, and flat leadership structures, the music—and thereby the modeled managerial practices—are still constrained by a set of rules that prevent a descent into utter chaos.

The broad aims of this chapter, then, are first to identify and interrogate the themes that permeate the organizational improvisation discourse and to cast light on the reasons for why these themes work and are put to work; and second, to highlight the fallacies or flaws in their presentation or underlying arguments. More specifically, the chapter aims to answer the questions: Why jazz? Why *this* jazz?

2.1 Jazz versus classical

From the earliest days in the life of the jazz metaphor, organizational scholars have drawn a sharp opposition between jazz and classical music. The symphony orchestra is a frequent target. Jazz, according to the authors I have identified, differs from classical music in general, and symphonic performance in particular, in two major respects. The first pertains to orchestral music's reliance on notation in performance, along with the demand for fealty to the letter and spirit of the score (a strong sense of *Werktreue*), accomplished via numerous rehearsals prior to the actual performance itself. The second deals with the leadership structure of an orchestra, although this is frequently (and perhaps strategically) misrepresented. The caricature of the all-powerful conductor at the top of the line of command becomes a useful foil to the jazz metaphor's alternative: a small group that deploys elements such as mutually-responsive improvisation, and a form of distributed leadership/authorship in which every player gets a turn to take a solo. Choosing the symphony orchestra, and especially the conductor, as a straw man, these jazz metaphor scholars find the most extreme case to illustrate the utility of its opposite number. Of course, organizational scholars did not invent the classical-jazz binary, but rather they draw on a well-worn Western trope that has pit the two genres against each other almost since the emergence of jazz itself. George E. Lewis maintains that, "For music of the twentieth century, the boundary between high and low culture in the United States has been symbolized musically by the great competition between the jazz and

classical traditions”; this opposition, he continues, serves as “a discursive stand-in for a more fundamental cultural struggle.”³ A secondary binary within the first is the composition-improvisation binary, which finds its analogue in the planning-improvisation binary that some organizational scholars marshal to oppose traditional managerial methods.

I should note that the opposition itself constitutes a significant move on the part of the organizational scholars. Prouty maintains that “The rejection of classical music stands as a useful metaphor itself, signaling a rejection of the old ways of doing business.”⁴ For example, Lee Tom Perry claims that “Traditional strategic plans are like traditional [classical] music format” and that “The best strategies are those that rely not only on traditional planning, but also improvisation.”⁵ Perry uses the rhetorical rejection of classical music to similarly reject the old tools used for strategic analysis.⁶

A key target for this rejection is the perceived reliance on scores in classical music performances. Rarely does a jazz metaphor source (be it an academic article, a trade manual, or a workshop) fail to mention the limits of following a score.⁷ Advocates rightly point out that the business environment, broadly conceived, is too volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous for a simple scripted plan to be followed to the letter. Classical music’s sheet music, being the metaphoric analogue for this type of plan, is similarly insufficient. Following Christopher Small’s idea that the

³ George E. Lewis, “Improvisation and the Orchestra: A Composer Reflects,” *Contemporary Music Review* 25:5–6 (2006): 429.

⁴ Prouty, “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor,” 42.

⁵ Tom Lee Perry, “Strategic Improvising: How to Formulate and Implement Competitive Strategies in Concert,” *Organizational Dynamics* 19:4 (1991): 51.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56–58.

⁷ See for example Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay, “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 11:3 (2003): 181–182; Steve Oakes, “Freedom and Constraint in the Empowerment as Jazz Metaphor,” *Marketing Theory* 9:4 (2009): 472; and Stephen A. Leybourne and Peter Cook, “Rockin’ All over the World’: Organizational Improvisation Lessons from the Music-Based Practitioner,” *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy* 9:1 (2015): 6–7.

absence of a written score allows a piece of music to change when performance circumstance change,⁸ the (relative) unscriptedness of jazz is then proposed as an alternative model.

However, after all this denigration of classical music's scores, jazz metaphor authors often backpedal a little, into the realm of conventions and constraints. While depending solely on precomposed material in performance is derided, sheet music is not wholly disavowed: in *Jamming*, John Kao maintains that "A well-managed enterprise can't survive without some sheet music. It allows the management of complexity... Most large-scale human interactions require their specific blueprints, rituals, road maps, scripts, whatever, but they also require improvisation."⁹ Such retreats are more prevalent in trade manuals than in the academic press. One might speculate that authors like Kao are pitching their message to an audience of managers who, for the most part, have been trained on processes and plans. Asking them to throw out any prepared material goes against much of their schooling and experience, as well as making redundant many of their business functions.

The model of sheet music is also decried as inhibitive of innovation: "Trial and error explorations of new beats and sounds produce breakthroughs that wouldn't occur if members were playing from the same old scores."¹⁰ Indeed, anecdotes about innovative companies (Honda, 3M, and Xerox are cited particularly often) and their loosely structured approach to research and development appear regularly in the jazz metaphor discourse. The freedom and unscriptedness of these firms' product development practices are marshaled as evidence that sticking closely to a plan does not yield innovative results and would cause companies to fall behind their competitors.

⁸ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 114.

⁹ John Kao, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (New York: Harper Business, 1996), 33.

¹⁰ William A. Pasmore and Mary Jo Hatch, "Organizing for Jazz," *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 563. David T. Bastien and Todd J. Hostager claim that "As a process of organizational innovation, jazz addresses some central concerns of organizations and their managers," in "Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation," *Communication Research* 15:5 (1988): 582.

Of course, these portrayals of classical music being reliant on sheet music (to a fault), ignore large swaths of classical musicking that are explicitly improvisatory. This includes practices like improvising cadenzas, as well as entire genres such as free fantasies.¹¹ In their organizational improvisation literature review, Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose maintain that there is rhetorical reason for the positioning of classical music as non-improvisatory, arguing that jazz metaphor authors select jazz as the genre of veneration because they “assume that it will resonate more with readers and organizations than other metaphors. Whereas jazz and improvisation are intrinsically linked in people’s minds, improvisation is less readily associated with symphony orchestras or baroque music.”¹² Yet improvisation in classical music is not only limited to specific genres, but also occurs on a smaller scale. Complementing similar ideas by Derek Bailey and Alfred Schutz, Bruce Benson’s ladder of improvisational musical performance, runs from the only slightly improvisatory addition of details excluded from the score (Improvisation₁) to the grander-scale improvisation on tradition (Improvisation₁₁).¹³ Classical musicians frequently climb the rungs up to Improvisation₆, and employ practices like “the addition of notes to the score the performer is *expected* (by the composer) to supply” such as figured bass realizations; as well as transcriptions and arrangements.¹⁴ Even if classical music relies less on improvisation than some of the forms touted by

¹¹ For discussion on the use of the term “improvisation” and fantasies in the context of eighteenth-century music, see Leo Treitler, “Speaking of the I-Word,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 72:1 (2015): 1–18; as well as a response to Treitler by Richard Kramer, “Improvisatori. Improvisiren. Improviser...” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 73:1 (2016): 2–8; for a detailed exploration of the free fantasy in the nineteenth century, see Dana Gooley, *Fantasies of Improvisation: Free Playing in Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹² Allègre L. Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose, “Organizational Improvisation: A Consolidating Review and Framework,” *International Journal of Management Review* 17 (2015): 444.

¹³ Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26–29. Benson uses the subscript to denote the rungs of the ladder. See the section in which I move toward a working definition of improvisation, in the introduction, for a more in-depth discussion of Benson, Bailey, and Schutz.

¹⁴ Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*, 26. Emphasis original.

organizational improvisation authors, Bailey, Schutz, and Benson show that the practice of classical music is hardly devoid of improvisation.

Whereas most (perhaps all, in the imaginations of jazz metaphor proponents) performances of classical music rely on the faithful reproduction of the notes on the score, the symphony orchestra receives special treatment. From the ethnomusicological perspective, Small makes the link between notation and the orchestral leadership structure by contrasting it to non-notated traditions, claiming that

In nonliterate composition and performance the power relationships among those taking part are diffuse, uncentralized; all will have some authority and bear some responsibility. As in all communal enterprises, there will almost certainly be a leader of the ensemble, but [unlike the orchestral conductor] his powers are limited and continue to exist only for as long as those working with him feel that he is worth following. He has no monopoly of the creative act, since other performers contribute to the piece.¹⁵

With a backhanded compliment, organizational scholars David Napoli et al. point out that, while classical music “that follow[s] a set score, note for note, repeating the past over and over,” might be aesthetically pleasing, the jazz band model needs to replace “The conductor and orchestra ‘master and followers’ relationship.”¹⁶ On this view, aside from the relaxation of hierarchical relationships, the small-group structure of jazz bands also allows mutual adjustment through careful listening.

Due to its size, the leadership structure of an orchestra differs vastly from the small-group models proposed by organizational scholars. While some of these scholars note the phenomenon of section leaders (analogous to middle managers), the big target is stuck on the back of the conductor. For example, after admitting that the leader of the violin section is responsible for their section’s standard, Mary Crossan et al. maintain that “all the musicians in all the sections follow the lead of

¹⁵ Small, *Musicking*, 115.

¹⁶ David Napoli, Alma Whitely, and Katherine Johansen, *Organizational Jazz: Extraordinary Performance through Extraordinary Leadership* (Malendy: eContent Management, 2005), x–xi. a similar backhander can be seen in Dennis and Macaulay, “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” 182.

the conductor who guides, develops, demands, and creates the mood of the piece.”¹⁷ These authors claim that the conductor, score in hand, serves as a coordinator and an integrator. However, they continue to recommend that organizations “strip away the veneer of artificial integrating mechanisms.”¹⁸ The large size of an orchestra demands an integrating lead figure, whereas smaller groups might rely on flatter structures and communal adjustment. This is largely consistent with early writings on management by Henry Mintzberg, who argues that “the greater reliance on mutual adjustments (due to interdependencies among complex tasks), the smaller the size of the work unit.”¹⁹ Such a flatter structure gives the group the opportunity to respond not only to a turbulent outside environment, but also to each other’s internal responses, thereby increasing their overall adaptability.

Yet, it has to be remarked that the comparison between a jazz quartet and a symphony orchestra is disingenuous. Other than the fact that both groups play what might broadly be understood as “western music” (with all the generalized aesthetic appendices such as tertian harmony, regular meters, or presentational performance conventions) and that there is likely at least one double bass in both ensembles, very little else seems to overlap. In particular, since the juxtaposition is used to draw out models of interpersonal relations, the vast difference in group size between the two ensemble types seems to eliminate any useful comparison beyond claiming that small groups (like quartets) rely more on mutual adaptation; whereas large groups (like orchestras) rely more on top-down leadership. This point, already been made by Mintzberg in the 1970, might very well be worth reiterating, but it does not need to include such wide genre-crossing. The same

¹⁷ Mary M. Crossan, Henry W. Lane, Roderick E. White, and Leo Klus, “The Improvising Organization: Where Planning Meets Opportunity,” *Organizational Dynamics* (Spring 1996): 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹ Henry Mintzberg, *The Structuring of Organizations* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1979), 141.

insight could be drawn from comparing a big band with the same jazz quartet; or from comparing a string quartet to a symphony orchestra. The metaphor gets stood on its head when comparing a string quartet, with all its agility and deep intragroup communication, with a big band, replete with sheet music and conductor. In much of the jazz metaphor discourse, the assumed synonymity between classical music and orchestral music goes unexamined, despite its logical flaws.

Part of the rationale for that assumption is that there is historical reason to use the conductor—the symphonic conductor—as a straw man. In what may be said to be the first manuscript-length tome on management as a responsibility separate from other work functions, management science kingpin Peter Drucker writes in 1954 that “The manager has the task of creating a true whole that is larger than the sum of its parts, a productive entity that turns out more than the sum of the resources put into it. One analogy is the conductor of a symphony orchestra, through whose effort, vision and leadership individual instrumental parts that are so much noise by themselves become the living whole of music.”²⁰ Drucker’s portrayal of orchestral conductors draws on the trope of the all-powerful conductor that emerged in the Western imagination in the late nineteenth century. Marja Soila-Wadman and Ann-Sofie Köping maintain that “One of the enduring images of a leader in our society is the conductor of a symphony orchestra—the lone genius who conducts an unruly gathering on one hundred individualistic artists and inspires them to strive towards a common goal.”²¹ Small sketches a striking example of this image:

²⁰ Peter F. Drucker, *The Practice of Management* (New York: Harper, 1954), 341–342.

²¹ Marja Soila-Wadman and Ann-Sofie Köping, “Aesthetic Relations in Place of the Lone Hero in Arts Leadership: Examples from Film Making and Orchestral Performance,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 12:1 (2009): 31. For a very brief rundown of the history of the emergence of the mythological image of the heroic conductor, see Tom Service, “Mystery of the Maestros: What Are Conductors For?” *The Guardian*, June 1, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jun/01/mystery-maestros-what-are-conductors-for> (accessed July 13, 2021).

His power over the performance and over the rehearsals that have preceded it appears all but absolute. His authority comes from his control of the score lying open on the desk before him, which he alone among the musicians sees and has the power to interpret. He is a larger-than-life, even heroic figure who, even with his back to the audience, dominates them into stillness while with facial expressions and gestures of his hands he imposes his will on the sophisticated and often bored or stressed professional musicians before him, galvanizing them into life and guiding and shaping their performance.²²

Drucker's analogy between managers and orchestral conductors serves as the basis for much critique of the symphony orchestra and its conductor in the jazz metaphor discourse. In this discourse, Drucker's midcentury statement serves as a model of the old styles of management that have become outdated by the end of the twentieth century. However, this statement by Drucker is incomplete. Right after, he continues: "But the conductor has the composer's score; he is only the interpreter. The manager is both composer and conductor."²³ It seems that even Drucker, ostensibly the pioneer in comparing managers to conductors, believes that managers have to be composers too. Indeed, on the view that improvisation is a combination of composition and performance, frequently taken in the organizational improvisation discourse, managers have implicitly been described as improvisers by Drucker as early as 1954 in, when management science was still an emergent field and long before it needed to be overthrown by the jazz metaphor.

However, this does not prevent organizational scholars from misrepresenting Drucker's claim. In the *Org Sci* Coda, Frank Barrett notes Drucker's suggestion that managers should be like orchestral conductors. Yet he ignores the second part of Drucker's statement—the inclusion of the composerly facet—in focusing on "pre-scripted musical scores" that the conductor interprets. Barrett continues to state that "Jazz players do what managers find themselves doing: fabricating

²² Small, *Musicking*, 79. He later, significantly, notes that "A successful conductor has, in fact, many of the attributed of a business tycoon." Ibid., 81.

²³ Drucker, *The Practice of Management*, 342.

and inventing novel responses without a pre-scripted plan and without certainty of outcomes...²⁴

This characterization of what jazz players do seems remarkably close to what a composer might do.

And the composer was already included in the managerial analogy, so Barrett's intervention—the jazz model—seems superfluous.

Or perhaps not the jazz model itself isn't the superfluous element. Drucker himself proposes jazz as an alternative to classical genres in a much later interview in *Wired*, claiming that

The model for management that we have right now is the opera. The conductor of an opera has a very large number of different groups that he has to pull together. The soloists, the chorus, the ballet, the orchestra, all have to come together—but they have a common score. What we are increasingly talking about today are diversified groups that have to write the score while they perform. What you need now is a good jazz group.²⁵

Barrett thus uses a mischaracterized statement from Drucker to argue a point that Drucker himself made two years prior.

Mintzberg contrasts Drucker's statement with one by management scholar Leonard Sayles in order to demonstrate that while conductors, like managers, are not entirely powerless, the latter do not have full control over the actions of the people they lead, as might be portrayed in fanciful caricatures of the conductors of yore.²⁶ Another depiction of the manager as not-only-performer appears a decade after Drucker's initial statement. Highlighting the non-musical leadership that conductors take on, Sayles maintains that

The manager is like a symphony orchestra conductor, endeavoring to maintain a melodious performance in which the contributions of the various instruments are coordinated and sequenced, patterned and paced, while the orchestra members are having various personal difficulties, stage hands are moving music stands, alternating excessive heat and cold are

²⁴ Frank J. Barrett, "Coda: Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 605.

²⁵ Drucker in Peter Schwartz and Kevin Kelly, in conversation with Peter F. Drucker, "The Relentless Contrarian," *Wired* (1996). <https://www.wired.com/1996/08/drucker-3/> (accessed May 5, 2020).

²⁶ Henry Mintzberg, "Covert Leadership: Notes on Managing Professionals," *Harvard Business Review* 76:11/12 (1998): 144.

creating audience and instrumental problems, and the sponsor of the concert is insisting on irrational changes in the program.²⁷

Similarly, Mintzberg notes on a blog that “Managers are like orchestra conductors all right, but away from pretentious performing.”²⁸ In a way, these responsibilities are perhaps more important than the conductor’s role as a musician because the orchestral musicians—the followers—are highly capable experts who need very little in terms of empowerment from a leader.

An orchestra, Mintzberg and Drucker both point out, are staffed by what they term “knowledge workers, who resist the command-and-control model that businesses took from the military 100 years ago.”²⁹ There is an interesting contrast here. Proponents of the symphonic model, however loosely defined, maintain that orchestras, composed of expert knowledge workers led by conductors, are the solution to the military-style management systems of the past. Soila-Wadman and Köping find in their ethnographic research that “Orchestral musicians are extremely disciplined. They must adapt to the musical scores, the conductor, and a hundred or so other musicians. The musicians act and react to the sounds of their colleagues’ instruments as well as to the gestures, signals and body language of the conductor and the other musicians”³⁰ and continue to suggest that the leadership model of orchestral conductors, in a more collaborative perspective, serves as “an alternative to the traditional one in business administration in which leadership is described as planning, issuing orders, governing and exerting control.”³¹ Jazz metaphor proponents also

²⁷ Leonard Sayles, *Managerial Behavior: Administration in Complex Organizations* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), 162.

²⁸ Henry Mintzberg, “The Maestro Myth of Managing” (2016). <https://mintzberg.org/blog/conductor> (accessed May 3, 2020).

²⁹ Peter F. Drucker, “The Coming of the New Organization,” *Harvard Business Review* 66:1 (1988): 45; see also Drucker, “The New Society of Organizations,” *Harvard Business Review* 70:5 (1992): 102.

³⁰ Soila-Wadman and Köping, “Aesthetic Relations,” 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 40. Soila-Wadman and Köping have a particularly improvisatory view on conductors and the balance of decision-making discretion between them and the orchestra. They claim that “The general view has been that only the leader makes the decisions in an organization. We find this individualistic approach to be simplistic. Even if the leader is

recognize the shift toward knowledge work and deride the traditional model of management, yet disparage the orchestral “master and followers” relationship as being a relic of the command-and-control era, ill-suited to the management needs of knowledge workers.³² While the same shift in business practice is identified by both groups, they provide diametrically opposed solutions, with each deriding the model of the other. However, the symphonic model, like statements about it, is frequently mischaracterized. Indeed, the visualized conductor, “the image of absolute control—management captured perfectly in caricature,” Mintzberg claims, “is all a great myth.”³³ The myth serves as a way to position jazz as the new gospel of management, from which further learnings can be drawn.

2.2 Explanations of the foundational elements of jazz theory

One tactic that authors use to position jazz as fundamentally distinct from classical music is to delve into the technical aspects of jazz. This affords authors the opportunity to lay out the playing field in a way that supports their arguments, while hiding the contradictory points. In many of the early articles on organizational improvisation that use jazz as a model, writers feel compelled to

accountable for decisions taken, decision-making is a shared process, particularly within knowledge-intensive teams such as found in the arts. Decision-making does not necessarily take place in advance. It occurs simultaneously with the action—in other words, it is performative” thereby highlighting both the decentralized leadership structures commonly associated with jazz (see section 2.3.2 below) as well as the notion that planning and execution converge, creating a situation of improvisation (following the Moonman and Miner frame). *Ibid.*, 39.

³² Ronald Purser and Steven Cabana, *The Self-Managing Organization: How Leading Companies Are Transforming the Work of Teams for Real Effect* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 109.

³³ Mintzberg, “Covert Leadership,” 141; Mintzberg later dedicates a subsection to “Some Myths of the Conductor as Leader” in which he exaggerates the power of the conductor before shutting it down: “In the conductor of the symphony orchestra, we have leadership captured perfectly in caricature. The great chief stands on the podium with the followers arranged neatly around, ready to respond to every command. The maestro raises the baton, and they all play in perfect unison. Another motion and they all stop. Absolutely in charge—a manager’s dream. Yet all of it is a perfect myth.” *Managing* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), 71.

include brief and elementary introductions to jazz theory.³⁴ In this subsection I consider why these scholars dedicate bits of their publications to the basics of western music, and jazz in particular.

The first thing that should be noted is that such an explanation signals in-group status.³⁵ This type of signaling is remarkably pervasive in a variety of fields that take jazz as their object of study. Musicologists, music theorists, and organizational scholars alike often open articles with statements of membership and/or in-group knowledge by sharing the fact that they are, in fact, practitioners of jazz and often following that with a claim that this practical experience grants them deeper insights into the arcane art of jazz.³⁶ In response to writers who rely solely on second-hand accounts (for example, David Bastien and Todd Hostager, who rely on the analysis by Bastien *père*, or those authors who draw quotations from musicians in ethnographic studies), some gatekeepers notice that “there is a strong sense that many commentators write about jazz through secondary sources rather than first-hand experience,” which, they argue, leads to “a lack of understanding among many authors about the nature of jazz music.”³⁷ Positioning themselves as authoritative voices, either positively by divulging their prowess as practicing jazz musicians, or negatively by maligning armchair jazzers, allows them the opportunity to educate the layperson on the intricacies of jazz.

³⁴ Among many, see Bastien and Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” 600–601; David T. Bastien and Todd J. Hostager, “Cooperation as Communicative Accomplishment: A Symbolic Interaction Analysis of an Improvised Jazz Concert,” *Communication Studies* 43:2 (1992): 95; Morris Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor: An Expanded Conceptualization of Music-, Management-, and Marketing-Related Themes,” *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* 2:3-4 (2007): 197–199; and Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 2010), 11.

³⁵ Prouty takes a more generous view on this than I do, claiming that jazz has a deeply-felt impact on their lives. “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business-Metaphor,” 45.

³⁶ Sherry Tucker lists “the ability to play an instrument” as the first criterium used by jazz researchers in making the distinction between “those with real jazz knowledge” and “loathsome imposters.” “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” *Current Musicology* 71–73 (2002): 379.

³⁷ Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay, “Miles ahead’—Using Jazz to Investigate Improvisation and Market Orientation,” *European Journal of Marketing* 41:5/6 (2007): 614; here, Dennis, as a trumpet player, provides the expertise. See also Nicholas Sorensen, “The Metaphor of ‘The Jazz Band’: Ethical Issues for Leadership,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013): 11.

Although this is not always the case, organizational scholars sometimes draw from their music-theoretical explanations of jazz, especially those of harmony, in order to elucidate some improvisatory aspect that they feel managers should emulate. For example, Morris Holbrook uses the practice of tritone substitution to demonstrate that business leaders should be open to and explore alternatives. Holbrook claims that “The rules for harmonic substitutions call to mind the phenomenon of *interchangeable team members* in an organizational setting,”³⁸ while smooth voice leading is like streamlined distribution systems or efficiency gains in well-managed teams.³⁹ Harmonic conventions found in jazz theory thus serve as practical analogues for new forms of managerial practice.

Aside from harmony, the other musical parameter frequently explained by jazz metaphor scholars is form. Of course, there is significant overlap between harmony and form in that some forms, such as sonata form, 12-bar blues, or 32-bar AABA song form, are as much harmonic as durational forms. Standard forms in jazz are important for two reasons. The first is that they serve as bases on which improvisations can be built, even in the absence of melodies (such as the 12-bar blues, again). In this sense, they serve as outlines that are to be filled through improvisation, providing both form and freedom within that form. These small-scale forms also repeat as choruses to create larger-scale forms, providing metric and harmonic underpinnings over which musicians can take turns soloing.⁴⁰ The second reason is that the very standardization of standard forms, and perhaps jazz standards more broadly, allow them to be learned easily, whether in training, rehearsal,

³⁸ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 236, italics original.

³⁹ Ibid., 219, 236.

⁴⁰ See for example Frank J. Barrett and Ken Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song: An Analysis of ‘All of Me.’” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 558.

or playing together as an ad-hoc ensemble.⁴¹ Proponents of the jazz metaphor tout this ability to learn on the fly in rapidly changing teams as one of the great benefits of the model, a solution to the increasing pace of the business environment.

Of course, the reality is that most readers of organizational theory are not trained musicians.⁴² Holbrook, following his jazz theory lesson but before diving into its business applications, muses on how well organizational scholars understand the complexities of jazz theory gathered from secondary sources, wondering “how fully Berliner’s devoted management-oriented disciples have absorbed the rather daunting technical details that fill his 900-page book—especially in the carefully documented musical illustrations from the ‘music texts’ that account for roughly 250 pages.”⁴³ Thus, to the lay reader, the theoretical concepts of jazz harmony and form might come across as esoteric and disconnected from any sort of practical use.⁴⁴ However, one implication of this didactic approach is that jazz theory can be learned, and therefore, the core principles of improvisation, ostensibly tied to theory, can be learned by the uninitiated as well. While learning is frequently cited as a facet that improvisatory behavior affords, particularly through embracing failure, authors like Mary Crossan and Paul Newton emphasize the importance of the transferability of improvisatory concepts and thought from art-making (comedy in the case of Crossan, jazz in the case of Newton) to the business realm, not only in terms of theory or at a high level of abstraction,

⁴¹ Bastien and Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” 587; Barrett and Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song,” 559.

⁴² Prouty, “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor,” 46.

⁴³ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 210–211. He is referring to Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁴⁴ I should note here that I am not in a position to determine the utility or efficacy of these explanations since my own training in the western tradition gets in the way of gauging whether a layperson would comprehend the concepts as a result of the descriptions provided.

but at a more pragmatic level as well. The same learnability principle underlies the jazz consultant-led workshops described by Mark Laver.⁴⁵

A final, more tactical, reason for stipulating some grounding principles of jazz is that these principles act not only as descriptors of the music, but also as prescriptors to performers. These prescriptions play a key role in demonstrating that, contrary to what some of the uninitiated might perceive, jazz is a highly constrained form of improvisation, particularly the styles of jazz that organizational improvisation scholars promote.

2.3 Circumscribed views of jazz

Prouty trenchantly points out that the “jazz” in the jazz metaphor takes the form of a very specific slice of jazz, ignoring many other genres and subgenres.⁴⁶ He claims that “In developing a musical framework for the metaphor, its advocates tend to draw upon a stylistically narrow and historically circumscribed definition of jazz that resonates with canonically-based understandings of jazz’s history and practice, but, I would argue, fails to capture the essence of jazz improvisation in its totality.”⁴⁷ The main styles on which jazz metaphor authors draw are swing and bebop, using figureheads like Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis. Herbie Hancock serves as illustrative example of this erasure: during Hancock’s long career, he played a broad swath of styles, including hard-bop (*The Complete Live at the Plugged Nickel 1965*, with Davis’s Second Great Quintet, as well as his recordings with VSOP, a Davisless Second Great Quintet); free jazz

⁴⁵ Mark Laver, “Improvise!(TM): Jazz Consultancy and the Aesthetics of Neo Liberalism,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013): 2–4.

⁴⁶ Jazz is, of course, a highly contested term and mean different things at different times. Reams of articles have been printed on what jazz is, what jazz isn’t, and what jazz might be. For the purposes of this section, the cloud of genres around a commonplace understanding of “jazz” suffices.

⁴⁷ Prouty, “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor,” 34–35.

(*Mwandishi*, 1971); and fusions with funk (*Head Hunters*, 1973) and hip hop (*Future Shock*, 1983), yet the only music to which jazz metaphor scholars refer is that which he played with Davis or VSOP, and the quotes they select tend to center on his time with Davis. Alongside free jazz, post-1960s genres like jazz fusion and smooth jazz are discarded; furthermore, pre-swing genres like Dixieland also fail to make the jazz metaphor cut.

The aim of this subchapter is not to disparage the laser-like focus on swing and bebop in the literature on the jazz metaphor, but rather to consider the rationales behind this limitation. I start by discussing organizational improvisation scholars' emphasis on turbulent environments and why jazz provides models that are well-suited to deal with such environments. The second significant contribution is the decentralized leadership structures associated with bebop, as well as combo-inspired small group size. Jazz metaphor scholars are usually very quick to reassure readers that jazz (their construal of it, at least) is not completely devoid of rules and structure; my discussion of this need for constraints and jazz as the perfect balance between freedom and constraints forms the third part of this section. Some of these rationales overlap with ideas identified by Prouty, yet most notably is the notion that this particular understanding of jazz brings with it a certain cultural capital. This I discuss last in this subsection.

2.3.1 Complex environment

Improvisation, in the portrayals of jazz metaphor scholars, provides leaders with a way to deal with the increasingly complex business environment of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. There are three interconnected elements to this environment: 1) the overall complexity of the business sphere, which is driven by 2) increased competition and rate of competitive response, as well as a more general condition of 3) rapid pace of change in the environment, particularly as a result of new technologies. From the earliest publications that consider jazz as a model for business

behavior, authors like Bastien and Hostager emphasize the need to navigate the “turbulent task environment”⁴⁸ and suggest that the way that jazz musicians do so can be transposed to corporate contexts. The repeated emphasis on such environments throughout the development of the jazz metaphor discourse demonstrates the pervasiveness of this trope.

Environmental complexity is intertwined with competition and pace of change, but also includes factors like a broader range of markets and customers through globalization and a proliferation of products and channels through which they can be distributed around the world. Louis Klein, Christopher Biesenthal, and Erlend Dehlin invoke Ashby’s law of requisite variety to claim that “the alignment of internal and external complexity is the main aspect for solving complex problems and achieving resilience.”⁴⁹ According to this law, the only way for an organization to thrive is to have its own variety, or repertoire of responses, match or exceed environmental variety or range of stimuli; Stafford Beer summarizes this capability as “variety [that] absorbs variety.”⁵⁰

For organizational improvisation scholars, this means that, since the external environment is so complex, the environment internal to the organization needs to become complex as well. For example, Claudio Ciborra promotes a “platform organization” that has the “intrinsic potential to generate efficiently new combinations of resources, routines, and structures which are able to match turbulent market circumstances.”⁵¹ Jazz is frequently lauded for its complexity—notably bebop’s

⁴⁸ Bastien and Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” 586.

⁴⁹ Louis Klein, Christopher Biesenthal, and Erlend Dehlin, “Improvisation in Project Management: A Praxeology,” *International Journal of Project Management* 33 (2015): 268. Holbrook notes Stephen Nachmanovitch’s usage of the law of requisite variety (*Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: TarcherPerigee, 1990), 44), and seems to ascribe the law’s origins to him. Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 227.

⁵⁰ Stafford Beer, *The Heart of Enterprise* (Chichester: Wiley, 1979), 286. For the original theorization of the law, see Ross W. Ashby, “Requisite Variety and its Implications for the Control of Complex Systems,” *Cybernetica* 1:2 (1958): 83–99; and for a meta-study, J. Donald R. de Raadt, “Ashby’s Law of Requisite Variety: An Empirical Study,” *Cybernetics and Systems: An International Journal* 18:6 (1987): 517–536.

⁵¹ Claudio U. Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 121.

harmonic complexity—and therefore stands out among other forms of improvisation in generating the requisite internal complexity and to have a sufficiently broad range of responses available, even to unforeseen stimuli. The variability of jazz (even within the bounds of constraints) models the internal variety that an organization needs to absorb the varieties of complex external environments. Dale Chapman’s analysis of the organizational science literature maintains that “What improvised aesthetics offers to corporate thought leaders is precisely a *fantasy of liquidity*, a means of realizing the disruptive turbulence of contemporary market dynamics as something playfully ebullient and eminently positive,”⁵² thereby not only emphasizing the congruity between internal and external complexity, but celebrating that very complexity from the inside and without.

In addition to having a wide palette of responses to this dynamic environment available, organizations also need to have the ability to draw on them quickly. The contemporary business environment is not only complex, but also fast-paced. Improvisation here proves to be the remedy by narrowing the time gap between planning and execution, as per Christine Miner and Anne Moorman.⁵³ Following Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche’s two-part understanding of improvisation as dealing with time or as an act of bricolage,⁵⁴ the rapidity of response falls into their category of applying improvisatory measures to counteract a scarcity of time. Yet in contrast to the improvisation-as-rapid-response model, the complexity of the environment at any tempo requires a more bricolage-like application, in that solutions must be found to the problem

⁵² Dale Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble: Neoclassical Jazz in Neoliberal Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 22, italics original.

⁵³ Christine Moorman and Anne S. Miner, “The Convergence of Planning and Execution: Improvisation in New Product Development,” *Journal of Marketing* 62:3 (1998): 10.

⁵⁴ Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation: What, When, How, and Why,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 1:3 (1999): 302.

at hand. Here it is important to note, as Ciborra does,⁵⁵ that quickness is far from the only characteristic of improvisation.

In their categorization of improvisation, Crossan et al. combine environmental turbulence (phrased as “uncertainty”) and time pressure.⁵⁶ In the absence of uncertainty and temporal constraints, planning thrives. However, if either or both of these elements are present, improvisation takes root, either as controlled experiments (uncertain yet unhurried); as a way to quickly adapt plans to match slight deviations (time-constrained yet certain); or “full-scale” improvisation (uncertain and time-constrained).

The first of these leads to the notion of improvisation to bring about innovation. While Crossan et al. characterize this as taking place in stable environments, innovation is frequently necessitated by turbulent environments, such as in product development in the high-tech sector or in startups. Innovation outside an organization causes disruption to the environment and also demands innovation within the organization if it is to stay relevant in such a competitive landscape.⁵⁷ If this is the case, as in the high-tech example, there are also implications to the rate at which new, innovative products have to be rolled out. As Steve Leybourne maintains, “because of the speed with which new products have to be developed to keep abreast of competitors, requirements change in scope and nature during the development and implementation cycles.”⁵⁸ It is also worth noting

⁵⁵ Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, 170.

⁵⁶ Mary M. Crossan, Miguel Pina e Cunha, Dusya Vera, and João Cunha, “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” *The Academy of Management Review* 30:1 (2005): 133. Cf. Table 1.1 in the present document.

⁵⁷ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 312.

⁵⁸ Stephen A. Leybourne, “Managing Improvisation within Change Management: Lessons from the UK Financial Services,” *The Service Industries Journal* 26:1 (2006): 91.

that the competitive aspect of the market—and the dynamism that such competition brings with it—pushed scholars toward the jazz metaphor, and away from others, in the early days.⁵⁹

The encapsulating charge by proponents of the jazz metaphor is that the managerial models developed during and for the first three quarters of the twentieth century are no longer effective in a world of rapid change and technological disruptions to the market. Leybourne asserts that “environmental turbulence has contributed to the difficulties in anticipating future scenarios for organisational success, marginalising traditional ways of planning and implementing change,”⁶⁰ and Barrett argues that “The mechanistic, bureaucratic model for organizing—in which people do routine, repetitive tasks, in which rules and procedures are devised to handle contingencies, and in which managers are responsible for planning, monitoring and creating command and control systems to guarantee compliance—is no longer adequate.”⁶¹ Indeed, in his assessment of the jazz metaphor literature, Nicholas Sorensen claims that this outdatedness is the first ontological assumption on which the metaphor rests:

There was a shared acknowledgment of a “paradigm shift,” a rift between modernity (characterized by a capitalist economy based on industry) and a post-Fordist view of late capitalism (based on a knowledge economy)... Within this context, the metaphor of the jazz band has gained prominence as a way to describe the complex, non-linear environment of the postmodern/post-industrial world.⁶²

⁵⁹ See for example Alan Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit: All That Jazz,” *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal* 13:5 (1992): 3. The following subchapter touches on the competitive dynamics *within* jazz groups and jam sessions, as opposed to the external dynamics of industry competition.

⁶⁰ Stephen A. Leybourne, “Managing Change by Abandoning Planning and Embracing Improvisation,” *Journal of General Management* 31:3 (2006): 13.

⁶¹ Barrett, “Coda,” 620.

⁶² Sorensen, “The Metaphor of ‘The Jazz Band,’” 6; see also 10.

The key distinction here is between the repetitive tasks performed by factory workers assembling cars and the like and those working in the knowledge economy, which includes primarily service jobs like lawyers, doctors, and professors.

Knowledge work is by no means a new phenomenon, nor one newly theorized in the late twentieth century. Indeed, Mintzberg provides guidance on the organizational requirements of knowledge workers in his work from the 1970s; the requirements include smaller group-sizes and decentralized leadership structures, as well as mutual adjustment and intra-group communication in lieu of standardization. What is new in the last decades of the twentieth century, however, is the rapid rise in the share of the workforce that participate in knowledge work. Indeed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the professional and business service sector overtook manufacturing in terms of output by 1990 and in terms of number of employees by 2000.

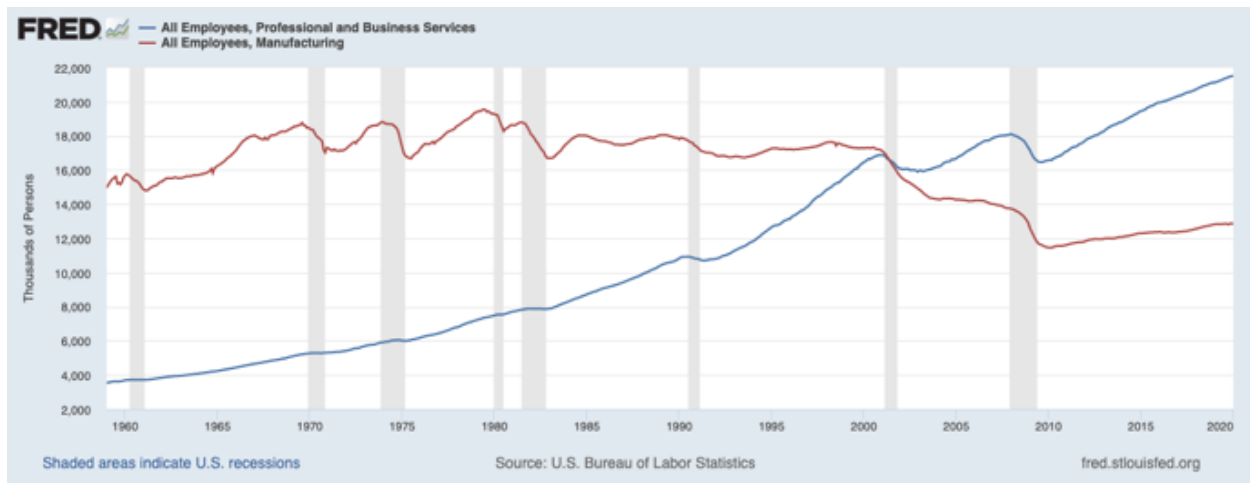


Fig. 2.1. U.S. Employees in Professional and Business Services and Manufacturing Sectors.⁶³

Whereas the typical workplace during modernity, to use Sorensen's language, was populated by assembly-line workers who could be managed through command-and-control-type hierarchies

⁶³ Chart generated by the Federal Reserve Economic Data, <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/graph/?g=v7FP> (accessed September 2, 2020).

since their work was predictable and standardized, managers in late-capitalism oversee knowledge workers who are to be creative and autonomous. The processes for such work were already outlined by Mintzberg and others by the time of the knowledge economy's ascent. What the organizational improvisation scholars do, then, is to present these ideas through metaphors such as the jazz combo; jazz metaphor authors do not so much generate new models of management as they repackage existing ideas in fresh and perhaps flashy forms.

I mean this not as an insult but rather as a clarification of the intellectual work being done by these scholars—and it is worthwhile intellectual work. What the jazz metaphor does is suggest a way of understanding a system of management that is appropriate for the current business environment, dominated by knowledge-work and the complexity and an accelerated pace of change that large swaths of competing knowledge-workers necessarily introduce into this environment. The following section delves into the leadership and group structures that jazz provides as illustrations of how to manage people in such an economy.

2.3.2 Leadership structures

The relentless recurrence in the discourse around the jazz metaphor of the themes of decentralized leadership and its consequent implications for groups warrants dedicated consideration. Rapidly changing business contexts, navigated and driven by knowledge workers, demand more flexible approaches than the management models of earlier in the twentieth century. Organizational improvisation scholars posit jazz groups as an exemplar of the flexibility required, as well as the group interactions—and especially leadership—that best facilitate such flexibility and maximize the potential of knowledge workers. Laver characterizes the fundamental shift in organizational models and the solution of the jazz metaphor proponents to the problem of outdated leadership and group structures thus:

Whereas Taylorist management (i.e., industrial-age, assembly-line oriented management) focused on both management structures and individual jobs that were methodical and infinitely repeatable, the tumultuous postmodern marketplace is seen to demand new approaches that are sufficiently agile, flexible, and intuitive to stay one step ahead of the competition. If a Taylorist organization was a majestic but unwieldy orchestra or string quartet, where employees slavishly repeated simply by mundane tasks (as it commonly is in the jazz-based initiative rhetoric), then the postmodern creative organization must be a dynamic improvising jazz band.⁶⁴

While there are disadvantages of using big bands as the models to emulate, since they rely on much the same organizational principles as the disparaged symphony orchestra (i.e. top-down leadership and adherence to scores), some jazz metaphor authors do indeed propose these larger ensembles as viable models for improvisatory leadership. Duke Ellington's leadership of swing-era big bands is a particular favorite. As this phrasing indicates, the bandleader is of particular import in this model, aligning it more thoroughly with hierarchical structures opposed by many authors in the preceding chapter, while also incorporating the notion of individual genius. Using renowned bandleaders as exemplars, Deniz Ucbasaran, Andy Lockett, and Michael Humphreys posit that entrepreneurial managers should learn three leadership lessons from men like Ellington, Miles Davis, and Art Blakey: team formation, team coordination, and team turnover.⁶⁵ By emulating musical leaders like Ellington in how they build and manage, they claim, business leaders can lead teams to creative results in dynamic environments.

Holbrook awards the highest honors for big band musicians who are also gifted composers and improvisers: "a handful of jazz geniuses have managed to lead, compose, and solo [improvise]

⁶⁴ Laver, "Improvise!(IM)," 4. Frederick Winslow Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1911) is repeatedly cited in this literature—particularly in more recent publications—as a foil against which the jazz metaphor for management acts. See for example Miguel Pina e Cunha, Steward Clegg, Arménio Rego, and Petro Neves, "Organizational Improvisation: From the Constraint of Strict Tempo to the Power of the *Avant-Garde*," *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23:4 (2014): 362; and Stephen A. Leybourne and Peter Cook, "Rockin' All over the World: Organizational Improvisation Lessons from the Music-Based Practitioner," *International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy* 9:1 (2015): 6.

⁶⁵ Deniz Ucbasaran, Andy Lockett, and Michael Humphreys, "Leading Entrepreneurial Teams: Insights from Jazz" (London: Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship, 2011): 5.

with brilliance in the big-band context. For his capacities in all three directions, Duke Ellington won an elevated stature as one of the past century's most admired and respected musicians."⁶⁶ In addition to big bands—and their leaders—featuring prominently in Holbrook's typology of jazz musicians, he finds that "Such jazz aggregations entail a larger-scale approach to managing the process of organizational innovation,"⁶⁷ perhaps more akin to large corporations than the smaller combos usually highlighted in the literature. Another instance of positioning big bands as more applicable models than small groups for transference to the corporate sphere can be found in a remarkably early (1992) and remarkably little-cited essay by Richard Wilson. He uses similar themes of personnel management and group leadership, as well as similar exemplar leaders, as Holbrook and Ucbasaran, Lockett, and Humphreys, going so far as to state that "It is tempting to suggest that the big band provides a better metaphor of current manufacturing organizations than the looser structure of the small jazz groups."⁶⁸ Prouty characterizes Wilson's choice of the big band as "defined not by the immediacy of the performance or prevalence of individual voices [as is typically the case in the discourse on organizational improvisation], but by careful planning and leadership, and success in the marketplace."⁶⁹ However, as Wilson recognizes, the big band model is perhaps most appropriate for the manufacturing sector—a sector typified by repeated and standardized work that can be lightly overseen by hierarchical and/or centralized leadership, rather than by the knowledge work that most other jazz metaphor scholars have in mind when proposing their decentralized leadership models. I now turn to these models.

⁶⁶ Holbrook, "Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor," 320.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁶⁸ Richard C. Wilson, "Jazz: A Metaphor for High-Performance Teams," in *Manufacturing Systems: Foundations of World-Class Practice*, eds. Joseph A. Heim and Dale Compton, 238–244 (Washington, DC: National Academies, 1992), 243.

⁶⁹ Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor," 37.

A key tenet in the small-group jazz model is the somewhat romanticized notion that there is no central leader in a combo and, perhaps even more idealized, that all the band members have an equal opportunity to participate and to set the musical direction. With regards to the structural flatness in free jazz, arguably more even likely to exhibit such decentralization than bebop, Noah Payne-Frank notes in an article in *The Guardian* that “The claims of non-hierarchical band structures are not always borne out—you can’t deny the seniority of experience, or the person who organized the gig,”⁷⁰ pointing out the factors that might darken the rose tint of the egalitarian view.

Such distortions ignored or brushed aside, the bebop convention of alternating solos features prominently in the discourse, from the earliest instantiation by Bastien and Hostager. Proponents of the jazz metaphor argue that business leaders can learn from the standard formal practice in bebop performances (particularly evinced in jam sessions). After the combo makes their way through the head of the tune, musicians have the opportunity to take a solo, with the light support of some of the others, setting the musical leadership; after they have concluded their solo, another musician plays their own solo, either shifting the musical direction, or continuing in a similar vein. For example, Barrett points out that part of the egalitarian nature of the jazz model is based on the notion that all the members in the group have the opportunity so take a solo, not merely that leadership rotates among a few of the members. Barrett maintains that “When self-directed work teams are performing well, they are often characterized by distributed multiple leadership in which taking turns leader various projects as their expertise is needed. In jazz bands, everyone gets a turn to solo.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Noah Payne-Frank, “Free Improvisation: Still the Ultimate in Underground Music?” *The Guardian*, November 15, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2017/nov/15/free-improvisation-jazz-ultimate-underground-music> (accessed September 8, 2020).

⁷¹ Barrett, “Coda,” 618. Commenting on this type of rhetorical move, Chapman maintains that “Given that state and private-sector actors have long encouraged a kind of ideological slippage between the celebration of democratic values and the promotion of market logics, it was perhaps inevitable that the well-established trope of a ‘jazz-shaped’

However, in practice, this is often not borne out: while front-line players typically do take solos, rhythm section players are often not afforded such opportunities of musical leadership in every tune. Furthermore, several jazz metaphor scholars note the convention of trading fours, sharing a solo in four-bar segments, typically between the drummer and the bassist, as a means to illustrate close communication and collaboration; what they do not note is that trading fours also means not having a full solo to oneself, which undercuts the professed ideal of equal access to musical leadership.

Even in non-jazz forms in the organizational improvisation orbit, such as improvisational theater, scholars like Dusya Vera and Crossan emphasize rotational leadership. In this context, similar to the jazz instantiation of the metaphor, each actor has the capability to shift the dramatic direction and the others are obliged to accept and follow. Yet, as Adrian Cho points out, employing this alternating model of leadership is not without risks, either of everyone on the team trying to lead simultaneously, or, perhaps worse, nobody taking up the lead.⁷² One mitigatory method, proposed by Newton (tune caller) and Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay (front-line player), is to rely on rotational leadership, but to have a nominal leader—a first-among-equals—to give guidance in times of leadership surplus or leadership deficit.

The decentralized leadership model has a circularly-reinforcing relationship to small group size. Knowledge workers tend to work better in small groups with more dedicated oversight than that provided by, say, a factory floor overseer.⁷³ This is due to the closer interactions among the

democracy would be repurposed as a straightforward account of the music's metaphorical resemblance to the dynamics of late capitalism itself." *The Jazz Bubble*, 14.

⁷² Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 261.

⁷³ Mintzberg, *The Structuring of Organizations*, 7–8.

various group members, who can manage themselves, rather than requiring top-down leadership.⁷⁴

Jazz metaphor scholars note that small groups facilitate improvisation: Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche cite a handful of authors, including Moorman and Miner and Mintzberg, and explain that

Group size is the final element of the organization's configuration with a potential impact [on] its ability to improvise. Exceedingly large groups can reduce the difference between routine and improvised behavior. This happens mainly because a large group of people cannot co-ordinate itself based on mutual adjustment alone, and then the newly imposed controls would hinder its ability to improvise. Moreover, the larger the group, the higher the probability of information distortion and the lower the real-time information communication speed, thus the lower incidence of improvisation.⁷⁵

Where group size is their last factor, their first factor facilitating improvisation is “the existence of close and trusting relationships among its members,” which “build[s] a ‘safety net’ for risk-taking.”⁷⁶

Trust, while associated with risk, is also associated with autonomy; Barrett ties it to the alternating leadership model (which, as he emphasizes, also relies on communal support): “deliberate efforts to make room of peers’ contributions is close to what jazz musicians do when they comp—agree to suspend judgement, to trust that whatever the soloist is doing right now will lead to something...

Such democratic structures enhance the likelihood that people not only have the right to be heard, but also have the opportunity to influence.”⁷⁷ Small groups, like improvising musicians, facilitate knowledge work by generating conditions for trust and mutual interaction among the few group

⁷⁴ In the Jazz-versus-classical section (2.1), I approach the argument from the other side, noting that large groups tend to rely on integrating figures, like conductors, in order to be coordinated.

⁷⁵ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 327.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁷⁷ Barrett, “Coda,” 619. Within the context of free improvisation, Julie Dawn Smith terms this type of reciprocal, agency-granting mode of interaction “listening trust,” which she characterizes as “a pact among performers and listeners that they will listen and be listened to; an agreement to engage in an ‘empathic communication across time’ and to employ an ‘ethics of respect’ for the performative journey with which and in which they engage.” Ellen Waterman provides an example of a group improvisation in which two duos merge to form a cohesive quartet, which one of the improvisers, kotoist and composer Miya Masaoka, describes as “thinking as a group.” Julie Dawn Smith and Ellen Waterman, “Listening Trust: The Everyday Politics of George Lewis’s ‘Dream Team,’” in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is Now!*, eds. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Duke University Press, 2013), 84–85; Masaoka is quoted on 72.

members; since improvisation, to a certain extent, relies on similar conditions, jazz metaphor scholars find it a useful way to translate arts-based ideas into management-oriented recommendations. However, some organizational improvisation scholars are skeptical of wholly flat leadership structures and frequently suggest some externally imposed constraint on alternating leadership models like having a first-among-equals leader on whom to fall when necessary. There are similar concerns of chaos that might ensue if improvisatory activity is left unchecked; scholars therefore emphasize the need for regulating structures so as to keep improvisation within the bounds of order.

2.3.3 Need for constraints

Nary a publication on organizational improvisation fails to include an explicit or implicit reference to the need for improvisation to be constrained. This section deals with the contradictions in calling for constraints, while also delving into the rationale behind the authors' choice to emphasize governing factors that delimit the space in which improvisatory activities takes place as well as delimit the range and unfolding of such ventures.

Bastien and Hostager's initial article posits that it is the *conventions* of jazz that are transferable; these conventions, of course, stand as rules to govern improvisatory musicking, either in technical or social terms. The same theme continues throughout the organizational improvisation discourse. For example, Barrett says that "One of the themes we want to talk about is that jazz is actually very structured... Jazz improvisation involves creating music on the spot without a prescribed score or plan. However, jazz is guided by a non-negotiable framework that constrains what the soloist can play. This structure provides the necessary backdrop to coordinate action and

organize the choice of notes.”⁷⁸ Bebop, with its many conventions, which subsequently became enshrined as rules, is then a suitable vehicle to transfer improvisatory thinking from music contexts to corporate contexts.

Some jazz metaphor authors, particularly those publishing in the popular press like Kao and Cho, take a negative approach to constraints, arguing that free jazz, with fewer technical constraints than swing or bebop, sounds (to many) cacophonous or chaotic. Indeed, Cho claims that “Rules provide a safeguard against chaos and anarchy.”⁷⁹ By pointing out the lack of appeal of free jazz (at least as compared to more traditional styles), these authors maintain that constraints are necessary for music to be harmonious and/or enjoyable; analogously, organizational improvisation has to be constrained in a similar way in order to be a fruitful method of work.

Whatever the approach, organizational improvisation scholars are quick to allay the fears of their managerial audience. Chapman points out the irony in advocating for a shift away from the rigid structures of prior management models, be that in terms of leadership structure of operating procedures, by drawing on a musical genre that is, as its boosters reassure, highly constrained. Yet there is clearly a reason why proponents of the jazz metaphor take this approach. The reality is that managers are reluctant to cede control to the whims of improvising teams. Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche note that “having to be purely organic or structureless [is] something that always seems to be an awkward thought for most executives”⁸⁰ and Mintzberg and Alexandra McHugh maintain that “No organization can function with strategies that are always and purely emergent.”⁸¹ With regards

⁷⁸ Barrett and Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song,” 558.

⁷⁹ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 21.

⁸⁰ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 335.

⁸¹ Henry Mintzberg and Alexandra McHugh, “Strategy Formation in an Adhocracy,” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 30:2 (1985): 196.

to jazz metaphor consultants, Laver notes the added wrinkle that proponents of organizational improvisation face in roles as consultants: their students/audience are also their clients, and that “While their task is undoubtedly to bring new perspectives to organizations, out of self-preservation...[jazz metaphor] consultants are often reluctant to propose anything too drastic or dramatic,”⁸² like eschewing all constraining frameworks. However, in Leybourne’s ethnographic work, “One key finding from the study was that only one of almost 100 interview respondents ... did not support the use of improvisation,”⁸³ indicating that managers might not be quite as skittish as organizational improvisation scholars assume.

What stands out in both Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche’s and Mintzberg and McHugh’s quotes is the employment of the word “purely,” which drives the sentiment of structurelessness to the extreme of a complete absence of any guiding principles—a pure, unbounded freedom. While pointing out such an extreme stance is a somewhat elementary debate tactic, it does lead to the lukewarm conclusion that, as much of the literature notes, both business leaders and jazz musicians need to find the correct balance between freedom and constraints, whether in the exciting form of Herbie Hancock’s “sort of walking a tightrope with the kind of experimenting we were doing in music, not total experimentation, but we used to call it ‘controlled freedom’,”⁸⁴ or Holbrook’s charge to “reconcile, balance, integrate, synthesize, or otherwise resolve tensions due to conflicting tendencies analogous to the dialectic opposition in jazz between structure and departure, order and chaos, constraints and freedom.”⁸⁵ Chapman believes that jazz metaphor authors, particularly those

⁸² Laver, “Improvise!(TM),” 9.

⁸³ Leybourne, “Managing Change,” 17.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 49.

⁸⁵ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 412.

with a narrow focus on a specific repertory, see opportunity in the position in which corporations find themselves in the current economic environment, pointing out that “This sense in which jazz neoclassicism understands itself as a freedom shaped by rules has frequently been seen as attractive for this looking to translate contemporary jazz into the terms of business-centered analogies given that it suggests the ways that modern corporations always walk the line between strategic flexibility and rigorous standards of performance” to which managers are held.⁸⁶

Even though Leybourne notes the positive stance that managers take toward improvisation, jazz metaphor authors are also tasked with finding a balance, not unlike the balance of their subjects or audience, between promoting too much freedom in corporate behavior and keeping their recommendations within the orbit of their managerial audience’s comfort zone. One way to broaden this comfort zone is to draw on the cultural capital that jazz has accrued.

2.3.4 Cultural capital

Although the origins of jazz are situated in lower-class establishments, during the course of the twentieth century the genre has accrued considerable amounts of cultural capital, even being touted as “America’s classical music,” drawing on—and subverting—the cultural capital enjoyed by European art music. Cunha et al. maintain that “improvisation in jazz matters because of its portrayal as positive deviance”;⁸⁷ Prouty, in his emphasis on the importance of jazz’s status in the organizational improvisation discourse, points out the intentional distancing from classical music once more, claiming that the jazz metaphor “depends heavily on the sense of cultural capital that is

⁸⁶ Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 19.

⁸⁷ Cunha et al., “From the Constraint of Strict Tempo to the Power of the *Avant-Garde*,” 363. The link between jazz and deviance, in this type of positive, cultural-capital-carrying light, was first drawn by sociologist and jazz pianist Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Free Press, 1963), 88–127.

associated with this idea, and that [the jazz metaphor] might work best on this level. Jazz's metaphorical applications might have less to do with any specific practices or structures in the music, and more to do with what jazz has come to mean in contemporary culture: a sophisticated American musical form that stands apart from the traditions of old, but is still distinct from what is common or popular."⁸⁸ Prouty provides an example of the interrogation of the capital on which the jazz metaphor is built—an interrogation often left untouched in the organizational improvisation literature itself. Indeed, non-musicological authors tend to lean into the identity that has been constructed around jazz (and its practitioners) that imbues it with positive traits like hipness and differentness on the one hand, and cultural value and prestige on the other.

A small body of musicological literature investigates the use of jazz in commercials, which serves as proof of the rise in the genre's cultural capital. Indeed, Prouty opens his article on the jazz metaphor for business, providing a vignette in which his students discuss the employment of jazz in a 2007 commercial for Grey Goose vodka; staying within the beverage advertising sector, Laver dedicates a chapter to Pepsi's 2006 marketing campaign for their "Jazz" limited edition soda.⁸⁹ Yet these examples are not the first. As early as 1995, contemporaneously with the teething stage of the jazz metaphor, Krin Gabbard claims that "even television commercials testify to the music's growing capital ... Advertisers no longer use jazz to connote...nightlife and slumming...jazz can now signify refinement and upper-class status, once the exclusive provenance of classical music."⁹⁰ The rise of jazz in the cultural hierarchy, as demonstrated by its ascent into the commercial

⁸⁸ Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-as-Business Metaphor," 53.

⁸⁹ Mark Laver, *Jazz Sells: Music, Marketing, and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 142–176.

⁹⁰ Krin Gabbard, "Introduction: The Jazz Canon and Its Consequences," in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 1–2.

soundtrack repertory, has been well documented;⁹¹ the following pages delves into how organizational improvisation scholars draw on that cultural capital.

One of the rhetorical tactics employed in promoting the prestige of jazz is by focusing on certain star musicians, like Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Miles Davis. Other only-less-frequent name-drops include Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, and Charles Mingus. A prime example of the weight of Ellington's and Gillespie's capital is their deployment as cultural diplomats promoting American exceptionalism in countries under perceived threat of communism during the Cold War, as masterfully documented by Penny von Escher.⁹² Perhaps the most obvious manifestation of similar notions of exceptionalism in the jazz metaphor literature can be found in Holbrook's hagiographic treatment of the same two musicians, in which he frequently highlights the non-musical characteristics of their leadership and personae. Drawing on the development of the discipline of film studies, Gabbard claims that "By authorizing the reading of a film around a single artist's work [that of the director], auteurism gave a new aesthetic legitimacy to movies,"⁹³ which he argues has been mirrored in jazz history. This is the same history on which the jazz metaphor discourse draws, similarly highlighting single great artists and the legitimacy that such a perspective brings to method of study—or to a method of organization and management.⁹⁴

⁹¹ For an early and influential example of such documentation, see Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum* 25:3 (1991): 525–560.

⁹² For an introduction, see Penny von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1–26.

⁹³ Gabbard, "Introduction," 5.

⁹⁴ More broadly, on the topic of the legitimization of jazz studies, DeVeaux argues that "The accepted historical narrative for jazz serves" the purpose of "acquiring the prestige, the 'cultural capital' (in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase) of an artistic tradition [so that] the music hope[s] to be heard and its practitioners receive the support commensurate with their training and accomplishments." "Constructing the Jazz Tradition," 526.

Particularly notable is the overlap between the genres venerated by the proponents of the jazz metaphor and the genres venerated by jazz musicians in the neoclassical tradition. Chapman points out the temporal overlap as well: “Both the renewed interest in jazz as a metaphor for democracy as well as the emergent interest in jazz as a private-sector organizational metaphor coincide with the rise of neoclassical jazz in the late 1980s and 1990s” and continues to state that “For the private sector in the 1980s and 1990s, the utility of jazz neoclassicism as a point of departure for thinking through the strategic dynamics of market procedures was also supplemented by its utility as a touchstone for certain kinds of social values.”⁹⁵ He maintains that the underlying neoliberal economic and political system gave rise to both the jazz metaphor and neoclassical jazz and the values for which they stand, including individualism, a willingness to navigate a turbulent environment, freedom (albeit bounded), and American exceptionalism. Laver goes a step further: “By adding an aesthetic valence to neoliberal policies, [jazz metaphor] consultants and theorists help to radically transfer the goals that [the implementers of neoliberal policies, U.S. President Ronald] Reagan, [U.S. Federal Reserve Chair Paul] Volcker, and [British Prime minister Margaret] Thatcher had linked to the themes of ‘dignity, freedom, and determination’ from crude economic ambitions to lofty artistic aspirations.”⁹⁶ Laver argues that neoliberalism can only be supported by profits for so long before workers need other sources of inspiration to support the ideology—and that organizational improvisation is a potential source of such inspiration.

Perhaps the most esteemed shrine of neoliberal inspiration is Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC) in New York City. JALC is one of eleven constituent arts organizations, with most of the others also dedicated to music, including the New York Philharmonic, The Metropolitan Opera House, and

⁹⁵ Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 19. The democratic aspect, of course, is not wholly separate from the organizational aspect, as shown in the section on leadership structures, in which distributed decision-making is a key component.

⁹⁶ Laver, “Improvise!(TM),” 6–7.

The Juilliard School, in the complex that has become known as one of the premier performing arts nexuses in the world. Under the “history” section of their website, JALC outlines its origins in the late 1980s and its official induction into the Center in 1996, the same period that saw the emergence of the jazz metaphor in management literature.⁹⁷ At the same time, then, that jazz was admitted to the hallowed halls of an elite performing arts campus, jazz also made its way into the hallowed halls of corporations and senior management retreats. Yet, as Alan Stanbridge notes,

It is also worthwhile pointing out that jazz is not the only previously ‘marginal’ contemporary form of cultural expression to have experienced a shift to a more mainstream positioning in recent years. Something similar could be said, for example, about wrestling, about thrash metal, about pornography, about tattoo art, or about body piercing, and it is interesting to observe the manner in which contemporary culture embraces—and thereby ‘mainstreams,’ or perhaps ‘co-opts’—previously socially peripheral, oppositional, or taboo phenomena.⁹⁸

For any of these “marginal” forms of expression, certain hurdles need to be overcome in order for any of them to reach the mainstream and, as is clear from the example of neoclassical jazz, the form that eventually feels the embrace of contemporary culture is frequently either a watered-down version of the transgressive form, or one in which only a subsection of the whole is presented.

The spearhead of the advance of JALC, and the neoclassical jazz movement more broadly, is trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. He is an ardent advocate for traditional genres like swing and bebop who has not been without opponents, perhaps most notably Lester Bowie, trumpeter of the Art Ensemble of Chicago. Yet, as Farah Jasmine Griffin trenchantly observes, “had Marsalis not struck such a conservative stance, whereby some of the most innovative practitioners are left out of the jazz canon, it is highly unlikely he would have been able to acquire the resources necessary to do the

⁹⁷ Even JALC’s URL is an illustration of their presentation of themselves as “the totality of jazz music”: <https://www.jazz.org/history/> (accessed September 16, 2020).

⁹⁸ Alan Stanbridge, “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Jazz, Social Relations, and Discourses of Value,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 4:1 (2008): 9.

kind of work on behalf of the music he has done,”⁹⁹ particularly his work in the JALC program. Chapman expands, claiming that, “For Griffin, the aesthetic conservatism of Marsalis’s vision of jazz has made it legible to those individuals and institutions who might otherwise have been skeptical about reviving such a transgressive musical legacy, originating from such a culturally charged site of identity,” but he continues to point out “A key irony here is that, even as the conservatism of neoclassicism has rendered jazz palatable for the consumption of large institutional actors by putting a brake on innovation, what these actors see reflected in jazz neoclassicism is precisely a quality of nimble, dynamic, and democratic innovation that they would like to see in themselves.”¹⁰⁰ The institution to which Chapman refers here is the Lincoln Center itself (which, according to the JALC “history” page, “was looking to expand its programming efforts to attract new and younger audiences”), yet the same arguments hold for institutional actors like organizational scholars and, to a certain extent, jazz metaphor consultants. By only drawing on a very thin sliver of the repertoire and touting its improvisatory freedom and flattened leadership structures, jazz metaphor scholars hamstring themselves by choosing not to select other styles of jazz in which those very characteristics are even more apparent.

Yet these styles lack the cultural capital with which swing and bebop have been imbued. At the end of this chapter, I discuss some of the instances in which organizational improvisation authors have touched on the freer forms of jazz, speculating on where the discourse might have gone had they chosen to lean into such styles. However, the following section remains within the bounds of standardized bebop conventions, but in the far less institutionalized setting of the jam session.

⁹⁹ Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't be Free, be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 143.

¹⁰⁰ Chapman, *The Jazz Bubble*, 12–13.

2.4 The jam session model

Several jazz metaphor scholars regard the jam session as a laboratory for new ideas to emerge collectively, and propose that conceptually transferring the jam session model to organizational contexts boosts innovation and collaboration. There are several characteristics of jam sessions that lend themselves to transposition to other fields, some of which have been outlined by Monika Herzig and David Baker.¹⁰¹ They include standardized structure, feedback, collaboration and competition, competency, and laboratory-like insulation.

Jam sessions are events that take place in rehearsal spaces or jazz clubs after hours and/or on nights that typically have fewer patrons (they can also take place in domestic spaces). In some venues, jam sessions occur after the advertised sets, shifting the performance model from presentational to participatory: musicians are encouraged to go onto the stage and play together, often around a core rhythm section. A tune caller selects a standard and the impromptu group plays together, without sheet music, following musical conventions associated with bebop jazz, including harmonic and rhythmic rules, use of standards, and the head-solos-head structure. This formal structure gives the visiting musicians a chance to demonstrate their competency and improvisational prowess as they take turns soloing. After the song, the musicians give others the chance to play while socializing with the other non-playing musicians. These events often run late into the night, or until dawn, if they started late.

While this brief rundown of jam sessions ignores many idiosyncrasies, the standardization of the jam session allows me to summarize it in such a fashion.¹⁰² William Bruce Cameron commented early on the structuredness of jam sessions: “It is an informal but traditionally structured association

¹⁰¹ Monika Herzig and David Baker, “Beyond Jamming: A Historical and Analytical Perspective on the Creative Process,” *MEIEA Journal* 14:1 (2014): 183–217.

¹⁰² See Scott DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop: A Social and Musical History* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997), 203.

of a small number of self-selected musicians.”¹⁰³ Indeed, the large-scale unfolding of jam sessions is sufficiently regular that Ricardo Nuno Futre Pinheiro can argue convincingly that they are rituals.¹⁰⁴ However, while the macrostructure of jam sessions is predictable—a series of tunes played by rotating musicians in a roughly-bebop style—there is considerable and desirable unpredictability *within* each of the tunes, as the musicians improvise their solos. It is exactly this type of regulated creativity that many jazz metaphor authors recommend to corporations to promote innovation in order to stay ahead of their competitors. Managers are, according to Kao, “being asked to stretch and grow—to jam—to help their companies improvise in today’s rapidly evolving global economy.”¹⁰⁵ Along the lines of Ralph Ellison’s Wild West analogy, Kao continues more urgently: “Jam or die—the issue is that stark.”¹⁰⁶

Whereas Ellison and Kao regard the jam session as hyper-competitive, others take a rosier view: Prouty notes that “In the jazz metaphor, jam sessions are seen as sites of intense collaboration between co-equal partners.”¹⁰⁷ This co-equality plays into the larger notion of jazz as an essentially democratic art form, from which contemporary corporations can learn. In what appears to be the earliest analogy between business practice and jam sessions, Eric Eisenberg takes such an optimistic stance: “Jamming celebrates the closeness that can arise through coordinated action. Jamming is

¹⁰³ William Bruce Cameron, “Sociological notes on the Jam Session,” *Sociological Forces* 33:2 (1954): 177.

¹⁰⁴ Ricardo Nuno Futre Pinheiro, “Jam Sessions in Manhattan as Rituals,” *Jazz Research Journal* 6:2 (2012): 140.

¹⁰⁵ Kao, *Jamming*, 95 and 98.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 163. Ralph Ellison maintains “And even the greatest can never rest on past accomplishments, for, as with the fast guns of the Old West, there is always someone waiting in a jam session to blow him literally, not only down, but into shame and discouragement.” “The Golden Age, Time Past,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 454.

¹⁰⁷ Prouty, “Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor,” 43.

nondisclosive but fulfilling.”¹⁰⁸ This coordinated action can be seen at a large scale in an example given by two organizational scholars, namely IBM’s internal “jam sessions,” the 2006 iteration of which involved 150,000 participants from 104 countries “generating more than 46,000 ideas.”¹⁰⁹ By following the jam session model, the multinational generates a wealth of concepts and hypotheses that can be tested by the jam itself. As another form of ideation, Barrett compares organizational jam sessions to brainstorming, during which “members take turns thinking out loud while others listen.”¹¹⁰ Later authors disagree with the analogy, claiming that “jam sessions are...defined from the start, in contrast to the results of a brainstorming session,”¹¹¹ and that brainstorming is more successful when combined with feedback and evaluation,¹¹² rather than the passive listening that Barrett suggests.

However, feedback does play an important role in jam sessions. This feedback steers the phenomenon of jam sessions further away from the idyll of amicable and boundless ideation offered by some jazz metaphor advocates. Lawrence Nelson maintains that musicians listen closely to audience responses to their playing, and maintains that the audience, therefore, are on equal footing

¹⁰⁸ Eric M. Eisenberg, “Jamming: Transcendence through Organizing,” *Communication Research* 17:2 (1990): 139; the nondisclosive element is important to Eisenberg since it serves as a foil to much of communications research that argues strongly for deep, shared connections.

¹⁰⁹ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 17. Steve Diasio also focuses on the IBM jam sessions, but argues that jam bands, such as The Grateful Dead, are better analogues than jazz combos. See “Not All That Jazz! Jamband as a Metaphor for Organizing New Models of Innovation,” *European Management Journal* 34 (2016): 125–134.

¹¹⁰ Barrett, “Coda,” 617.

¹¹¹ Sofia Börjesson and Tobias Fredberg, “Jam Sessions for Collaborative Management Research,” in *Collaborative Research in Organizations: Foundations for Learning, Change, and Theoretical Development*, eds. Niclas Adler, A. B. (Rami) Shani, and Alexander Styhre (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 144. On this view, jam sessions in the bebop model are too standardized to facilitate optimal brainstorming; free improvisation, then, seems to be the model more suited to brainstorming.

¹¹² Maksim Belitski and Monika Herzig, “The Jam Session Model for Group Creativity and Innovative Technology,” *Journal of Technological Transformation* 43 (2018): 511.

with the performers,¹¹³ which, in many cases, they are, since the audience might largely comprise other musicians awaiting their turn to step up to play with the band. That the audience is made up mostly of other musicians is significant; in 1941, a correspondent for the trade press on jazz praises the absence of the general public at jam sessions: “There’s no audience, no crowd, no hot fans. Thank god, there are no messy jitterbugs, no critics to mutter under their breath.”¹¹⁴ The performers themselves, however, do sanction each other through verbal or body language for transgressing musical conventions¹¹⁵ and repeated transgressions would likely lead to reputational harm.

Alongside co-performer and audience feedback, Nelson observes another structuring factor: the tune caller, a semiformal leader who decides what standard the group will play. This role, although rare in the jazz metaphor discourse,¹¹⁶ finds a home in jam session models of innovation as a link between the improvising group and the organization in which it is housed: Maksim Belitski and Monika Herzig claim that “For a variety of reasons, musicians might not be willing to take on such managerial tasks,”¹¹⁷ and note that such a “designated leader helps facilitate performers and their order of appearances, tunes, and tempos.”¹¹⁸ Similarly, Kao believes that there needs to be someone to set the agenda, yet he has a more flexible view on who that might be.¹¹⁹ The presence of

¹¹³ Lawrence D. Nelson, “The Social Construction of the Jam Session,” *Jazz Research Papers* 15 (1995): 98.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in DeVaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 205. See also Dana Gooley, “The Outside of ‘Sitting In’: Jazz Jam Sessions and the Politics of Participation,” *Performance Research* 16:3 (2011): 43–44.

¹¹⁵ Bassist and ethnomusicologist Ofer Gazit refers to this reprimanding practice as “vibing.” “Sound at First Sight: Jam Sessions and Immigrants in Brooklyn, New York,” *Jazz Perspectives* 9:1 (2015): 44.

¹¹⁶ But see for example Bastien and Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” 58; or Paul M. Newton, “Leadership Lessons for Jazz Improvisation,” *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 7:1 (2004): 85.

¹¹⁷ Belitski and Herzig, “The Jam Session Model,” 511.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 508.

¹¹⁹ Kao, *Jamming*, 39. Sofia Börjesson and Tobias Fredberg also insist on the necessity of agenda-setting in corporate jam sessions. “Jam Sessions for Collective Management Research,” 142.

a tune caller distorts the imagined equality among performers in jam sessions. Two other factors have implications on equality: competition and competency.

While competition is often touted as one of the boons of jazz (Kao's claims are obvious examples), the tone around it is frequently softened. Indeed, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, recommending "a balance between collaboration and competition" in order to "Achiev[e] a meaningful performance," go on to caution that "without seeking to romanticize jazz, we would argue that egotistical behaviour must be situated within a context of collaborative praxis."¹²⁰

Pinheiro similarly notes the representation of the atmosphere in jam sessions as "not only competitive, but also friendly, loyal and encouraging"¹²¹ and Eisenberg points out the distinction between jam sessions and cutting sessions, the former of which are based on cooperation rather than competition.¹²² With regards to more stable groups (i.e. not the ad-hoc ensembles thrown together in jam sessions), Dennis and Macaulay are particularly critical toward intra-group competition, even if inter-group competition is allowed: "within a jazz group there should be no competition among players, or at least if there is competition then the musicians are doing something wrong."¹²³

However, Eisenberg also maintains that the practice of jamming itself "encourages both cooperation and individuation. Jamming experiences provide an opportunity to transcend the

¹²⁰ Ken N. Kamoche, Miguel Pina e Cunha, and João Vieira da Cunha, "Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation: Looking Beyond the Jazz Metaphor," *Journal of Management Studies* 40:8 (2003): 2027. This sentiment is echoed by DeVeaux, who maintains that, at jam sessions, "While the competition was serious, the atmosphere was congenial and supportive." *The Birth of Bebop*, 211.

¹²¹ Ricardo Nuno Futre Pinheiro, "The Jam Session and Jazz Studies," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 45:2 (2014): 338.

¹²² Eisenberg, "Jamming," 150–151; see also Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, "Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation," 2027. Saxophonist Coleman Hawkins denies this distinction, claiming "What you're calling today a jam, we used to call them cutting contests." Quoted in DeVeaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, 210.

¹²³ Dennis and Macaulay, "Miles Ahead," 618; for their tolerance of external competition between different groups, see *ibid.*, 614.

autonomy-interdependence dialectic, simultaneously allowing for the possibility of both.”¹²⁴

Individuation, when left unchecked, might lead to egocentric performance, a faux pas in jam sessions. Whereas the organizational science discourse frequently emphasizes the competitive aspect of jam sessions (and its adherent benefits), the cooperative aspect receives more attention in the musicological literature,¹²⁵ stressing pedagogical and community-building facets. This divergence in focus is perhaps not surprising. It stands to reason that scholarship aimed at the business community promotes competition, since competition—or, more accurately, competitiveness—is already highly prized in that sector.

In order for a setting to be adequately competitive, participants need to be adequately competent. Lore of musicians participating in jam sessions without the requisite competency abounds, perhaps most famously the anecdote about Charlie Parker having a cymbal thrown at him. Miles Davis recalls the similarly violent atmosphere in the 1940s: “If you got up on the bandstand at Minton’s and couldn’t play, you were not only to get embarrassed by people ignoring you or booing you, you might get your ass kicked.”¹²⁶ In the jazz metaphor literature, authors consistently refer to the competence of good players (usually the revered ones in the canon) in arguments for selective recruiting; for example, Kao prompts his leaders to “be fussy about who you hire.”¹²⁷ The need for competence is further exacerbated by the fact that “In a tightly coordinated activity, the quality of the total experience is always limited by the skill of the weakest member.”¹²⁸ However, competency in itself is not enough. Eisenberg declares that “Jamming also requires that skill levels be

¹²⁴ Eisenberg, “Jamming,” 146.

¹²⁵ See for example Sorensen, “The Metaphor of ‘The Jazz Band,’” 6.

¹²⁶ Miles Davis, with Quincy Troupe, *Miles: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 54.

¹²⁷ Kao, *Jamming*, 184.

¹²⁸ Eisenberg, “Jamming,” 152.

comparable.¹²⁹ Similarly, Börjesson and Fredberg argue that, for successful jamming, musical or otherwise, “participants should have approximately the same level in a field of interest. Too large a variance is undesirable.”¹³⁰ In the context of jam sessions in Brooklyn, bassist and ethnomusicologist Ofer Gazit expounds on such variance: “Even an experienced newcomer who is matched to perform with less proficient musicians will find it difficult to communicate ideas freely and perform their best.”¹³¹ To follow Kao’s recommendation, it is necessary to bring on not only highly skilled people, but also to match their respective skill levels.

The final element of jam sessions that some jazz metaphor scholars point out is that jam sessions are like laboratories, not only in that participants generate new ideas through experimentation, but also that they are isolated—and therefore safe—to do so. Börjesson and Fredberg maintain that their jam session model requires “detaching oneself from today’s concerns”¹³² and Eisenberg explains that “jamming is most likely to occur when a separation is made between ‘normal life’ and some special contained setting. The function of this encapsulation is to allow people to shed the baggage of their daily lives.”¹³³ The partition between jam sessions and the everyday—or perhaps the everyman—has been argued much earlier by Cameron in his claim that “The jam session is a transitory recreational association of an elite”¹³⁴ and that provides a “refuge” for musicians to play without risk of critique from the public. A similar assessment is made by Alan Merriam and Raymond Mack, who maintain that “The jam session performs essential functions for

¹²⁹ Ibid., 153, emphasis original.

¹³⁰ Börjesson and Fredberg, “Jam Sessions for Collaborative Management Research,” 142.

¹³¹ Gazit, “Sound at First Sight,” 44.

¹³² Ibid., 145.

¹³³ Eisenberg, “Jamming,” 155.

¹³⁴ Cameron, “Sociological Notes on the Jam Session,” 177.

the musician and for those of his public allowed to attend and listen, but it also reinforces the in-group feeling and the sense of separation from the general public.¹³⁵ While these articles, and this last claim in particular, have been derided in musicological print,¹³⁶ the same disavowing author notes the important role that jam sessions play in acculturation and technical learning. Cameron and Merriam and Mack argue that jazz musicians use jam sessions to distance themselves from the public; by contrast, Pinheiro repeatedly claims that, without participation in jam sessions, musicians will not be accepted into the jazz community, thereby positing jam sessions as a way to keep musicians in or out of the jazz scene.¹³⁷ Thus, jam sessions serve as both a gateway to inclusion and a wall of exclusion.

However, not all jam session authors take this cloistered-off laboratory view. Indeed, Eisenberg himself believes that “Jamming can occur in many places and in many forms, from full-blown crises...to more routine situations (e.g., in lunchroom banter or at holiday office parties). Jamming can be task-related or more personal; it can be initiated by managers or employees; and it can focus on the status quo or on innovation.”¹³⁸ The addition of lunchroom banter indicates that jamming does not need to be separate (or, more forcefully, separated) from the quotidian. Furthermore, jamming does not need to be limited to a small group of people in some in-group. With regards to the IBM jamming projects, Cho and Diasio both note how important it was that so many employees (and even their families!) were involved in the global jam session. Kao—who

¹³⁵ Alan P. Merriam and Raymond W. Mack, “The Jazz Community,” *Social Forces* 38:3 (1960): 220.

¹³⁶ Pinheiro, “Jam Sessions in Manhattan as Rituals,” 131; “The Jam Session and Jazz Studies,” 341. Pinheiro trenchantly notes the primitivist and racist tones in Cameron’s work in particular.

¹³⁷ Travis Jackson also stresses the criticality of playing with other (African-American) musicians in order to cultivate a “blues aesthetic,” which Pinheiro regards as at the heart of jamming. Travis A. Jackson, *Blowin’ the Blues Away: Performance and Meaning on the New York Jazz Scene* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 117–119; Pinheiro, “Jam Sessions in Manhattan as Rituals,” 132.

¹³⁸ Eisenberg, “Jamming,” 158.

initiated the jamming projects at IBM—similarly emphasizes *organization-wide* jamming, rather than a small in-group tasked with innovation.

Jazz metaphor authors use the jam session on either a small or a large scale to promote innovation either at the level of a single innovation, or as a culture shift for an entire company. In the culture-shift scenario, audience members are drawn into the performance and, as suggested by Nelson, relied upon for feedback and, depending on competency, participation. The shifting of participants is also mirrored by shifts in the balance between competition and collaboration among them. By conceiving such settings as jam sessions, the dynamism of the environment and the participants therein can be lauded as experimental and innovative.

2.5 Crisis

While jam sessions are characterized by positive dynamism, equally dynamic environments have negative auras in times of crisis. Since jazz metaphor scholars place such emphasis on unstable environments, it should come as no surprise that crisis management and behavior in times of crisis are frequent themes in the literature. However, in my initial conception of this dissertation, I was adamant *not* to include a section on improvisation in times of crisis because I strongly believe in the ubiquity of improvisation and find that the contingency conception of improvisation (“so we had to improvise...”) undercuts this vision. Yet halfway through the dissertating process, crisis struck at a global scale through the calamity of the covid-19 pandemic and the resultant economic and social fallout. After seeing, experiencing, and performing the highly improvised responses to these overlapping crises, I could no longer justify excluding it from this document.

In a way, crises are merely spikes in environmental turbulence, with the corollary that, when calamity strikes, more improvisation is needed. However, crises can go beyond mere environmental factors and induce intrapersonal complications and adjustment to analytical capabilities as well. Karl

Weick calls these types of events—crises so dire that they go beyond environmental upheavals—“cosmology episodes.” He explains in a 2003 interview with former *Harvard Business Review* editor Diane Coutu that I quote at length for its current applicability and resonance:

Think back to 1993. That’s when the Centers for Disease Control first came up against the hantavirus in the South-west. The virus made no sense: It had never appeared in landlocked regions before, and it was killing people by attacking their lungs rather than their kidneys, the virus’s usual target. It seemed to defy expectation. And that’s as close a parallel to a cosmology event as I can describe. Basically, a cosmology episode happens when people suddenly feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that people suffer from the event and, at the same time, lose the means to recover from it. In this sense, a cosmology episode is the opposite of a déjà vu experience. In moments of déjà vu, everything suddenly feels familiar, recognizable. By contrast, in a cosmology episode, everything seems strange. A person feels like he has never been here before, has no idea of where he is, and has no idea who can help him. An inevitable state of panic ensues, and the individual becomes more and more anxious until he finds it almost impossible to make sense of what is happening to him.¹³⁹

Catastrophes that rise to the level of Weick’s cosmology events add an impacting factor: those living through the crisis are not only no longer able to rely on previous methods of working because the situation has changed or is changing too quickly, but also have been stripped of the capacity to understand the environment in which they find themselves. What Weick proceeds to recommend is that thinking can no longer precede action, as in the traditional models of separating planning and execution, derided by organizational improvisation scholars, suggest. Instead, Weick goes beyond the Moorman and Miner convergence of planning and execution construal of improvisation, arguing instead that “leaders have to act in order to think—and not the other way around.”¹⁴⁰ This example of leaping before looking is extreme; most jazz metaphor authors stop at the point of full conflation, if not before.

¹³⁹ Karl E. Weick and Diana L. Coutu, “Sense and Reliability,” *Harvard Business Review* 81:4 (2003): 88.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

In the 1999 field overview by Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, they note that improvisation is often associated with constraints of time and/or constraints of resources (bricolage). Similarly, such constraints could be said to be the defining characteristics of a crisis. Indeed, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies—perhaps the most lauded crisis management group in the world, with more Nobel Prizes than any other entity—defines disaster as “a sudden, calamitous event that seriously disrupts the functioning of a community or society and causes human, material, and economic or environmental losses that exceed the community’s or society’s ability to cope using its own resources,”¹⁴¹ emphasizing both the lack of time in its sudden onset, as well as the insufficiency of available resources. Since catastrophe brings about scarcities in both temporal and other resources, improvisation—as a way of working *with* and *within* such constraints—a useful, if not essential, practice.¹⁴² Insisting on just how essential improvisation is in crisis management, James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf maintain that “improvisation is a significant feature of every disaster...If an event does not require improvisation, it is probably not a disaster.”¹⁴³ It should be noted that some organizational improvisation scholars position improvisatory behavior during crises as a gateway that leads to an expanded acceptance of improvisation in everyday (i.e. crisis-free) management. This holds, although less explicitly, for the trade press as well. The assumption seems to be that business leaders are open to improvisation in times of crisis—some may even see it as a necessity due to the increased environmental turbulence

¹⁴¹ International Federation of the Red Cross, “What is a disaster.” <https://www.ifrc.org/en/what-we-do/disaster-management/about-disasters/what-is-a-disaster/> (accessed August 17, 2020).

¹⁴² For a list of examples of publications that focus on improvising through crisis, see Steve Leybourne, Gary Lynn, and Morten Thanning Vendelø, “Forms, Metaphors, and Themes: An Introduction to the Special Issue on Organizational Improvisation,” *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23:4 (2014): 354.

¹⁴³ James Kendra and Tricia Wachtendorf, “Improvisation, Creativity, and the Art of Emergency Management,” in *Understanding and Responding to Terrorism*, ed. Huseyin Dumaz, Bilal Sevinc, Ahmet Sait Yayla and Siddik Ekici (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2007), 324.

and the obliteration of prior strategic plans—and that this begrudging acceptance of the practice in times of heightened uncertainty could be stretched into times of somewhat greater stability. Note the Foreword to Ciborra’s *Labyrinths of Information*, in which Kristen Nygaard claims that the tome is “an emergency toolkit for us to use in crises” but also that crisis is “a fairly normal state.”¹⁴⁴ If improvisation is a useful tool for dealing with the uncertainties of crises, then it follows that improvisation can be a useful tool to deal with the uncertainties of the increasingly turbulent business environments of the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In order to demonstrate how improvisatory behavior that came about by (perceived) necessity during crisis stretches into non-crisis situations, I present a brief vignette that provides a thin slice of the experience of crisis and crisis response that dominates my time of writing. The snapshot focuses on the divide between planning and implementation, and the team size and leadership models proposed by management consulting firms in the first months after the covid-19 outbreak in the United States and their recommendations to businesses to continue using these disaster-management models even after the crises secede.

From crisis to quotidian: *a covid vignette*

March 2020 saw the shuttering of restaurants, event spaces, and office buildings as mayors and governors in the United States issued shelter-in-place orders and enforced blanket lockdowns to flatten the curve of covid-19 spread. While industries like tourism and live entertainment were decimated and e-commerce and digital communications boomed, white-collar workers were confined to their kitchen tables, staying in touch with their officemates via email, Zoom, and Slack. A handful of these, employed by large management consultancies like Bain & Company, McKinsey

¹⁴⁴ Kristen Nygaard in Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information*, v.

& Company, and the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), produced publicly available briefs that provide guidance for business leaders on how to deal with the crisis. Very few of these mention improvisation explicitly—one exception is a McKinsey note that claims that “During a crisis, which is rule by unfamiliarity and uncertainty, effective responses are largely improvised.”¹⁴⁵ Tenets of improvisation, as outlined both in the introduction of this dissertation and by the organizational improvisation authors discussed in the previous chapter, are integral to these firms’ recommendations. Following the Moorman and Miner definition of improvisation as the convergence of planning and execution, crucial for dealing with time constraints, BCG insists that “Strategy must be intertwined with execution.”¹⁴⁶ However, they also argue that “Those immediate steps are urgent—but they are not enough. CEOs also need to plan for what happens after the outbreak.”¹⁴⁷ A competitor, Bain, similarly states that “crisis management teams need to plan for continuity and have clear post-covid objectives, complementing ‘deploy now’ actions with corresponding ‘plan for the future’ initiatives.”¹⁴⁸ Companies are thus charged with both planning ahead and improvising to deal with current issues.

Yet uncertainty, along with a lack of useful information, a non-temporal resource, hamper both of these types of action. As a solution, BCG proposes the use of OODA loops.¹⁴⁹ The loop

¹⁴⁵ Gemma D’Auria and Aaron De Smet, “Leadership in a Crisis: Responding to the Coronavirus Outbreak and Future Challenges,” March 16, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/leadership-in-a-crisis-responding-to-the-coronavirus-outbreak-and-future-challenges> (accessed May 22, 2020).

¹⁴⁶ François Candelon, Pierre de Villiers, Tom Reichert, Nikolaus Lang, Rodolphe Charme di Carlo, and Ali Kchia, “How Scenarios Can Help Companies Win the COVID-19 Battle,” April 23, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/win-covid-19-battle-with-scenarios> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹⁴⁷ Mai-Britt Poulsen, Joe Davis, and Lars Fæste, “COVID-19: Big Decisions for CEOs Right Now—And Urgent Questions about the Time After,” March 20, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/covid-ceo-response> (accessed April 27, 2020).

¹⁴⁸ Hernan Saenz, Tom Holland, Patrick Litré, Simon Henderson, David Schannon, and Mark Capeless, “In a Crisis, This Is What Good Looks Like,” April 2, 2020. <https://www.bain.com/insights/in-a-crisis-this-is-what-good-looks-like/> (accessed April 27, 2020).

¹⁴⁹ Candelon et al., “How Scenarios Can Help Companies Win.”

comprises four steps: Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act, the first two of which focus on gathering and analyzing information. The US Air Force initially developed this approach and it has been tied to jazz improvisation by Cho.¹⁵⁰ The quicker one moves through cycles of these loops, the better the response will be.

All three firms under discussion propose similar type of crisis management teams, characterized by cross-functionality, agile working methods, decentralized leadership, and being tasked with gathering information. These teams work fast and give daily updates on whatever they're working on to ensure that information and responses are as up to date as possible. However, interaction among these teams differ in the three firms' respective guidance.

Bain recommends setting up a single “war room” from which to coordinate all crisis response,¹⁵¹ yet admits that “The ‘war room’ approach to crisis management, by design, only engages a small percent of the leadership team and can create fragility in parts of the organization—which ultimately hurts the firm’s resilience” over the long term, making it less applicable beyond crisis situations.¹⁵² Sticking to military metaphors (a remarkably common trait in both management and jazz metaphor discourse), McKinsey counters that “Unlike businesses, which tend to assign crisis response to a single war room or management group, a wartime command establishes several teams charged with distinct tasks”¹⁵³ and advises leaders to “shift some responsibilities from their

¹⁵⁰ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 93, 104. I discuss OODA loops, and their improvisatory underpinnings, at much greater length in the next chapter.

¹⁵¹ Tom Holland, Simon Henderson, David Schannon, and Henan Saenz, “A CEO Plan for Coronavirus: Actions to Take Now,” March 13, 2020. <https://www.bain.com/insights/ceo-plan-for-coronavirus-actions-to-take-now/> (accessed May 2, 2020).

¹⁵² James Allen, “Managing Trade-offs: Prediction, Adaptability and Resilience,” May 4, 2020. <https://www.bain.com/insights/managing-trade-offs-prediction-adaptability-resilience-fm-blog/> (accessed May 5, 2020).

¹⁵³ Yuval Atsmon, David Chinn, Martin Hirt, and Sven Smit, “Lessons from the Generals: Decisive Action amid the Chaos of Crisis,” May 18, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/lessons-from-the-generals-decisive-action-amid-the-chaos-of-crisis> (accessed May 26, 2020).

command-and-control hierarchy to a network of teams.”¹⁵⁴ Within these networked teams, much like the much-touted bebop combos following the convention of taking turns to shape the musical direction through alternating solos, the firm continues, “The model should provide managers with a degree of autonomy sufficient to allow them to deal with any quickly evolving situation.”¹⁵⁵

BCG, while proposing a somewhat middle ground of three war rooms,¹⁵⁶ agrees with such a flattening of hierarchies, recommending that “team norms should allow more decentralized decision making and autonomy, such as by introducing a ‘default to yes’ logic for many noncritical decisions.”¹⁵⁷ In addition to the diffusion of leadership, the “yes, and...” principle is also familiar to improvisers, particularly in the comedy world, although the general notion of accepting contributions of collaborators holds across jazz, theater, and business spheres.

A refrain in many of the briefs is that the group size and dynamics models necessitated by the crisis will be useful beyond the recovery. Refuting the old way of organizing, BCG maintains that “While the command-and-control model, which implicitly rests on one-way communication, has worked reasonably well in stable environments, it is ineffective at addressing recent years’ exponential increase in business complexity, particularly in unstable times,”¹⁵⁸ echoing the calls from proponents of the jazz metaphor to embrace improvisation to deal with turbulent environments.

¹⁵⁴ D’Auria and De Smet, “Leadership in a Crisis.”

¹⁵⁵ Mihir Mysore and Ophelia Usher, “Responding to Coronavirus: The Minimum Viable Nerve Center,” March 16, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/risk/our-insights/responding-to-coronavirus-the-minimum-viable-nerve-center> (accessed May 2, 2020).

¹⁵⁶ Kermit King and Dan Wald, “Advantage Beyond the Crisis,” April 21, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/en-us/publications/2020/building-business-advantage-beyond-covid-19-crisis> (accessed July 13, 2020).

¹⁵⁷ Michael Ringel, Ramón Baeza, Rahool Panandiker, and Johann D. Harnoss, “Tomorrow’s Innovation Leaders Are Made Today,” April 13, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/six-moves-for-innovation-during-recovery> (accessed April 27, 2020).

¹⁵⁸ Rainer Strack, Janina Kugel, Susanne Dyrchs, and Matthias Tauber, “Leadership in the New Now,” May 7, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/leadership-post-covid-19> (accessed May 23, 2020).

McKinsey also lauds small groups and flat hierarchies: “the flatter decision-making structures many companies have adopted in crisis mode are faster and more flexible than traditional ones. Many routine decisions that used to go up the chain of command are being decided much lower in the hierarchy, to good effect.”¹⁵⁹ And considering “the firm of the future,” Bain projects that “Most work will be project-based, with Agile teams the dominant organizational unit; such teams will blend internal and external resources to provide the right skills as needed. Teams will be self-managed, leading to a vast reduction in the number of traditional managers.”¹⁶⁰

This vignette shows the explicit recommendations that improvisatory models adopted to deal with crises should provide the impetus to continue such ways of work. The fact that these recommendations come from management consulting firms is significant, since their typical guidance—as well as some of the ways in which they phrase improvisatory action—is around long-term planning through careful analysis, followed by undeviating execution. From management consultancies to jazz metaphor scholars, then, crisis is seen as a stomping ground for models and methods that are adept at dealing with uncertainty and restricted resources which can be transplanted to or continued into non-crisis situations, which might be marked by similar, if perhaps not quite as severe, limits to time, resources, and certainty.

¹⁵⁹ Kevin Sneader and Shubham Singhal, “From Thinking about the Next Normal to Making It Work: What to Stop, Start, and Accelerate,” May 15, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/from-thinking-about-the-next-normal-to-making-it-work-what-to-stop-start-and-accelerate> (accessed June 14, 2020).

¹⁶⁰ James Allen, James Root, and Andrew Schwedel, “The Firm of the Future,” April 12, 2020. <https://www.bain.com/insights/firm-of-the-future/> (accessed July 14, 2020). I deal with agile and agile teaming at length in chapter 3, and their guises and applications in large companies in chapter 4.

2.6 Conclusion: Glances towards freedom

As demonstrated, most of the emphasis in theories of organizational improvisation, and the jazz metaphor in particular, has been on mid-century styles of jazz (i.e. those which are deemed traditional by the neoclassicists: swing, bebop, some postbop). I point out not only active choices of selecting these limited styles, but also moments when proponents of the jazz metaphor disparage free jazz either for its lack of audience appeal or for the genre's perceived absence of rules that lead to chaos, frequently introduced by mischaracterizing it, such as in the following example: "Jazz without structure, called free jazz, sounds dissonant and disjointed to most listeners; it's a collection of random instrument noises with little creative glue to unify the sound."¹⁶¹ Prouty comments on this statement, countering that it represents "something of a misunderstanding of the practices of free jazz... While opinions of free jazz vary, it is certainly much more than 'random instrument noises'."¹⁶² Prouty continues to argue that "the free jazz movement was largely predicated on precisely that same kinds of 'new thinking' that drives" the jazz metaphor, including flatter hierarchies and a freedom from constraints, and that "There is a sense of irony in these perspectives, that free jazz is not a useful model because its practitioners seemed to turn their backs on structure,"¹⁶³ similar to Chapman's trenchant observation of the irony of neoliberal jazz and the jazz metaphor for focusing on styles that display their most-celebrated qualities in a very limited way.

Yet some authors do make an effort to consider later, freer styles of jazz and jazz-based improvisation. Credit should be given where credit is due. However, it should be noted that even in cases where authors do recognize the freer forms, they often give them a mere nod and proceed to

¹⁶¹ Josh Linkener, *Disciplined Dreaming: A Proven System to Drive Breakthrough Creativity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 20.

¹⁶² Prouty, "Finding Jazz in the Jazz-As-Business Metaphor," 47.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

remain on the more familiar path of the straight-ahead and narrow. A robust instance of this trend is demonstrated in Holbrook's "Expanded Conceptualization of Music-, Management, and Marketing-Related Themes." After a thorough literature review of the jazz metaphor and a note to the uninitiated on jazz chord figuration (replete with advice to stick post-it notes on the keys of the piano), Holbrook tackles the limitations of the jazz metaphor.¹⁶⁴ He acknowledges that "the vast majority of those who have written about the jazz metaphor from the management- or marketing-related perspective have taken the viewpoints of a musical soloist playing a performance of a standard tune in a mainstream jazz group,"¹⁶⁵ and concludes that "applications of the jazz metaphor to management or marketing strategy typically reflect various limitations due to their restriction to particular styles of jazz that embody high degrees of predictability [in terms of harmony and form] in their adherence to certain well-established canons of ordinary performance practice."¹⁶⁶ He then works through some of the extant literature that suggest moving beyond the metaphor, acknowledging that the conception of jazz needs to be broadened to include those styles of jazz that have been accidentally or willfully ignored by management scholars: "it is time to abandon the excessively monolithic view of jazz as an undifferentiated commodity and to recognize the subtle complexities of differences among various kinds of jazz artists, what they have accomplished, and how these differences suggest complications in our perspectives on management practice."¹⁶⁷

This charge is commendable and one that I take up in the present study. It is, however, rather regrettable that Holbrook himself does not take up the charge. His "present analysis will

¹⁶⁴ Holbrook, "Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor," 200–207.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

retain the common focus on jazz that adheres to [a] harmonic structure represented by a standard set of chord changes”¹⁶⁸ and in it he “recognize[s] that—within mainstream jazz—hitherto neglected differences, subtleties, and nuances also demand recognition,”¹⁶⁹ thereby also ignoring jazz beyond the mainstream. These boundaries, of course, limit the potential benefits of engaging with improvised music; indeed, Laver maintains that “The market is healthiest and strongest [according to economists of a neoliberal bent] when it is assorted to realize the full extent of its aesthetic dimension—when it becomes a shifting, tumultuous artwork for the improvising business leader to ‘play on,’ albeit an artwork where the chord progression is never the same and the meter changes without warning.”¹⁷⁰ Yet Holbrook proceeds to analyses that compare standard harmonic practices to management techniques, as if chord progressions do remain the same, and dedicates chapters to two musicians who can only be considered well within the just-derived canon: Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, the latter of which is given particularly hagiographic treatment, including a score of pages on how nice he was.¹⁷¹

Intentionally moving away from jazz into other forms of improvisation, Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha provide three other improvisatory activities from which management scholars can draw: Indian music, music therapy, and role theory. They claim that “the time seems opportune to study the diversity of improvisational behaviours, instead of implicitly assuming its unity under a jazz-based model.”¹⁷² This implicit assumption is fueled by the fact that “a number of the pioneers [of the jazz metaphor discourse] are either amateur jazz performers or know jazz musicians from whom

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 207.

¹⁷⁰ Laver, “Improvise!(TM),” 8.

¹⁷¹ Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor,” 386–407.

¹⁷² Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2041.

they have learnt about jazz and subsequently made the connection to organizational analysis.”¹⁷³

Fortunately, they acknowledge that insights into organizational improvisation can be drawn from a) non-jazz improvisatory phenomena as well as b) other forms of jazz, “with concomitant degrees of improvisation, each providing different sets of implications for organizational improvisation.”¹⁷⁴

Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha follow route a) and subsequently compare three improvisatory activities to the jazz that had inspired the pioneers in order to elucidate how other forms of improvisation can cast light on different management activities and situations. Two notable examples include, firstly, a contrast between the collaborative, rotating-leadership model of jazz soloing and comping and the leaderless and competitive model of Indian music¹⁷⁵ and, secondly, the intentionality of improvisation in the two art forms (the activity seeks improvisation out) as opposed to the more contingency-based role of improvisation in music therapy and role theory (which relies on improvisation in order to return to a place of greater stability).¹⁷⁶

An earlier critique of the limitations of the jazz metaphor’s narrow focus on traditional styles of jazz can be found in a response to the special issue of *Organization Science* (1998). In this response, Michael Zack points out that the authors of in the *Org Sci* issue often rely heavily on the structures and structuredness of swing and bebop styles; he continues to argue that “overemphasizing the structure of traditional improvisational genres may limit the power of using jazz as a metaphor for

¹⁷³ Ibid., 2024.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha draw on Avery Sharron for their understanding of the competitive nature, and therefrom the leaderlessness, of Indian music, in which musicians “try to ‘outphrase’ each other without diverting from the tonal order.” “Time and Space Bias in Group Solidarity: Action and Process in Musical Improvisation,” *International Social Science Review* 58:4 (1983): 27. The notion that jazz is supremely collaborative and free of competition is clearly an idealized version, as I note in the discussion on jam sessions; Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha do acknowledge that “Achieving a meaningful [jazz] performance requires a balance between collaboration and competition,” yet “without seeking to romanticize jazz, [they] would argue that egotistical behaviour must be situated within the context of a collaborative praxis.” “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2027.

¹⁷⁶ Kamoche, Cunha, and Cunha, “Towards a Theory of Organizational Improvisation,” 2026.

innovation.”¹⁷⁷ In a way not unlike Benson’s ladder of improvisation, Zack presents four genres of improvisation, each with representative musical genre: 1) minimal, classical music; 2) constrained, traditional jazz/swing; 3) extensive, bebop; and 4) maximal, postbop.¹⁷⁸ In particular, Zack argues that the key distinction between bebop and postbop genres of jazz is that, in the former, harmony is improvised upon yet structure remains stable, while in the latter, structures themselves are improvised upon and are therefore emergent. Throughout the article, he notes that the jazz metaphor achieves some success in communicating interventions in management, but he, too, would like the metaphor to be stretched, and concludes: “The jazz metaphor is extremely useful, but we must push it further. We need to unpack the metaphor so that we don’t end up using it merely as a vehicle into which we force-fit our existing ways of thinking, merely because jazz is different, and using it as a metaphor sounds hip, hot, or cool. Let’s *really* improvise.”¹⁷⁹ Yet he, like Holbrook, does not break the path that he claims leads to deep and meaningful insights into management theory from improvisation.

This is a missed opportunity. In discussing Ciborra’s notion of a platform organization, Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose argue that “The jazz metaphor (in particular, free jazz) provides multiple opportunities to illustrate the ambiguous, emotional and temporal characteristics of platform organizations,” which have been made viable by “entrepreneurial ad hoc teams, nimble virtual organizations, open innovation systems and flexi-time.”¹⁸⁰ In chapter 4, I seize the opportunity to use freer forms of improvisation as models for platform-like organizations like

¹⁷⁷ Michael Zack, “Jazz Improvisation and Organization: Once More from the Top,” *Organization Science* 11:2 (2000): 228.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 233. Emphasis original.

¹⁸⁰ Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose, “Organizational Improvisation,” 452.

maturing startups and larger firms that seek to adopt managerial practices associated with startups.

The next chapter outlines how these practices, in their agile and lean instantiations, manifest in small startups, and how these practices, too, are improvisatory.

Chapter 3:

Improvising Startups: The Improvisatory Nature of Agile and Lean

The jazz metaphor has primarily been employed as a method to reconceptualize and reorganize mature companies that have fallen prey to rigid hierarchical structures and standard operating procedures. The metaphor comes as an intervention for these large firms, pushing managers (at all levels) to take more flexible approaches and change the way in which people work together. In particular, the proponents of the metaphor recommend small, non-hierarchical teams in which each member is responsible for their own knowledge work, without the strict oversight or standardization required on the twentieth-century factory floors. Also at odds with the mass-production models of yesteryear are a set of improvisatory elements including a strong emphasis on innovation and a greater embrace of failure. While these factors are antithetical to the ways in which most large companies operate—which is why the jazz metaphor does indeed appear as an intervention—they are commonplace in startups and rapidly growing businesses. Yet the improvisatory nature of startups goes unacknowledged more often than not, leading to missed opportunities to understand the process of starting up and benefiting from the conceptual insights of improvisatory behavior.

I make explicit the improvisatory nature of agile and lean methodologies, which are widely regarded as the best current practices for starting a business, mainly by dissecting their primary sources and surrounding discourses, although I also draw on illustrative examples from practice. With this baseline of understanding of the practice of entrepreneurship, particularly in its agile and lean instantiations, as inherently improvisatory, I extend the discourse on organizational improvisation to include these types of business types and methodologies by illuminating the parallels between agile, lean, and the principles explicated in the two preceding chapters. The current

chapter, after a very quick historic overview of agile's and lean's respective histories and their convergence, is organized to highlight four principles central to agile and lean that I find either particularly improvisatory or resonant with core elements from the jazz metaphor or organizational improvisation discourses: 1) People-centricity, 2) Embracing change, 3) Efficiency and speed, and 4) Learning and failure.

Individual agency, a dispersal of sources of information necessary to achieve success, and a decentralization of decision-making, all accomplished through careful listening, characterize the emphasis that agile and lean methodologies place on customers and members of teams within the company. As new information is supplied by customers and team members, founders are to remain open to change in order to make the most of these interactions and subsequent learnings about the market. Such an embracing of change finds an analogue in improvisation, as opposed to the plan-then-execute model that leaves little room for alterations. Making any changes in response to external shifts should happen quickly and efficiently. In order to optimize changes in direction, founders are encouraged to accept failure, as long as it results in learning. Learning happens through bricolage and iterative loops and the quicker learning takes place within a startup, the more successful the business will be.

Working through the agile and lean methodologies' primary sources with an improvisational lens opens doors to transposing small-business practices to larger firms that seek to tap into similar modes of innovation, growth, and readiness to respond to an ever-changing environment. I make the first steps toward such a transposition, using improvisation as the through line, in the next chapter.

Although I claim that the improvisatory nature of startups and their now-standard agile and lean methods have not been fully theorized, my work in this chapter is not entirely without precedent. Indeed, some of the improvisational organization scholars that feature heavily in the

previous chapters have extended their thinking into the realm of agile practices in the past decade. A notably early example is Steve Leybourne’s 2009 “Improvisation and Agile Project Management: A Comparative Consideration,” in which he draws parallels between organizational improvisation and a particular application of agile. Broadly, he finds that both agile and organizational improvisation move away from traditional strategize-then-execute approaches in favor of a more adaptive approach. Aside from adaptation, he outlines six other constructs shared between agile project management and improvisation: creativity, intuition, bricolage, compression, innovation, and learning.¹ Some of these overlaps appear in this chapter, with bricolage and compression under the third subchapter, and learning under the fourth.

Cunha et al. notes the aptness of agile, like that of improvisation, to deal with turbulent environments, and finds that “the search for agility and readiness expressed by the agile philosophy entails the striking balance between order and improvisation.”² They present broad similarities and differences between agile and improvisation, including a shared emphasis on responsiveness to change and a certain level of decision-making decentralization; but note the possibility of *planning* agile (the implication is that planning is antithetical to improvisation, though such a dichotomy is spurious) as a differentiator. By analyzing organizations’ human resources management in three parts—leaders, followers, and contexts—they make recommendations on how each of these groups can best facilitate the cultivation of the precepts of agile.³ In part, the current chapter is a response

¹ Stephen Leybourne, “Improvisation and Agile Project Management: A Comparative Consideration,” *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* 2:4 (2009): 525–529.

²Miguel Pina e Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility: Organizations as Structured-Extemporaneous Hybrids,” in *Learning and Innovation in Hybrid Organizations: Strategic and Organizational Insights*, ed. Paolo Boccardelli et al (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 232. “Order” is deployed here in a manner similar to “structure” or “planning,” in a way that echoes the long-standing false dichotomies used to frame improvisation as something unstructured or disorderly, some of which is covered in the introduction as well as in chapter 2.1 section on the opposition between jazz and symphonic music.

³ Ibid., 234–235. For a summary, see 237.

to Cunha et al.’s lacuna-identification: “Both agility and improvisation are relatively new concepts in the field of management and organization whose interception has not been addressed...”⁴ In particular, I flesh out the two above-mentioned similarities—decentralized decision-making and responsiveness to change—in the first and second subchapters, respectively.

3.0 Agile and Lean: The Primary Sources

In order to reveal the improvisatory underside of agile and lean methodologies, it is necessary to take a step back and examine some foundations of these two concepts and their intertwining. Since these are trade concepts, neither agile nor lean have a stable definition and they are sometimes used interchangeably in the context of startups or software development.⁵

Broadly speaking, agile is a business methodology that differs from traditional models in that it promotes fast-moving and self-managing teams rather than longer-term strategic plans administered through top-down leadership structures. Teams meet regularly to share information across business functions (product development, sales, marketing, etc.) and update each other on progress; these updates are then used to prioritize tasks for the next short sprint of work. The concurrent workflows and constant reprioritization stand in contrast to the “waterfall” method, previously used to bring products to market, which follows a sequential timeline mapped out before the process begins.⁶ Agile allows new information, gleaned from actively interacting with customers

⁴ Ibid., 232.

⁵ As indicated, for example, by the title of Mary Poppendieck and Tom Poppendieck, *Lean Software Development: An Agile Toolkit* (Amsterdam: Addison-Wesley Longman, 2003). Both agile and lean are used as nouns (“agile and lean are...”) or adjectives (“agile and lean methodologies”) in the trade press. I follow this flexibility in syntactic function in the current document.

⁶ For a description of the waterfall model, and its failings, see Dave McKenna, *The Art of Scrum: How Scrum Masters Bind Dev Teams and Unleash Agility* (New York: Apress, 2016), 6–14. This Dave McKenna, much to my disappointment, is not the jazz pianist with whom he shares a name.

or perceiving shifts in market conditions, to change the course of the workflow, thereby ensuring that the final product is closely matched to what customers need, not what customers were imagined to need at the beginning of the waterfall planning.

Whereas agile focuses on product development, lean focuses on business development, particularly in its Customer Development instantiation, in startups. Lean ensures that there are customers that will pay for a product from a startup, rather than optimistically assuming that they will, by generating and testing hypotheses with potential customers to ascertain whether there is need for a certain product with a certain set of product features. Going through the lean process prevents spending time and money on efforts that do not deliver value. Like agile, and unlike traditional methods of drafting and executing business plans, lean emphasizes learning and using new learnings shift the direction that a startup is going.

Despite the fluid terminology, several documents serve as primary sources and are frequently referred to in contexts from trade manuals to blogs to conference presentations. It is useful to take a zoomed-out view in order to glance at the historical development of both lean and agile in order see how these primary sources came to occupy the dominant positions in the discourse as well as to illustrate their respective, though not wholly separate, intellectual precedents. Indeed, the two concepts also share some historical similarities and rely on much the same paradigms, including rapid iteration and feedback, waste reduction, and an emphasis on interpersonal engagement.⁷

The term “lean” first appeared in a business context as it pertains to lean manufacturing methods. Pioneered by Toyota, these were instituted at Japanese car makers in the 1980s and insist on continual improvement of the way in which factory work is done. This insistence is

⁷ A quick rundown of some of this history can be found in Darrell K. Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Hirotaka Takeuchi. “The Secret History of Agile Innovation.” *Harvard Business Review*, April 20, 2016. <https://hbr.org/2016/04/the-secret-history-of-agile-innovation> (accessed September 14, 2018).

demonstrated by the now-legendary stories of requiring each floor manager on each Friday afternoon to stand in a red-painted square on the factory floor until he generates no fewer than three implementable operational improvements. Many of these improvements dealt with reducing costs, incurred through either labor, equipment, or raw materials.

Lean remained in the realm of manufacturing until halfway through the aughts, when its emphasis on continual information-seeking and improvement was introduced to entrepreneurial processes by Steve Blank, as first articulated in his 2005 tome *The Four Steps to the Epiphany: Successful Strategies for Products that Win*—the book that serves as one of the primary sources in the lean startup discourse.⁸ Blank is a serial entrepreneur, venture capitalist, and adviser to many startups, as well as a professor at the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley. Through his extensive experience observing the rise and fall of startups, he noticed several patterns of behavior that lead to success in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, he argues that startups are distinctly different from large, established companies and, as a result, that the management methods that have been developed during the twentieth century and typically taught in MBA programs do not lead to success. Based on the patterns that Blank found led to success, he proposes, instead, the Customer Development model which comprises 1) customer discovery, 2) customer validation, 3) customer creation, and 4) company building.

The Customer Discovery process broadly works as follows. Founders generate hypotheses of what a certain type of customer needs. They then go out and test these hypotheses by talking to these types of customers in order to confirm that they do indeed have such a need and that that need is sufficiently urgent that the customer is willing to spend money on solving it. The next step is

⁸ Steve Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany: Successful Strategies for Products that Win* (Pescadero: K&S Ranch Press, [2005] 2013). The 2013 edition of the text carries on its cover page the banner “The book that launched the Lean Startup revolution.”

then to test whether the hypothesized solution fixes the problem in the way that the customers want (and are willing to pay for). This all takes place before the product is developed beyond an extremely rudimentary form. If the problem and the solution are both validated, the startup can proceed to a more refined version of the product; one that still lacks all the features of the envisioned final product, but which could be sold to a customer desperate enough for a solution. The selling process is validated in the next step, again, by going out to customers (and others involved in a sale, such as distributors) and testing hypotheses about how the startup gets from zero to closing a sale. Once it is clear how products are sold—Blank calls this the sales roadmap—traditional business functions like marketing and sales departments can be established in order to allow for more walks through the mapped-out road. However, the roadmap pertains mostly to early-adopters, rather than to all the customers that the company might serve; the final step in Blank’s process, Company Building, sets up the infrastructure for reaching the broader market, while maintaining the agility and responsiveness of a young startup.

Since the publication of *The Four Steps*, Blank’s method has been adopted by founders, venture capitalists, startup incubators (even including some of those run by the US Department of Defense, in which I had my first contact with lean), and, to Blank’s pleasure, business school curricula. This widespread uptake of the method generated revisions to *The Four Steps*, as well as an expansion of the first two steps, coauthored with Bob Dorf, in the form of the 2012 *The Startup Owner’s Manual: The Step-by-Step Guide for Building a Great Company*.⁹ This text, particularly the Customer Development Manifesto that summarized the approach laid out *The Four Steps* and *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, serves as a supplementary primary source. The explicit link to lean manufacturing came when Eric Ries, an engineer, tech entrepreneur, and advisee of Blank at Haas,

⁹ Steve Blank and Bob Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual: The Step by Step Guide for Building a Great Company* (Pescadero: K&S Ranch Press, [2012] 2020).

reformulated much of Blank’s Customer Development model in *The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*—the third primary source for the lean methodology.¹⁰

While agile shares a birthplace with lean—Japanese manufacturing—it grew up in a very different realm:¹¹ software development. Various initial formulations of agile appeared in during the 1990s, but a group of software engineers codified it in 2001 in the *Manifesto for Agile Software Development*.¹² The *Manifesto* comprises four prioritizations, which are undergirded by twelve principles.¹³ These two lists serve as the primary sources for agile in this chapter, as in almost every other text on the subject.

A brief aside on the selection of the “manifesto” genre in both the agile and lean sources. Manifestos are by necessity futural documents and frequently take on didactic styles in the hopes of creating a future that is different from and better than the present by inspiring action, intervention, and reconceptualization of what is possible.¹⁴ While Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Communist Manifesto* is certainly the locus classicus for the manifesto genre, the *Agile Manifesto* and Customer

¹⁰ Eric Ries, *The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses* (New York: Crown Business, 2011).

¹¹ Hirotaka Takeuchi and Ikujiro Nonaka, “The New New Product Development Game,” *Harvard Business Review* 84:1/2 (1986): 1–11. Emil Crisan, Ioana Belciu, and Liviu Ilies maintain that Agile Manufacturing “was mainly focused on creating an adaptive company to market changes.” See “The Place of Agile Management Science: A Literature Review,” *Managerial Challenges of the Contemporary Society* 9:1 (2015): 62.

¹² Kent Beck et al. *Manifesto for Agile Software Development* (2001), <http://agilemanifesto.org/> (accessed September 20, 2018).

¹³ Kent Beck et al. *Principles behind the Agile Manifesto* (2001), <https://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html> (accessed November 17, 2020).

¹⁴ Felicity Coleman, “Notes on the Feminist Manifesto: The Strategic Use of Hope,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 14:4 (2010): 380. The didactic tone of many manifestos has also been described as “pompous self-regard” by Nicholas Thornburn, “Is There an Autonomous Model of Political Communication?” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 35:4 (2011): 337; see also Kathi Weeks, “The Critical Manifesto: Marx and Engels, Haraway, and Utopian Politics,” *Utopian Studies* 24:2 (2013): 220–223, on “The Manifesto Voice.”

Development manifesto have perhaps more in common with techno-optimistic documents like hacker manifestos, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, and, in contrast to Marinetti's anti-feminist stance, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*.¹⁵ A particular parallel that can be drawn between the *Cyborg Manifesto* and the *Agile Manifesto* is the use of oppositions in order to demarcate an "old" and a "new": Haraway's table that contrasts concepts from "Organics of Domination" to "Informatics of Domination"¹⁶ has an analog in the *Agile Manifesto*'s repeated use of prioritizing a new practice "over" the old wisdom.

Furthermore, the urgency of many manifestos has interesting resonances with the temporal aspects of improvisation. In both improvisation and the manifesto genre, there is a shortening of the distance between past and present and present and future. Kathi Weeks urges to "think of the compressed temporality in the [*Communist*] *Manifesto*, with its quickly encapsulated narrative of the relations between the past and the present, together with the message that we are now on the edge of the present, ready to step over the bring into a new future."¹⁷ Another version of this improvisational stance can be seen in Martin Puchner's description of the manifesto genre as being "eager to stop talking and to begin doing,"¹⁸ highlighting a similar push toward action rather than deliberation that organizational improvisation scholars frequently promote.

Because many startups since 2001 have been tech startups that benefitted from building their products following the agile software development methodology, the concepts were soon adapted

¹⁵ The Mentor, "The Hacker Manifesto," Phrack Inc. 1:7 (1986). <http://phrack.org/issues/7/3.html> (accessed October 18, 2021); Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Futurist Manifesto," *Le Figaro* 20 (1909): 39–44; Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century (1985)" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149–181.

¹⁶ Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 161–162.

¹⁷ Weeks, "The Critical Manifesto," 218.

¹⁸ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006), 926.

for building not only products, but also for building the businesses that sell them.¹⁹ As an organizational methodology, agile comes in different forms, with “scrum” and “kanban” being the most-frequently implemented, yet they differ principally in focus rather than foundations.²⁰

Since agile and lean share so many characteristics, it is unsurprising that they can be usefully combined. Indeed, in the 2012 update and expansion of *The Four Steps to the Epiphany*, Blank writes that “just as [*The Four Steps to the Epiphany*] was published, agile engineering became the preferred product-development method. This iterative and incremental method created a demand for a parallel process to provide rapid and continual customer feedback. The Customer Development process I articulated in *The Four Steps* fit that need perfectly.”²¹ Blank regards his lean startup methodology as the business process that runs alongside the agile software design methodology for production: lean develops customers for the products developed through agile. Similarly, Ries admits that his Lean Startup approach draws on “many previous management and product development ideas, including lean manufacturing, design thinking, [Blank’s] customer development, and agile development.”²² A combination of the two spheres also appears in Stephen Denning’s “Updating the Agile Manifesto,”

¹⁹ In their comparative review of Agile Manufacturing, Agile Software Development, and Agile Project Management, Crisan, Beleiu, and Ilies find that “the link between ASD and APM is very strong” even though “The link between AM and ASD seems to be weak.” Crisan, Beleiu, and Ilies, “The Place of Agile Management Science,” 65, 64.

²⁰ Coursera, the massive open online course provider, summarizes these two forms of agile as such: “Kanban and Scrum are project management methodologies that complete projects tasks in small increments and emphasize continuous improvement. But the processes they use to achieve those ends are different. While Kanban is centered around visualizing tasks and continuous flow, Scrum is more about implementing timelines for each delivery cycle and assigning set roles. Both Kanban and Scrum borrow from Agile and Lean approaches, though Scrum is more heavily associated with Agile. That means Kanban and Scrum are both adaptive, transparent, and reduce inefficiencies in the project process.” “Kanban vs. Scrum: What’s the Difference?” <https://www.coursera.org/articles/kanban-vs-scrum> (accessed October 18, 2021).

²¹ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, xiv; see also xxix. Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi note that there was some initial resistance from the agile community to regard lean as a corresponsive methodology, but agile practitioners eventually accepted these lean processes “as legitimate applications of agile values and principles.” “The Secret History of Agile Innovation,” 4.

²² Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 4. Design thinking is similar to agile, but focuses on finding the right problems, whereas agile seeks the right solutions. They share characteristics like ideation, building and testing prototypes, and constant feedback and evaluation.

in which he infuses concepts from Blank's and Ries's texts into the *Agile Manifesto*, with the guidance of one of its many authors, Kent Beck. For example, Denning argues that, even more important than working software (the second point of the *Agile Manifesto*) is validated learning (the third point of the Lean Startup methodology). Similarly, more important than customer collaboration (*Agile Manifesto* point 3), in the context of a startup that has no customers as of yet, is customer discovery, which is the first step in Blank's Customer Development model.²³

In the table below, I summarize the traits shared between primary texts of agile and lean. In my discussion of the agile and lean components that are particularly improvisatory, I expand the number of columns from four to six, adding elements from organizational improvisation, as well as components from George Lewis's five-part construal of improvisation,²⁴ with the aim to demonstrate how particular characteristics are shared not just between agile and lean, but among the respective perspectives of organizational and critical improvisation scholars as well.

²³ Stephen Denning, "Updating the Agile Manifesto," *Strategy & Leadership* 43:5 (2015). <https://www-emeraldinsight-com.eduproxy.tc-library.org:2443/doi/full/10.1108/SL-07-2015-0058> (accessed September 19, 2018).

²⁴ George E. Lewis, "Is Our Machines Learning Yet? Machine Learning's Challenge to Improvisation and the Aesthetic," in *Machinic Assemblages of Desire: Deleuze and Artistic Research 3*, eds. Paulo de Assis and Paolo Giudici (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021), 122.

Agile		Lean	
<i>Agile Manifesto</i>	Agile Principles	Customer Development Manifesto	Lean Startup methodology
Individuals and interactions over processes and tools	Build projects around motivated individuals. Give them the environment and support they need, and trust them to get the job done.	There are no facts inside your building, so get outside [and talk to people]	
	The most efficient and effective method of conveying information... is face-to-face conversation.		
Working software over comprehensive documentation	Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential.	Preserve all cash until needed. Then spend	
	Working software is the primary measure of progress.		
Customer collaboration over contract negotiation	Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer through early and continuous delivery of valuable software.	[The core principle of Customer Development is to ensure that products fit customer needs]	
Responding to change over following a plan	Welcome changing requirements... Agile processes harness change...	Make continuous iterations and pivots	Entrepreneurship is management... specifically geared to its context of extreme uncertainty
	No business plan survives first contact with customers...		
	Deliver working software frequently... with a preference to the shorter timescale.	Fast decision-making, cycle time, speed and tempo	Build-Measure-Learn ... All successful startup processes should be geared to accelerate that feedback loop
	Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project.	Startup job titles are very different from a large company's	Entrepreneurship is management
	At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.	Communicate and share learning	Build-Measure-Learn
		Design experiments and test to validate your hypotheses	Validated learning

Table 3.1. Summary of similar concepts among agile and lean methodologies.²⁵

²⁵ *Agile Manifesto*; *Agile Principles*; Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner's Manual*, 31–49; Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 8–9. Only the most relevant tenets are listed in the table; for the sake of completeness, here follow the list of tenets excluded from the table. *Agile Principles*: Agile processes promote sustainable development. The sponsors, developers, and users should be able to maintain a constant pace indefinitely; Continuous attention to technical excellence and good design enhances agility. The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams. Customer Development Manifesto: Pair Customer Development with agile development; Failure is an integral part of the search; No business plan survives its first contact with customers, so use a business model canvas; Agree on a market type. It changes everything; Startup metrics differ from those in existing companies; It's all about passion; Customer Development begins with buy-in. Lean Startup methodology: Entrepreneurs are everywhere; Innovative accounting.

3.1 People-Centricity

Agile		Lean		Improvisation	
<i>Agile Manifesto</i>	Agile Principles	Customer Development Manifesto	Lean Principles	Organizational improvisation	Lewis Quintipartite improvisation
Individuals and interactions over processes and tools	Build projects around motivated individuals...	Communicate and share learning		Listening	Agency
Our highest priority is to satisfy the customer...					
Customer collaboration over contract negotiation	The most efficient and effective method of conveying information...is face-to-face conversation	There are no facts inside your building, so get outside	The fundamental activity of a startup is to turn ideas into products [and] measure how customers respond...	Audience engagement	Analysis of conditions
	The best architectures, requirements, and designs emerge from self-organizing teams	Startup job titles are very different from a large company's	Entrepreneurship is management		Agency
	Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the project				

Table 3.2. Concepts around people-centricity shared among agile, lean, and improvisation.

The agile and lean approaches to business-building both start from the principle of centering people, rather than products or processes. People fall into two broad categories: those outside the company (customers) and those inside (workers). This subchapter deals with both sets of stakeholders since people-centric mindset and accompanying array of approaches pertain to individuals inside or outside the company. Broadly speaking, agile pays more attention to existing customers for which products are built, while lean, particularly the Customer Development element, deals with finding customers in the first place. Inside the company, agile and lean methodologies both promote small, cross-functional teams with flat hierarchical structures. The relevant central tenet from the organizational improvisation literature, and in particular the jazz metaphor segment, that facilitates an emphasis on people is the insistence on listening as a key skill in the contemporary business environment. While listening is not the only way to gather information about people, it

remains the most widely used and most strongly advocated-for across agile, lean, and organizational improvisation.

The *Agile Manifesto* centers people by charging developers to work closely with customers, rather than imagining product beforehand or haggling over specifications. Dave McKenna, in his expounding on how agile works in practice, rightly points out that “developers are not users,” and therefore they need to “collaborate with the customer to get a solid understanding of what they are looking for,”²⁶ to avoid creating an unwanted product. While the *Manifesto* refers to existing customers and contracts, the Customer Development model implores entrepreneurs to take a similarly collaborative perspective with would-be customers who are yet to be discovered, validated, and created.

This shift in perspective serves as an intervention against the traditional wisdom of product development strategies used by large firms, as well as by the startups that predated the dotcom bust. A mantra in the dotcom mania was “build it and they will come,” implying that the quality of the product will be enough of a draw. However, as the burst of the bubble demonstrated, even the most well-resourced startups cannot merely build their products and wait for the customers to flock to them. Blank goes as far as to claim that “The greatest risk—and hence the greatest cause of failure—in startups is not in the development of the new product but in the development of customers and markets. Startups don’t fail because they lack a product; they fail because they lack customers.”²⁷ At the heart of his Customer Development model is the idea that customers are central to a business and that their needs, and therefore custom, can and should be ascertained long before the product is sold to them.

²⁶ McKenna, *The Art of Scrum*, 17.

²⁷ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 6.

In the pre-dotcom model, which focuses on products and business processes, customer demand is assumed in an aspirational manner in a business plan. Blank finds that too many businesses are founded without a verified idea of who their customers will be. The first three of his *Four Steps* walks founders through the process of validating who their customers are and what they want—by talking to them. The Customer Development Manifesto asserts that finding and listening to customers are the activities most critical to the success of a startup,²⁸ and that this cannot be left to aspirations alone. Throughout the process of discovering, validating, and creating customers, Blank suggests a “shut up and listen” approach in order to maximize the amount of information that the founders glean from the necessarily limited interactions with their various would-be customers, rather than to be hellbent on selling the product to them, at least at the earlier stages of the startup’s life: “Your goal is to get the *customers* to talk, *not you*. *This is the biggest idea in Customer Development*. The real goal [...] is for you to capture your hypotheses about what you believe, but unlike an existing company, you aren’t trying to convince anyone you’re right. You’re there to listen.”²⁹ Similarly, in the context of adopting agile business development, Darrell Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Hirotaka Takeuchi insist on the primacy of listening in their description of unsuccessful developers: “They talk more than listen. [...] With the best of intentions, they erode the benefits that agile innovation can deliver,”³⁰ by making it more difficult for people to interact. In both the Customer Development methodology and agile, listening is critical to the success of the venture.

²⁸ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 31.

²⁹ Ibid., 204, emphasis original. Ries expresses the same sentiment: “...to find a synthesis between our vision and what customers would accept; it wasn’t...to tell customers what they ought to want.” *The Lean Startup*, 50.

³⁰ Darrell K. Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Hirotaka Takeuchi, “Embracing Agile: How to Master the Process That’s Transforming Management,” *Harvard Business Review* 94:5 (2016): 42. Sutherland is one of the authors of the *Agile Manifesto*; Takeuchi is one of the authors of the initial *Harvard Business Review* article on agile manufacturing practices.

Listening is, of course, also a frequent feature in the jazz metaphor discourse. For example, it rounds out jazz consultant Michael Gold's "Five Dynamics of Jazz": APRIL (the other letters stand for Autonomy, Passion, Risk, and Innovation).³¹ While listening is merely one of the five dynamics for Gold, it is prized as the most valuable competency by others. To highlight the importance of this skill to integrate feedback in large organizations, jazz metaphor proponent Morris Holbrook cites trombonist and pedagogue Hal Crook: "With jazz improvisation, ... the best listeners—versus the best players—make the best improvisers."³² In small organizations, Amiel Kornel, who promotes explicitly improvisatory approaches to building startups, likewise asserts the same emphasis, noting that during the Customer Development process, "The venture craftsman incubating their startup relies on this skill [active listening] first and foremost to tease out market needs from customer conversations and interviews."³³

It should be noted that there is considerable slippage in the jazz metaphor discourse between intra-group listening (bandmembers listening to each other) and listening to an audience. To a certain extent, intra-group listening is more relevant to teamwork in a business context, whereas paying attention to the audience seems more aligned to the type of customer interaction that agile and lean promote. Blank claims that external listening ought to be balanced with internal listening in order to ensure alignment and to spur creativity:

Listening to external voices share their perceptions about the company is one half of this audit step. Listening inside the company is the other half. An internal audit directs the same questions to the founding team and executive staff [as the customers in the external audit]. Most startups assume they have internal unanimity on all the issues in the external audit. An

³¹ Mark Laver, "Improvise!(TM): Jazz Consultancy and the Aesthetics of Neo Liberalism," *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013): 1

³² Hal Crook, *Ready, Aim, Improvise!: Exploring the Basics of Jazz Improvisation* (Rottenburg: Advance Music, 1999), 274, quoted in Morris Holbrook, "Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor: An Expanded Conceptualization of Music-, Management-, and Marketing-Related Themes," *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* 2:3–4 (2007): 284. Ellipses in the original.

³³ Amiel Kornel, *Spinning into Control: Improvising the Sustainable Startup* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 9–10.

internal audit will probably reveal you have a cacophony of voices. The goal of the internal audit is to hear those differences and extract new ideas.³⁴

Listening within a team provides another source of information, while also giving agency to individuals on the team that allows them to contribute to the direction of the business.

A corollary to the argument that all team members should be listened to is the notion of flatter leadership structures and more decentralized decision making than those found in the business development models that predate agile and lean. Indeed, one of the *Agile Principles* notes that the best designs and results are driven by self-organizing teams,³⁵ rather than top-down hierarchies. Similarly, Blank advocates for management styles that “support decentralized decision-making,” and continues to state that “this type of decision-making results in an agile, sped-up, and informed decision-making process that makes a company flexible, cohesive, and responsive—in other words, a growing company that kicks butt,”³⁶ affirming that results are superior when team members have more agency in the decision-making process.

In order to maximize the creative potential of such decentralization, agile and lean methodologies both insist on having people from different functional areas on the team. Ries maintains that such cross-functionality helps deal with uncertainty and grants a single team ownership of the whole process of developing an initiative or project.³⁷ The *Agile Principles* similarly insists that “Business people and developers must work together daily throughout the product,” and Blank argues that such a blurring of functional lines is particularly important in startups.³⁸ The idea

³⁴ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 185; see also Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner's Manual*, 416.

³⁵ Beck et al., *Principles*.

³⁶ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 250.

³⁷ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 181; 253.

³⁸ Beck et al., *Principles*. Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 133.

of cross-functionality is prevalent in jazz studies too, with the primary object of study being a typical bebop combo comprising a front line of trumpet, saxophone, and /or trombone, and a rhythm section that includes piano, bass, and drums. Front line instruments are frequently grouped together functionally (playing the melody during the head of the tune and improvising solos thereafter). Jazz scholars Ingrid Monson and Robert Hodson emphasize the different roles the members of the rhythm section play; Hodson's description of combo functions serves as a good model for cross-functionality in jazz:

These two subgroups [the front line and the rhythm section] divide up the musical responsibilities: the front line is usually responsible for the melody, whereas the rhythm section provides and defines the harmony and rhythm. These divisions are, of course, not absolute; the front line's melodies often contribute to the overall harmony and rhythm of the performance, and the rhythm section's harmony and rhythm often have melodic aspects or effects. Nevertheless, the division, however crude, serves a useful purpose: it symbolizes the group aesthetics of jazz, an aesthetics that values both the division of labor and the sharing of responsibilities.³⁹

Just as front line and rhythm section members interact and cross-contribute, so do business development and product development members on the same cross-functional team co-create and collaborate to deliver results that would be impossible if each traditional segment had worked in isolation and their respective outputs later amalgamated. The dense interaction among the functions on a team also advances a greater sense of equality in the team and allows each individual to contribute to how decisions are made.

Interestingly, a voice opposing fully decentralized decision making comes from organizational improvisation studies, a literature that, as seen in the preceding chapters, tends to tout decentralization. In their analysis of the overlaps between organizational improvisation and agile

³⁹ Robert Hodson, *Interaction, Improvisation, and Interplay in Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 25–26. He dissects the functions of the various rhythm section members on 29–40. Ingrid Monson has a similar section in *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1996), 29–66. Monson formulates the aesthetic distinction in a clearly analogous, yet slightly different way from Hodson, arguing that the “inherent tension within the jazz ensemble [is] between the individual and the group,” 66.

management, Cunha et al. argue that “While agile management emphasizes the peer-to-peer side of social interactions and the mechanisms for self-organizing [...] leadership still plays a crucial role in its enactment.” Further, the authors claim that “leadership is needed even in organizational forms designed to rely on self-organizing and team-based mechanisms.”⁴⁰ Even though Blank promotes flatter structures (including in the core customer development team), as well as an absence of formal titles to emphasize the more egalitarian model, he also notes that “More often than not it includes a ‘head of Customer Development’.”⁴¹ The tension that exists in the organizational improvisation literature between fully flattened structures and having some sort of leadership, even if in the first-among-equals guise, thus also manifests in the agile and lean methodologies. Yet the broader practice of listening enables and facilitates any sort of intra-team hierarchical flattenings and is touted as an essential support function across the fields of agile, lean, and organizational improvisation, whether the listening takes place between team members or between producers and consumers.

The practice of listening is so essential in business development that proponents of the lean methodology strongly maintain that it cannot be outsourced to agencies or even in-house employees. Blank and Ries both stipulate that founders themselves have to have these conversations; the former author claims that “In Customer Development, the *founders gather firsthand experience about every component of the business model. [...] firsthand experience by definition cannot be delegated.*”⁴² From lean manufacturing at Toyota, Ries draws the principle of *genchi gembutsu*, which it usually

⁴⁰ Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility,” 232.

⁴¹ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 51.

⁴² Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 31–32, emphasis original.

translated as the imperative “go and see for yourself.”⁴³ On the one hand, Customer Development and lean insist on hearing from the customers themselves; on the other, they insist that the founders themselves need to do the listening. The directness of interaction also features in the *Agile Principles*, which states that “The most efficient and effective method of conveying information...is face-to-face conversation.”⁴⁴ What this close contact between customers and developers implies is a smooth transfer of knowledge not only from one group to the other, but also that one group can respond to the other.

Organizational improvisation authors similarly advocate for direct and responsive listening, claiming, for example, that “each musician listens to all the others all the time [...] the best listening and responding involves noticing how others are listening and responding to you.”⁴⁵ Conversations between the most important participants—customers who need to be satisfied in order for the business to thrive and founders who have the key decision-making power to allow that—have to be as direct as possible so that as much as possible can be gained from the interaction.

However, it should also be noted that listening is not the only way to gather information directly from participants, whether those are customers or bandmates. Jazz literature that emphasizes the communicative and conversational aspects of the genre frequently note non-musical cues such as a glance or hand gestures that musicians use to coordinate their improvisations.⁴⁶

⁴³ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 86–88. When Toyota opened a plant in Kentucky, the Japanese phrase was transliterated as “getcha boots on,” which neatly ties the “go look for yourself” imperative to Blank’s repeated directive to get out of the building.

⁴⁴ Beck et al., *Principles*.

⁴⁵ Mary Jo Hatch, “Exploring the Empty Spaces of Organizing: How Improvisational Jazz Helps Redefine Organizational Structure,” *Organizational Studies* 20:1 (1999): 80. The slippage between intra-group and inter-group listening appears here too, yet points out that agile’s insistence on face-to-face communication is also relevant within cross-functional teams.

⁴⁶ The locus classicus for asserting essentialness of interaction in jazz is found in Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1996), 84.

Similarly, in an earlier articulation of his understanding of improvisation, Lewis lists “listening” as a foundational component of improvisation;⁴⁷ yet he expands that component to “analysis of conditions” in a more recent iteration, which allows for non-musical improvisation, thereby including other ways of gleaning information.⁴⁸ For software and business development, these other forms include A/B testing, cohort analysis (which shows how changes in the product or marketing bring about changes in behavior like subscribing or unsubscribing from a service), and simply inviting a customer into the office and, in addition to listening to them in interviews, observe how they navigate a website or interact with an application.⁴⁹

Listening (or other forms of analyzing conditions) and, crucially, responding also suggest that participants, whether they are customers or employees on a team, have agency—another of Lewis’s core components of improvisation.⁵⁰ Critical improvisation scholars Julie Dawn Smith and Ellen Waterman refer to such a sense of shared agency in improvisational performance as “listening trust, which they define as “a pact among performers and listeners that they will listen and be listened to; an agreement to engage in an ‘empathic communication across time’ and to employ an ‘ethics of respect’ for the performative journey with which and in which they engage.”⁵¹ Most of the agile and lean texts promote listening and listening trust to the benefit of the developer or founder; yet the customers and employees also benefit in that they have the opportunity to shape business

⁴⁷ George E. Lewis, “Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance,” *Parallax* 13:4 (2007): 116. This initial formulation also includes indeterminacy and agency, but neither judgement nor choice.

⁴⁸ George E. Lewis, “Foreword: Who is Jazz,” in *Jazz Worlds/World Jazz*, eds. Philip V. Bohlman and Goffredo Plastino (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xxii.

⁴⁹ See Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 370–374; Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 123–125; 42–46.

⁵⁰ Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122; Lewis, “Who is Jazz,” xxii.

⁵¹ Julie Dawn Smith and Ellen Waterman, “Listening Trust: The Everyday Politics of George Lewis’s ‘Dream Team,’” in *People Get Ready: The Future of Jazz is Now!*, eds. Ajay Heble and Rob Wallace (Durham, Duke University Press, 2013), 84–85.

processes. Founders are encouraged not just to passively listen, but to make changes based on what their interlocutors tell them. The customers and team members, therefore, have the power to bring about change, or, stated differently, they have agency. While the lean literature demands listening from entrepreneurs, organizational improvisation authors similarly implore business leaders to listen. This argument appears from the beginnings of the jazz metaphor discourse, with Alan Neilson stating that “Every member of the band *has to* listen and respond to other members...”⁵² Others, like Frank Barrett and Monika Herzig and David Baker, liken the necessity of listening in corporate settings to musicians listening to each other on the bandstand during jam sessions.⁵³ Requiring participants to listen and respond, grants the dialogists the opportunity to have an impact on the development of the business, the products it builds, and the services that they are rendered. This benefits both the customers, whose needs are met by well-fitted products, and the founders of the startup, who use the insights gained to grow their businesses and generate income from product sales.

This level of agency that startups relinquish to their prospective and early customers, however, is not without risk. Kornel, sometimes skeptical of the Customer Development model, cautions against too much customer dependency, noting that “the customer embrace can be suffocating,”⁵⁴ if that means that the startup founder gets yanked to and fro by every sentiment expressed. The other argument frequently presented against active listening to customers is that, when developing a completely new product, customers do not yet know that they want it. The loci

⁵² Alan Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit: All That Jazz,” *Leadership & Organizational Development Journal* 13:5 (1992): 5, emphasis added.

⁵³ Frank J. Barrett, “Coda: Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning,” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 617; Monika Herzig and David Baker, “Beyond Jamming: A Historical and Analytical Perspective on the Creative Process,” *MEIEA Journal* 14:1 (2014): 191.

⁵⁴ Kornel, *Spinning into Control*, 110.

classici here are Mark Zuckerberg’s creation of Facebook—users ostensibly did not yet know that they want to share their thoughts and photos with friends and family on a daily basis—or Steve Jobs’s imaginings of the uptake of novel Apple devices like iPods or iPhones. Jobs has reportedly said that

It’s really hard to design products by focus groups. A lot of times, people don’t know what they want until you show it to them...Some people say give customers what they want, but that’s not my approach. Our job is to figure out what they’re going to want before they do. I think Henry Ford once said, ‘If I’d ask customers what they wanted, they would’ve told me a faster horse.’ People don’t know what they want until you show it to them. That’s why I never rely on market research. Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page.⁵⁵

However, the examples of Facebook and Apple are red herrings. A negligible number of companies succeed by taking this type of strategy and the Customer Development model aims to increase the odds of success by following a predictable and verifiable methodology. The analogue in the jazz metaphor literature is the importance of taking audience tastes into account when improvising. Neilson maintains that a jazz band, as an analogy of a company, “only has meaning in terms of what it produces—music—and that requires the audience. When it comes to developing its music, the band learns from its audience [...by] actively interacting with them.”⁵⁶ Of course, exceptions to this model of music-making exist in many avant-garde improvising circles that favor individual expression and artmaking above audience appeal; however, startup founders (and, notably, their investors) typically prioritize broader uptake of their products above the joys of invention. Neilson’s statement resonates strongly with Ries’s claim that “Lean thinking defines value as providing benefit

⁵⁵ Jillian D’Onfro, “15 Steve Jobs quotes that will leave you feeling inspired,” *Business Insider*, February 24, 2016. <https://www.businessinsider.com/best-steve-jobs-quotes-2016-2> (accessed February 8, 2021); Dave Smith, “What everyone gets wrong about this famous Steve Jobs quote, according to Lyft’s design boss,” *Business Insider*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/steve-jobs-quote-misunderstood-katie-dill-2019-4> (accessed February 8, 2021).

⁵⁶ Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit,” 5. Neilson’s argument and emphasis on listening and responding to audience were later adapted to a marketing context by Noel Dennis and Michael Macaulay, who claim that “the jazz group practices strategic fit. It identifies and responds to the needs of its audience in an interactive and continual process,” “Jazz and Marketing Planning,” *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 11:3 (2003): 180.

to the customer; anything else is waste,”⁵⁷ and the *Agile Manifesto*’s preference for working software—ostensibly what customers desire—over comprehensive documentation that fails to add value.⁵⁸

By careful and active listening, founders and developers access the minds of their most important thought partners: their customers and their teams. Customers feed them information that, at the beginning of the Customer Development process, ensures that the startup is headed in the right direction. However, founders have to continue listening to their customers and teams as the process continues and—significantly—continue to respond to them, even if that requires making changes long after the initial direction has been set.

3.2 Embracing change

Agile		Lean		Improvisation	
<i>Agile Manifesto</i>	Agile Principles	Customer Development Manifesto	Lean Principles	Organizational improvisation	Lewis Quintipartite improvisation
Responding to change over following a plan	Welcoming changing requirements, even late in development. Agile processes harness change...	Make continuous iterations and pivots No business plan survives first contact with customers...	Entrepreneurship is management ... specifically geared to its context of extreme uncertainty	Improvisation as a way to deal with turbulent task environments	Indeterminacy Judgement

Table 3.3. Concepts around embracing change shared among agile, lean, and improvisation.

The second large thematic overlap among the discourses of agile, lean, and organizational improvisation is that of embracing change. In traditional business models, change is seen as an aberration best avoided; in these updated models, change is the path to continual improvement, a

⁵⁷ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 48.

⁵⁸ McKenna, *The Art of Scrum*, 17.

source of competitive advantage, and a way to deal with the realities at hand. By remaining open and responsive to discoveries and shifts in the environment, startups can adapt their products and businesses to those realities revealed by customers or to new market circumstances. However, even though change is to be embraced throughout the development process, the lean methodology, like the jazz metaphor, also assures that this willingness to change at any stage does not (or should not) lead to anarchic situations.

In waterfall product development models, the cascade is planned out in advance and leaves little room for alterations along the way. This corresponds broadly to what Allen Newell, John Shaw, and Herbert Simon refer to as the problem-solving heuristic of “planning,” in which the solution to a complex problem is proposed “in general terms before working out the details.”⁵⁹ This manifests in product development by envisioning what features a particular product should have, before verifying it, and then building those. Since the implication is that the envisioned plan is optimal, any change to it necessarily constitutes a disruption and is best avoided. If any issues arise, changes within the plan are not possible; the planning process has to be restarted anew.

By contrast, the agile method allows for—and even invites—change long after the development has been set in motion. While the *Agile Manifesto* simply prioritizes “Responding to change over following a plan,” the *Agile Principles* explains that change at any stage of the process can be harnessed for competitive advantage. A clear link between this component of agile and organizational improvisation has already been made by Cunha et al.: agile’s claim that “responding to change is more important than following a plan [...] is compatible with the practice of

⁵⁹ Allen Newell, John C. Shaw, and Herbert A. Simon, “Report on a General Problem-Solving Program,” The Rand Corporation, P-1584 (1959), 18. The “planning” approach stands in contrast—and as an alternative to—the means-ends analysis is a process of breaking up a complex problem into several smaller, easier ones. The means-ends analysis approach does allow for changes along the way, but does not keep the more distant objective in mind as it goes through the steps of solving one sub-problem at a time.

improvisation. Therefore, both concepts represent an alternative to the planning/executing model.”⁶⁰ In the original context of software development, this means that features that seemed important at the outset might have to be discarded; those that seemed inessential (or were not even thought of) might have to be added; and those about which the development team had clear initial ideas might have to be tweaked.

The analog for this type of responsiveness to change in the lean methodology is an openness to “pivoting.” A pivot is an intentional change in one or more of the foundational elements of the business model canvas. For example, if a customer segment for, say, organic lipstick has been identified as middle-class teenage girls living in suburban areas, but the testing the cost hypothesis leads to a minimum price of \$400 per stick—a price exceeding the means of the customer group—some change needs to be made to ensure that the startup does not incur high costs to make a product that will never sell. They need to pivot.

In this example, a change could be made in the customer segment: rather than selling to young suburbanites, the product could be targeted toward beauty professionals or price-indifferent (i.e., high-end) spenders. This will likely also change the delivery model: no longer will the products be shipped to retailers in malls, but rather sold by specialists at high-street boutiques. McKenna explains that “Sticking to the plan is not going to cut it anymore. The power is in the ability to pivot and adapt quickly. That is how we create delighted customers.”⁶¹ If these new hypotheses are verified, the startup now sells its product to customers delighted rather than deterred by the \$400 price tag, and makes a profit while doing so. However, even as the spaces on the canvas get filled in

⁶⁰ Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility,” 235.

⁶¹ McKenna, *The Art of Scrum*, 6.

with verified facts, a discovery in one area might impact a verified hypothesis in other, thereby forcing another change.

This stands in contrast to prior models of building a business. The old method that the Customer Development methodology seeks to replace is that of presenting investors, typically, with a 50-page business plan that lays out future grow rates, sales targets, and when the company will reach profitability. However, these plans leave little space for the eventuality that any these projections can be missed. Blank notes that only in the rarest and most conservative cases are these targets actually hit,⁶² mostly because the founders who author these plans make projections based on intuition rather than by following his mantra of “get out of the building” to confirm hypotheses about these metrics and others with customers and partners.⁶³ The Customer Development Manifesto hammers on the fragility of business plans, asserting that “No business plan survives first contact with customers.”⁶⁴ Whereas the business plan lays out a series of events in a way that sets their expectation in stone, Blank proposes instead using a more flexible business roadmap or business model canvas and updating it regularly. Initially, the canvas shows where there are gaps in knowledge of how the business will work: who the customers will be; how products will reach them; how much they are willing to pay; etc. An empty space on the business model canvas invites the

⁶² Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, ix; Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner's Manual*, xiii.

⁶³ Blank and Dorf print the words “Get out of the building” on the very first page of their book, and many chapter titles include the imperative. *The Startup Owner's Manual*, i, v.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 35. Blank here draws on a partial misquotation of Helmuth von Moltke: “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” The Prussian general claims, in *Kriegsgeschichtliche Einzelschriften* in 1880, that “No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force.” Recall that Lee Tom Perry, encountered in chapter 1.1 as one of the early proponents of the jazz metaphor, also invokes von Moltke in his argument for strategic improvisation. Lee Tom Perry, “Strategic Improvising: How to Formulate and Implement Competitive Strategies in Concert,” *Organizational Dynamics* 19:4 (1991): 51.

founder to make a hypothesis about that foundational component of the business and then go out and test it.⁶⁵

Considering that the spaces on the business model canvas are so interrelated, discovery and shifts occur continuously throughout the process of building a business as one factor impacts another in a perpetual flow of newly discovered or newly generated information. Blank and Dorf insists that “Customer Development *reinvents the business model on the fly*, iterating often and pivoting whenever indicated.”⁶⁶ This means not only that pivots might be necessary at multiple points in the business-building process, but also that the pivoting takes place without bringing this process to a halt; this type of “on the fly” approach echoes Christine Moorman and Anne Miner’s understanding of organizational improvisation as the convergence of strategy and execution,⁶⁷ as well as jazz metaphor tropes of responding to change in the moment of performance. Since much of entrepreneurship is experienced a continual surge ahead, we can understand pivoting as a maneuver that has to be executed while other business processes continue to unfold around it. Regarding a pivot as an improvisatory action allows founders to conceptualize it not as an interruption, but as a necessary part of moving forward without delaying progress elsewhere in the company.

Another key component of the embrace of change is the recognition that the business environment is subject to frequent and unpredictable changes, and that these external shifts compel

⁶⁵ The nine spaces on the business model canvas are: value proposition; customer segments; distribution channels; customer relationships; revenue streams; key resources; key activities; key partners; and cost structure. The business model canvas was first suggested by Alex Osterwalder on 2005 blog post and ascended to mainstream usage by founders through Blank and Dorf’s insistence on deploying this method rather than the business plan: “Startups should dump the business *plan* and adopt the flexible business *model*.” *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 36, emphasis original. Osterwalder eventually published a more comprehensive book on the approach: *Business Model Generation: A Handbook for Visionaries, Game Changers, and Challengers* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010).

⁶⁶ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 49, emphasis original. The Customer Development Manifesto also emphasizes continual iteration and pivoting. *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁷ Christine Moorman and Anne S. Miner, “The Convergence of Planning and Execution: Improvisation in New Product Development,” *Journal of Marketing* 62:3 (1998): 1.

companies to pivot continually. This uncertain environment is described by George Lewis as “indeterminacy,” the baseline of his components of improvisatory interaction. Furthermore, many jazz metaphor and organizational improvisation authors use the increasing pace and turbulence in the business environment as the starting point that necessitates improvisation in corporate contexts. From the earliest jazz metaphor arguments, scholars like David Bastien and Todd Hostager have promoted the idea of improvisation as a means to navigate a “turbulent task environment”⁶⁸ and others frame this turbulence more like Lewis’s indeterminacy, labeling it as “uncertainty.”⁶⁹ These authors focus primarily on established businesses—startups face even more uncertainty. Indeed, it is for this reason that Blank maintains that development models of old, which suffice in stable market settings, do not work for burgeoning firms.⁷⁰ Ries continues this line of argument, claiming that, while it is tempting to apply the ways of thinking that imply and rely on determined environments,

this doesn’t work, because startups operate with too much uncertainty. Startups do not yet know who their customer is or what their product should be. As the world becomes more uncertain, it becomes harder to predict the future. The old management methods are not up to the task. Planning and forecasting are only accurate when based on a long, stable operating history and a relatively static environment. Startups have neither.⁷¹

This emphasis on indeterminate circumstances resonates with Lewis’s identification of indeterminacy as a foundational condition of improvisation, with Ries defining a startup as “a human institution designed to create a new product or service under conditions of extreme uncertainty.”⁷² Just as a lack of indeterminacy constitutes a definitional breakdown of

⁶⁸ David T. Bastien and Todd J. Hostager, “Jazz as a Process of Organizational Innovation,” *Communication Research* 15:5 (1988): 586.

⁶⁹ Mary M. Crossan et al., “Time and Organizational Improvisation,” *The Academy of Management Review* 30:1 (2005): 133.

⁷⁰ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 2.

⁷¹ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 27. See also Lewis, “Who is Jazz,” xxiii; Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122.

improvisation,⁷³ a company that operates in perfectly certain circumstances cannot be understood as a startup. Uncertainty necessarily manifests in multiple stages of the startup's growth, as well as in both the product development and the customer development work streams.

While agile and lean both allow for changes in the original conception as more information becomes available through testing, they also advocate for making changes in order to stay abreast of the mutations in the environment. For agile software development, this might mean that a product needs to be able to interact with a brand-new piece of hardware or that a feature that was deemed useful yesterday is no longer useful today. In other words, an underlying need changed; this was not merely a discovery that the need was never there. This circumstance is not limited to the development of software products. In his discussion of the need for change managers to accept improvisatory behavior, Leybourne notes that “because of the speed with which new [financial] products have to be developed to keep abreast of competitors, requirements change in scope and nature during the development and implementation cycles,”⁷⁴ indicating that embracing change internally in order to match external change manifests in other industries as well. This matching, in turn, mirrors Louis Klein, Christopher Biesenthal, and Erlend Delhi's marshaling of Ashby's law of requisite variety (“the alignment of internal and external complexity is the main aspect for solving complex problems and achieving resilience”)⁷⁵ to argue for improvisatory project management.⁷⁶

⁷³ Lewis notes that “these characteristics are sufficiently primordial that in a given proceeding, the absence of any one of [the five components, including indeterminacy] means that the activity in question is not improvised.” Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122.

⁷⁴ Stephen A. Leybourne, “Managing Improvisation within Change Management: Lessons from the UK Financial Services,” *The Service Industries Journal* 26:1 (2006): 91.

⁷⁵ Louis Klein, Christopher Biesenthal, and Erlend Delhi, “Improvisation in Project Management: A Praxeology,” *International Journal of Project Management* 33 (2015): 268.

⁷⁶ A similar sentiment is noted by Crisan, Beleiu, and Ilies with regards to project management more broadly. They claim that “The traditional project management approach is threatened by the existence of multiple risks, multiple changes in customer requirements, by the need to implement improvisation and rapid modifications during project implementation. The static world of a project is exposed to the speed and the change of the present.” Crisan, Beleiu, and Ilies, “The Place of Agile Management Science,” 64.

Since the law requires a match between external and internal complexity, shifts in the external landscape necessitate internal changes in order to maintain the balance.

With regards to business development, the lean model proposes a similar openness to changes when the environment allows; Blank warns that “Clinging to present business plans that have outlived their usefulness destroys the company’s ability to adapt to changing circumstances and exploit opportunities as they come up.”⁷⁷ Here Blank takes an optimistic tone (latching onto opportunities rather than avoiding threats) for building startups, but similar admonitions to large firms, in more pessimistic tones, appear in the jazz metaphor literature. For example, in *Jamming*, John Kao maintains that “captains of industry have no choice but to effect change while their vessels are at sea”;⁷⁸ an image similar to Blank and Dorf’s “on the fly” pivoting, though with an older mode of transport.⁷⁹ As with agile, the need to internally adapt to external change is not limited to fast-paced industries like high tech. Even though their earlier research suggested that “improvisational behavior may be a key mechanism for surviving or even thriving in dynamic industries,”⁸⁰ Keith Hmieleski, Andrew Corbett, and Robert Baron find that no significant relationship between improvisational ability and industry dynamism.⁸¹ Rather than being limited to a few vanguard sectors, this finding demonstrates that improvisatory behavior and understanding behaviors as improvisatory are required throughout the business environment.

⁷⁷ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 259.

⁷⁸ John Kao, *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity* (New York: Harper Business, 1996), 11. Predating Kao, Neilson links organizational improvisation to jazz by noting that, in both, “Adaptation takes place within real-time as the performance is underway,” “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit,” 5.

⁷⁹ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 49.

⁸⁰ Keith M. Hmieleski, Andrew C. Corbett, and Robert A. Baron, “Entrepreneurs’ Improvisational Behavior and Firm Performance: A Study of Dispositional and Environmental Moderators,” *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* 7 (2013): 141–142.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

Encouraging the embrace of change is also a meta-strategy: choosing to embrace change is a change from earlier understandings of business plan execution. George Lewis maintains that “In performances of improvised music, the possibility of internalizing alternative value systems is implicit from the start,” indicating that a shift toward the improvisatory requires an openness to change.⁸² In *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, Blank’s insistence on making the change and internalizing the value system that he proposes takes on moralistic tones, when he quotes Matthew 7:13–14 in order to illustrate the difference between the broad road of business planning that many take and the narrow road of the customer development that leads to a startup’s life rather than its destruction.⁸³ The manifesto-style “out with the old, in with the new” urges startup founders to change from the stolid, ineffective, and change-skeptical worldview associated with established firms to embrace a more agile and adaptable model of building a business that can change as more information becomes available to them and as details about the business environment changes.

Like Barrett and other proponents of the jazz metaphor, the champions of the lean methodology also contrast their approach with the manufacturing industry of the mid-to-late twentieth century.⁸⁴ This parallel exposes the lean argument to Nicholas Sorensen’s critique of a core jazz metaphor assumption:

There was a shared acknowledgment of a “paradigm shift,” a rift between modernity (characterized by a capitalist economy based on industry) and a post-Fordist view of late capitalism (based on a knowledge economy). [...] Within this context, the metaphor of the

⁸² George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16:1 (1996): 110.

⁸³ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 1, 23. Matthew 7:13-14, “...for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it at many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.”

⁸⁴ See Barrett, “Coda,” 620; and Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 2. For a more thorough discussion of this rhetorical move in the jazz metaphor literature, see Chapter 2.3.1 in this document.

jazz band has gained prominence as a way to describe the complex, non-linear environment of the postmodern/post-industrial world.⁸⁵

Yet while making this paradigm shift is essential, the originators of the lean methodology admit that it is not an easy one to make.⁸⁶ In particular, embracing change causes many businessfolk, especially investors, to shy away, fearing that such fickleness might quickly devolve into a state of pandemonium. While Ries finds that the management principles of yore “are ill suited to handle to chaos and uncertainty that startups must face,”⁸⁷ agile and lean advocates are also quick to note that their change-friendly approach does not lead to chaos within the business itself. This backpedaling is the final parallel between the respective embraces of change in the discourses of agile and organizational improvisation. Both discourses declare that a greater openness to change does not lead to anarchy. In the jazz metaphor, limitations on chaos are framed as constraints and conventions of the jazz idiom and performance traditions.⁸⁸ In their *Harvard Business Review* explainer of agile, Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi note that “some executives seem to associate agile with anarchy,” but quickly assert that this interpretation is a fiction.⁸⁹ While agile and lean methods do favor greater freedom and more empowerment to enact change, Blank claims that there are necessary boundaries to that freedom, for the benefit of both the founders and the investors: “Attempting to impose precise order on how a project in a department is accomplished stifles

⁸⁵ Nicholas Sorensen, “The Metaphor of ‘The Jazz Band’: Ethical Issues for Leadership,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation* 9:1 (2013), 6.

⁸⁶ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 72.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 15

⁸⁸ For examples of such framings, see Frank J. Barrett and Ken Peplowski, “Minimal Structures within a Song: An Analysis of ‘All of Me,’” *Organization Science* 9:5 (1998): 558; and Adrian Cho, *The Jazz Process: Collaboration, Innovation, and Agility* (Boston, Addison-Wesley, 2010), 21. Chapter 2.3.3 in this document delves deeper into the assumptions and assertions around chaos in the organizational improvisation literature.

⁸⁹ Rigby, Sutherland, Takeuchi, “Embracing Agile,” 42.

creativity and leads to a formulaic approach to business problems. [...] Instead, let your people know that you want them to exercise leadership...”⁹⁰

Reed Hastings, founder and CEO of Netflix, presents an interesting case study of balancing freedom and constraints in his book, *No Rules Rules*, co-authored with Erin Meyer. His overall approach throughout the meteoric rise of Netflix, an entertainment streaming giant that started out as a DVD mail delivery service, is to set up an environment in which employees are free to make decisions that maximize creativity and flexibility. The maxim is “Freedom and Responsibility.”⁹¹ Achieving that freedom means doing away with many controls, yet the free environment is supported by hiring the right people (at the right rates), constant feedback, and transparency throughout the organization. Transparency is particularly important, since it helps establish the context in which employees make decisions; another dictum is “Lead with context, not control.”⁹² Furthermore, when decision-making authority is decentralized in this fashion, Hastings suggests that an organization should be set up in a way that individual components of the business can be changed without having to change the entire system.⁹³ This “loose coupling” encourages change by increasing the ease at which small, iterative changes can be made.

Right at the end of the book, Hastings introduces a familiar comparison: “It’s jazz, not a symphony.”⁹⁴ He rehearses the same jazz metaphor arguments about the need to shift away from

⁹⁰ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 259.

⁹¹ Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, *No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), xx.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 208.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271. For a thorough discussion of the jazz-versus-symphony trope, as marshaled in the jazz metaphor discourse, see Chapter 2.1 of this document.

industrial-era/orchestral command-and-control structures, yet also cautions against unbridled anarchy:

Jazz emphasizes individual spontaneity. The musicians know the overall structure of the song but have the freedom to improvise [...] Of course, you can't just remove the rules and processes and tell your team to be a jazz band, and expect it to be so. Without the right conditions, chaos will ensue. [...] Welcome constant change. Operate a little closer toward the edge of chaos. Don't provide a musical score and build a symphony orchestra. Work on creating those jazz conditions...⁹⁵

The kind of balance between freedom and responsibility—between improvisation and structure—that Hastings cultivates⁹⁶ allows change to happen constantly without disrupting the overall growth of the company or development of a particular product. Returning to the context of organizational agility, Cunha et al., cited earlier for their conception of the need for balance between order and improvisation, state that “being agile represents an organizational hybrid, a paradoxical combination of structure, and extemporaneity,”⁹⁷ thereby making explicit the link between organizational improvisation and agile business development, by highlighting the productive tension between freedom and constraints that characterize both agile and improvisatory embracings of change. While the external environment demands relentless change and founders adapt their understandings of the customers and their needs, improvisation provides a way to conceptualize the changes that a startup

⁹⁵ Ibid., 272.

⁹⁶ Hastings avoids putting down constraints and instead asks employees and managers to provide context. This context, then, helps employees make responsible decisions. One policy example is that Netflix has no policy—or constraints—on business expenses; company money should be spent with the good of the company in mind: if an executive has an early-morning client meeting, it is good for the company if she is well-rested and she is therefore encouraged to take a business-class flight; if the meeting is later in the day, an economy-class seat would be more appropriate. The context of “for the good of the company” sets bounds on what is considered responsible behavior, even in the absence of constraining policies. Employees have the freedom to act in this absence, but are urged to do so in a responsible manner. In the domain of musical improvisation, George Lewis’s composition *Artificial Life 2007* includes similar guidance to the players: “as with all improvisations, including our everyday-life human efforts, the success of a given performance of this work will be less a question of individual freedom than of the assumption of personal responsibility for the sonic environment.” George Lewis, *Artificial Life 2007* (Leipzig, London, and New York: Edition Peters, 2007, music score), Performance Guidelines.

⁹⁷ Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility,” 232.

needs to make in order to succeed against a backdrop of balancing the liberties that can be taken against the real limits that bound—and support—such behavior.

3.3 Efficiency and Speed

Agile		Lean		Improvisation	
<i>Agile Manifesto</i>	Agile Principles	Customer Development Manifesto	Lean Principles	Organizational improvisation	Lewis Quintipartite improvisation
Working software over comprehensive documentation	Simplicity--the art of maximizing the amount of work not done--is essential. Working software is the primary measure of progress	Preserve all cash until needed. Then spend	[Waste elimination central to Lean]	Improvisation as a way to deal with a scarcity of resources (bricolage)	
[Speed implicit]	Deliver working software frequently...with a preference to the shorter timescale	Fast decision-making, cycle time, speed, and tempo	Build-Measure-Learn ... All successful startup processes should be geared to accelerate that feedback loop	Moorman and Miner: temporal convergence of planning and execution Cho's OODA loops	[Speed notably excluded]

Table 3.4. Concepts around embracing change shared among agile, lean, and improvisation.⁹⁸

One of the biggest contributions of the Lean Startup methodology is its relentless emphasis on reducing waste. Wastage can take many forms, including building unwanted product features, creating unnecessary or hindering documentation, spending money without good ideas about what the results will be, and progressing too slowly through the various business processes that allow a startup to grow.

Ries sums up waste as anything that does not provide value for the eventual customers.⁹⁹

This highlights the need to constantly listen to customers in interviews and product testing sessions

⁹⁸ For the centrality of waste elimination to Lean, see Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 181–182.

⁹⁹ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 48. “Value” is broadly construed and can include financial gains or time saved, i.e. quantifiable benefits; but also qualitative benefits such as prestige or enjoyment. Take for example an electric vehicle: the monetary value is that it is cheaper to drive and maintain than an internal combustion car; a qualitative value is having the bragging rights that come with green-vehicle ownership.

to ensure that products do not become overloaded with wasteful features that add no value for the customers. The customer interactions set the parameters on what the work is that needs to be done, as to delimit the space for the tenth Agile Principle: “Simplicity—the art of maximizing the work not done—is essential.”¹⁰⁰ Agile also highlights the importance of working software above any other metrics of progress, thereby limiting the amount of resources wasted on elements such as documentation that do not directly create value.

The prioritization of resources in this manner is a way for developers (of either customers or products) to engage in a type of bricolage. This improvisatory practice, as a component of improvisation that deals with scarcities of resources,¹⁰¹ also has a “fit” component in that it is not merely an efficient way to use what is available, but that the bricoleur adapts to the situation at hand, which in the case of lean entrepreneurship, I contend, is the needs of the customers. Through bricolage, developers dedicate only the most necessary resources to find a solution to the demands they discover through customer interaction, thereby reducing wastage.

A particularly rare resource in startups is, unsurprisingly, cash. Growing businesses have constant expenses and, almost by definition, do not yet bring in enough revenue to cover all those expenses. Initial injections of cash come in the form of equity, initially by the founders and later by angel investors and venture capitalists. Yet these latter two sources of cash have dilutive effects on both the founders’ stake in the company as well as their autonomy. Many owners put off raising

¹⁰⁰ Beck et al., *Principles*.

¹⁰¹ See the discussions in Chapter 1.2 of this document on the material by Miguel Pina e Cunha, João Vieira da Cunha, and Ken Kamoche (1999) and Claudio Ciborra (2002). Leybourne notes that within Agile Project Management “bricolage may be a more disputed concept, as no mention is made within the emerging APM literature about agile projects with scarce resources.” Leybourne, “Improvisation and Agile Project Management,” 527. Indeed, many guides to agile business practices recommend generous resource allocation along the lines of “pick a dream team, give them free rein and a blank check.” By contrast, the Lean Startup methodology creates a mindset of scarcity by emphasizing the elimination of waste, even if the startup is well-funded.

venture capital as long as possible and there are horror stories of founders who gobble up (or are force-fed) too much cash too early in the company's growth trajectory. The phenomenon certainly contributed to the rapid swelling of the dotcom bubble at the turn of millennium.

A more recent example is that of WeWork. The legend goes—and many things are legendary around Adam Neumann, founder of WeWork—that, in the back of a car, Masayoshi Son, CEO of SoftBank, press-ganged Neumann into accepting a large capital infusion from SoftBank's Vision Fund. The glut of capital created distortions in the functioning of the startup by removing the constraint on cash, which allowed WeWork to grow at an unsustainable pace.¹⁰²

The WeWork case of an oversupply of capital is an exception—and therefore a cautionary tale—to the typical startup model in which cash is constrained. Despite the warnings of having too much to spend, most founders battle the other extreme: not having enough. In a way, cash acts as a platform for most other resources since money can buy time (in the form of worker hours) or interactions or ideas. Yet cash is not only exchangeable for time; it is also a measure of time. Blank and Dorf maintain that “Money is the lifeblood of startups. You stay in business until you run out of it” and continue to state that their book “is about how to reduce startup infant mortality by making everything you do less wasteful and more cash-efficient.”¹⁰³ Much of their message is not to spend money on business processes before the entrepreneur has validated that they will, in fact, produce the desired outcomes. Ries prefers to consider the timeline not in terms of units of cash, but rather

¹⁰² *The New Yorker* ran several articles on WeWork and the distortions that the Vision Fund caused. Lizzie Widdicombe, “The Rise and Fall of WeWork,” *The New Yorker*, November 6, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-rise-and-fall-of-wework> (accessed January 5, 2021); Sheela Kolhatkar, “WeWork’s Downfall and a Reckoning for SoftBank,” *The New Yorker*, November 14, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/business/currency/weworks-downfall-and-a-reckoning-for-softbank> (accessed January 5, 2021); Charles Duhigg, “How Venture Capitalists Are Deforming Capitalism,” *The New Yorker*, November 30, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/30/how-venture-capitalists-are-deforming-capitalism> (accessed January 5, 2021).

¹⁰³ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 170.

as how many fundamental changes (pivots) a business can still make, yet it is not clear that the limit for Ries is not still somehow dependent on when the money runs out. He suggests that “The true measure of runway is how many pivots a startup has left... Measuring runway through the lens of pivots rather than that of time [which is determined by dividing remaining cash by current burn rate] suggests another way to extend that runway: get to each pivot faster. In other words, the startup has to find ways to achieve the same amount of validated learning at lower cost or in a shorter time.”¹⁰⁴ The “runway” for startups, seen in either units of cash or in units of remaining pivots can, then, be used more efficiently by increasing the speed at which the various processes run. The need for speed in when pivoting emphasizes the urgency for founders to be comfortable with making changes and making them rapidly.

Like other resources, time can be wasted, and agile and lean methodologies aim to trim such wastage by increasing the speed at which business processes unfold. In Blank and Dorf’s model, building a successful startup is a race against the clock of cash running out.¹⁰⁵ In their explication of the Customer Development model, they go as far as to aver that “Speed and tempo are integral parts of startup DNA,”¹⁰⁶ thereby indicating the inherency of speed in growing businesses.

The *Agile Manifesto* itself does not contain any demands for speed, but the word “agile” itself includes an element of speed, solidifying the tie between this development methodology and the pace at which it is to take place. In agile processes, work timelines are divided into “short cycles (less than a month [as opposed to three to six months in traditional product development methods])

¹⁰⁴ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 160–161.

¹⁰⁵ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

known as *sprints*.¹⁰⁷ These quick sprints allow momentum to be maintained in the team, having them “Deliver working software frequently,” per the Agile Principles, “from a couple of weeks to a couple of months, with a preference to the shorter timescale.” As noted by many organizational improvisation scholars, businesses need to keep pace with the speed of new product development by their competitors and the “depth and speed of creative destruction,”¹⁰⁸ particularly in the technology section from which the agile software development principles emerged. Speed is required to remain in step with the competition and the ever-changing business environment more broadly.

While high-speed product innovation cycles make the positive case for organizational improvisation, the negative case—responding to adverse environmental shifts, either small changes or cataclysmic crises—also requires speed. Improvisation as a way to decrease response time is a refrain that repeats throughout the jazz metaphor discourse, from as early as Lee Tom Perry’s recommendation to use improvisatory methods akin to “quick strike” military tactics.¹⁰⁹ In such crisis situations, speed is necessitated by the scarcity of time and improvisation. In Moorman and Miner’s formulation, this provides a way to reduce the time between planning and implementation: “In improvisation, the time gap between these events narrows so much that, in the limit, composition converges with execution. Therefore, the more proximate the design and implementation of an activity in time, the more that activity is improvisational.”¹¹⁰

This convergent relationship between thinking and doing undergirds much of the organizational improvisation literature. In Blank’s Customer Development model, the relationship

¹⁰⁷ Rigby, Sutherland, and Takeuchi, “Embracing Agile,” 43, emphasis original. They also note, however, that agile is not simply doing things that the boss says, but doing them fast. *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰⁸ Miguel Pina e Cunha et al., “Organizational Improvisation: From the Constraint of Strict Tempo to the Power of the Avant-Garde,” *Creativity and Innovation Management* 23:4 (2014): 367.

¹⁰⁹ Perry, “Strategic Improvising,” 56.

¹¹⁰ Moorman and Miner, “The Convergence of Planning and Execution,” 3.

between planning and execution differs by level. The first two steps, customer discovery and customer validation, serve as a process of strategizing, which he terms the “‘search’ for the business model,” and continues to state that “Steps three and four ‘execute’ the business model that’s been developed, tested, and proven in steps one and two.”¹¹¹ He warns that planning is critical before the activities of customer creation (step 3) and company building (step 4) are engaged since “You cannot learn and discover while you are executing...attempting to execute before you have a sales roadmap in place is pure folly.”¹¹² The entrepreneur still relies on a worked-out plan (the roadmap) before execution of sales, the driving feature of step 3, can begin. It should, however, be noted that this pertains mainly to the sales and marketing processes, which are very costly; product development and customer discovery do indeed follow a more strategize-by-executing model at the intra-step level.

Yet the notion of improvisation as inherently speedy has not been without detractors. Within the realm of organizational improvisation studies, Claudio Ciborra cautions against conflating the concepts of extemporaneity, which he regards as a core component of improvisation, and speed.¹¹³ He also warns that insistence on speed, either as an agile managerial choice or necessitated by a crisis situation, might cause workers to fall back on standard operating procedures, which do not take current environmental features or demands into account, rather than to seek novel ways to use resources in order to deal with the situation at hand. Speed, as a way to reduce the time an activity takes or the periods between activities, may therefore have adverse effects on innovation and solving the problem at hand.

¹¹¹ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 22.

¹¹² Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 111.

¹¹³ Claudio U. Ciborra, *Labyrinths of Information: Challenging the Wisdom of Systems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2002), 170.

Furthermore, any connotation to speed is notably absent in Lewis's partition of improvisation. In seminars and Q&As, he frequently cites Paul Richards's *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* chapter on rice farming in Sierra Leone, which showcases improvisations that take place over temporal distances of seasons, years, and generations as women selectively choose the seeds best-suited to the environment, per their analysis.¹¹⁴ Allowing such long timeframes under the roof of improvisation destabilizes the notion that improvisation is merely behaving in a speedy manner or enacting a temporal convergence between planning and execution.

In the corporate realm, an analogous example is 3M, which started as the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company in 1902, extracting minerals for making sandpaper. Since then, the company has continually expanded and, more than a century later, still heralded as one of the most innovative companies every year, despite being a decades-old conglomerate—in many ways an antithesis of a startup. The company continuously developed products over the course of its existence, adapting to the needs of the market. From abrasives like sandpaper, they moved to adhesives, which led them to the office supplies market and later into health care materials, including nonwoven materials, which rose to importance in 2020, as a key component of the N95 masks that inhibit the spread of covid-19. 3M now explicitly uses agile styles of product development in their healthcare segments, as well as in digital products and electronics, even if exceptional proto-agile approaches could be found within the firm during the twentieth century. The company's growth is supported by an "innovation strategy" that invites employees to spend 15% of their time on "experimental doodling."¹¹⁵ One of the yields of this experimentation is the Post-It Note, which has,

¹¹⁴ Paul Richards, "A Long-Term Study of Rice Farming in Central Sierra Leone" in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol 1, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 366–382.

¹¹⁵ John D. Stoll, "Corporate America's Most Underrated Innovation Strategy: 3M's 15% Rule," *Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/corporate-americas-most-underrated-innovation-strategy-3ms15-rule-11589556171> (accessed January 5, 2020). See also the "Timeline of 3M History" page: https://www.3m.com/3M/en_US/company-us/about-3m/history/timeline/ (accessed January 5, 2021.)

in turn, become a staple technology in the Kanban method of agile. Like rice farmers in Sierra Leone, 3M slowly but continuously improvises their way toward superior products that are steadily ever better-suited to the changing environment. Both cases also demonstrate that small improvisatory decisions build to much larger trajectories of improvement over the course of generations.

Within the startup literature too, there is some skepticism about blinding speed. Ries admits that his book “has emphasized the importance of speed,” but caveats that “speed alone would be destructive” and that “To work, startups require built-in speed regulators that help teams find their optimal pace of work.”¹¹⁶ Finding a rhythm contributes both to the sustainability of the organization by allowing employees not to burn out and ensuring that business processes that interlock do so seamlessly. An emphasis on the consistency of pace appears in other bodies of literature too, from the *Principles behind the Agile Manifesto* to Kornel’s statement that “Cadence trumps speed at [the seed] stage of a business’ life”¹¹⁷ and even in early jazz management writings that insist on finding grooves that facilitate continuous workflow and intra-team cohesion.

Whereas these authors focus on the opposition between raw speed and constant pace, another distinction falls between raw speed and rate of adaptation, which is arguably more closely aligned to a commonplace definition of agility. In explaining the tenets of agile in *The Art of Scrum*, McKenna issues highlights this distinction in a didactic manner by asking readers “What animal do you think of when I say the word ‘agile?’”¹¹⁸ He maintains that, although the cheetah is an obvious choice at the surface level due to its preeminent speed in the animal kingdom, its prey, the fleet-

¹¹⁶ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 227.

¹¹⁷ Kornel, *Spinning into Control*, 3.

¹¹⁸ McKenna, *The Art of Scrum*, 4.

footed antelope is a better candidate. Top speed matters less than the ability to quickly change direction—in other words, pivoting.

One way in which startups maintain the ability to change direction is by keeping product development light and speeding up the delivery of a product by releasing a minimal viable product (MVP) rather than a fully-fledged one. The aim of the MVP is not to be sold to millions of customers, but rather to test whether there is demand for it at all. Rapid, bare-bones iterations on the MVP that include customer-collaborative feedback from previous tests allow entrepreneurs to quickly find the features that customers value, without delaying release times for want of a complete product with features that might or might not be valuable. The MVP serves as the necessary foundation on which subsequent experiments are performed. MVPs might not even have to have any of the functionality of the eventual product; experiments can be performed on mock-ups in order to ascertain customer needs. By means of a personal example, in the cybersecurity startup that I co-founded, Predictive Cyber Protection, we made PowerPoint slides to show what the interface of a cybersecurity diagnostics program might look like. We asked potential users whether the dashboard showed what they needed to see and whether the navigation from one set of cyber risk indicators to the next is useful to them. By learning what customers need, we could redesign the interface and ensure that the underlying software could deliver the right elements, without ever demonstrating the back end. Had we not made this very crude MVP, software development might very well have been veered in a direction that adds no value to the eventual product, wasting precious time and programmer-hours.

The concept of a bare-bones product on which to improvise is also prevalent in the organizational improvisation literature. Cunha et al. maintain that improvisation is “the deliberate fusion of the design and execution of a novel production,” thereby linking the Moorman and Miner

convergence theory to *production* in particular.¹¹⁹ Seeing the parallel processes of product- and customer development through the lens of improvisation, the MVP also becomes the “something” in the Charles Mingus quote—“you can’t improvise on nothing; you’ve gotta improvise on something.”—that appears frequently in jazz metaphor authors’ insistence on the need for baseline structures that serve as the basis for improvisation.¹²⁰ Similarly, you can’t iterate on nothing; therefore, the faster something, basic as it initially may be, can be generated, the more productive improvisation can take place.

Blank charges that “As a startup, your goal and battle cry should be ‘fast to market.’ Fast to market simply means getting your first release in the hands of paying customers as quickly as you can”¹²¹ and more specifically, “the goal for Product Development should be to build the product incrementally and iteratively—getting it out the door and quickly revising it in response to customer feedback.”¹²² Blank emphasizes speed at the beginning of product development so that tests, iterations, and improvements, which are also supposed to run at high tempos, can commence sooner in an effort to minimize the time it takes for the full-scale product to be launched as well as to minimize wasteful efforts along the way. Ries emphasizes the element of learning in his formulation, maintaining that, “Contrary to traditional product development, which usually involves a long, thoughtful incubation period and strives for product perfection, the goal of the MVP is to begin the process of learning, not end it.”¹²³ For Ries, much of the learning takes place in a strict and

¹¹⁹ Miguel Pina e Cunha et al., “Strategic agility through improvisational capabilities: Implications for a Paradox-sensitive HRM,” *Human Resource Management Review* 30 (2020): 3. It should be pointed out that one of the authors is, indeed, Anne Miner.

¹²⁰ Mingus is quoted in Barry Kernfeld, *What to Listen for in Jazz* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 119; see the discussions on Karl Weick and Frank Barrett in Chapter 1.1.

¹²¹ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 96.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 132. See also Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 58; and Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 76–77; 93–94.

¹²³ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 93.

scientific manner (he hammers on the importance of hypothesizing and testing, and the scientific method more broadly), but organizational improvisation scholars point out the beneficial possibilities of more serendipitous types of learning that iterations around an MVP can bring about: “Prototyping around evidence can allow people to make discoveries, to untapped new forms of knowledge that can lead to improvisatory deviations, to cultivate real-time experiments...”¹²⁴ Whether iterations take the form of scientific tests or improvisatory deviations, the goal is to bring about a change and assess whether or not that change is useful.

Both the Customer Development Manifesto and the principles of lean emphasize the speed at which such feedback loops need to take place, claiming that startups are more successful when they can cycle through these loops quickly. In their fleshing-out of their Customer Development manifesto, Blank and Dorf go as far as to state that “Perfect decision-making is both unimportant and impossible, and what matters more is forward movement and a tight, fact-based feedback loop to quickly recognize and reverse bad decisions,”¹²⁵ thereby placing greater value on speed than on accuracy in making decisions. However, accuracy can be improved by repeatedly taking feedback from the outcomes of decisions that lead to failures. In the Lean Startup method, Ries expresses this concept as its fourth principle: Build-Measure-Learn. The decision point is implicit in Ries’s formulation, but there is a similar notion of learning-by-doing and implementing feedback with each iteration. He adds that “All successful startup processes should be geared to accelerate that feedback loop”¹²⁶ and dedicates the second portion of his book to techniques that “minimize the

¹²⁴ Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility,” 244.

¹²⁵ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 43.

¹²⁶ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 9.

total time through the Build-Measure-Learn feedback loop,¹²⁷ again emphasizing the speed at which this process should occur.

The notion of rapidly cycling through circular feedback processes manifests in both organizational improvisation literature and lean startup methodologies in the form of the OODA loop: Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act. The loop was first theorized by US Air Force Major John Boyd, who used this cycle initially to explain how fighter pilots behave during air-to-air combat. Yet, military historian Daniel Ford maintains that he “expanded the OODA Loop first to warfare generally, then to any contest between individuals or groups, and finally to the problem of human survival in an ever-changing universe.”¹²⁸ While Adrian Cho has tied OODA loops to jazz improvisation;¹²⁹ I here propose a mapping of each of these phases onto Lewis’s five-part definition of improvisation.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Ibid., 78.

¹²⁸ Daniel Ford, *A Vision so Noble: John Boyd, the OODA Loop, and America’s War on Terror* (Durham, NH: Warbird Books, 2017), 61.

¹²⁹ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 104. See Ibid., 93 for Cho’s explanations.

¹³⁰ Lewis, “Is Our Machines Learning Yet?” 122.

Boyd OODA loop	Cho explanation	Lewis definitional component
[Assumed indeterminacy]		Indeterminacy
Observe	Acquire data through the senses	Analysis of conditions
Orient	Analyze and synthesize data to form a perspective of the situation	Judgement
Decide	Determine a course of action based on the perspective	Choice
Act	Implement the decision	Agency

Table 3.5. OODA loop steps as components of improvisation.¹³¹

This table demonstrates that Boyd’s military strategy is, at its heart, a series of improvisations in that each step maps onto a component of Lewis’s definition. The OODA loop encapsulates all the steps needed for a fighter pilot—or entrepreneur—to improvise through an environment, which, particularly in its original context, includes enemies or competitors. Ford notes that it is critical not simply to understand the concept of OODA as a four-step recipe, but rather as a continuous process, in which each action of one cycle-through changes the environment in such a way as to generate new conditions to Observe, thereby restarting the loop from the top. The speed through which these loops can be moved is a key factor in agonistic settings: “in order to win or gain superiority—we should operate at a faster tempo than our adversaries or inside our adversaries’ time

¹³¹ With regards to the assumption of indeterminacy, John Boyd, the originator of the OODA loop, advocated ubiquitous indeterminacy. Antoine Bousquet maintains that “Boyd believes in a perpetually renewed world that is ‘uncertain, ever-change, unpredictable’ and thus requires continually revising, adapting, destroying, and recreating our theories and systems to deal with it.” *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York: Hurst/Columbia University Press, 2009), 193, quoting Boyd, “Conceptual Spiral,” in *A Discourse on Winning and Losing*, edited and compiled by Grant T. Hammond (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, [1992] 2018), 356; and Frans Onsinga writes of Boyd’s output that “The fundamental, unavoidable and all-pervasive presence of uncertainty is the starting point.” *Science, Strategy and War: The Strategic Theory of John Boyd* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 131.

scales.”¹³² Although Blank does not cite this passage (not unusual for a trade manual), he draws on it explicitly as a way to build the company after the initial stages of Customer Discovery: “Here you use the military concept of OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act) by moving and responding to competitors and customers at a tempo much faster than your competition.”¹³³ The speed at which entrepreneurs move through the improvisatory loop helps their company grow from a small startup into an established company in a market beset with competitors.

OODA loops, when rapidly cycled, therefore guide the startup through a hostile external environment. Gathering feedback from customers is central to Lean methods and the greater the speed, the higher the startup’s success rate. However, speedily moving through feedback loops like OODA also have benefits for the internal workings of the company and are essential in fostering intra-group and intra-company learning and development.

¹³² The time scales here refer to the OODA loops of the adversaries. John Boyd, cited in Ford, *A Vision so Noble*, 19, underline Boyd’s. Ford seems ambivalent about the importance of speed. At a later point in his book, he stresses that “the OODA Loop is not a speed competition, as it is too often misrepresented,” and notes that, while “Speed is certainly important, and it provides a convenient shorthand for discussing the OODA Loop...speed alone doesn’t produce [a winning] outcome.” Ibid., 29.

¹³³ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 220–221. Ries is more explicit in his acknowledgement of this work; right at the end of *The Lean Startup* he states that “The idea of the Build-Measure-Learn feedback loop owes a lot to ideas from maneuver warfare, especially John Boyd’s OODA (Observe-Orient-Decide-Act) Loop.” 290.

3.4 Learning and Failure

Agile		Lean		Improvisation	
<i>Agile Manifesto</i>	Agile Principles	Customer Development Manifesto	Lean Principles	Organizational improvisation	Lewis Quintipartite improvisation
	At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.	Communicate and share learning Design experiments and test to validate your hypotheses	Build-Measure-Learn Validated learning	Organizational learning through improvisation	Analysis of conditions Judgement
			Failure is an integral part of the search	Embracing failure Risk-taking	

Table 3.6. Concepts around learning and failure shared among agile, lean, and improvisation.

Learning and failure are implicit or explicit components of many of the tenets of organizational improvisation as well as agile and lean methodologies. These two components are frequently intertwined, with the directive that failure should lead to learning—and is forgivable if it does. While failure shouldn't happen without efficient learning, efficient learning couldn't happen without remaining open to failure since learning stems from the possibility of being wrong.

At its core, learning is a system that involves the input of information, which then gets processed into actionable insights that alter future behavior; in Lewis parlance, it involves analysis of conditions, making judgements about the analysis, and making choices as a result of that judgement. Various parts of improvisatory entrepreneurship, as espoused by Blank, Ries, and others, seek to improve, accelerate, or optimize either the input of information or facilitate and encourage changing course after learning has taken place. Generating any type of feedback, whether through active listening to customers, testing product feature hypotheses with an MVP, or cycling through OODA loops, produces the information that serves as the raw material for learning. The faster and more efficiently that can happen, the better the odds of success; Ries goes so far as to insist that “The ability to learn faster from customers is the essential competitive advantage startups must

possess,”¹³⁴ in order to hammer down the benefits of learning and the speed at which learning should take place.

Within the organizational improvisation discourse, learning is one of the key advantages that an organization might draw from actively engaging in improvisatory behavior. In their early literature review, wherein they devote a considerable amount of space on landing on a particular definition of what improvisation is, Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche maintain that learning is a “related construct” to improvisation. They continue to identify learning as a positive outcome listed in more than 80% of the publications they review.¹³⁵ Representative title fragments in this literature include Barrett’s “Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning,” and Cristian Chelariu, Wesley Johnson, and Louise Young’s “Learning to Improvise, Improvising to Learn.”¹³⁶ The notion that organizations can learn through improvisation extends past the *fin de siècle* titles, into the forthcoming issue of *Management Learning* that focuses on improvisatory learning during the covid-19 pandemic.

In order for learning to happen as productively as possible, organizational improvisation scholars and entrepreneurship gurus alike promote embracing failure. Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche maintain that improvisation takes place in an experimental culture that “results from a set of values and beliefs that promote action and experimentation... For this to happen, the organization has to,

¹³⁴ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 193.

¹³⁵ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation: What, When, How, and Why,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 1:3 (1999): 312, 328.

¹³⁶ Barrett, “Coda”; Cristian Chelariu, Wesley J. Johnson, and Louise Young, “Learning to Improvise, Improvising to Learn: A Process of Responding to Complex Environments,” *Journal of Business Research* 55 (2002).

at least, tolerate errors.”¹³⁷ Similarly, Ries avers that “if you cannot fail, you cannot learn,”¹³⁸ emphasizing that failure is critical for founders in the early stages of their startups.

This section starts with an affirmation of the centrality of learning in the lean startup methodology and, to a lesser extent, in the *Agile Manifesto*. Learning through failing provides the link to the second half of the subsection, which explains that centrality of failure in these methodologies. Along the way, I put the arguments from the entrepreneurship discourse in dialogue with relevant segments of the organizational improvisation literature in order to demonstrate the close link between their respective views on learning and failure as well as the implication that these are inherently improvisational concepts.

3.4.1 The centrality of learning

Throughout Ries’s explication of the lean methodology for building startups, he emphasizes the importance of learning, including positing two of the method’s five core principles to be “validated learning” and “build-measure-learn.”¹³⁹ The former he defines as “a rigorous method for demonstrating progress when one is embedded in the soil of extreme uncertainty in which startups grow. Validated learning is the process of demonstrating empirically that a team has discovered valuable truths about a startup’s present and future business prospects,” and continues to note its improvisatory superiority by claiming that “It is more concrete, more accurate, and faster than market forecasting or classical business planning.”¹⁴⁰ The latter, build-measure-learn, already

¹³⁷ Cunha, Cunha, and Kamoche, “Organizational Improvisation,” 318.

¹³⁸ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 56.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

discussed above with regards to OODA loops, also serves as an iterative and improvisatory process of gaining key insights in uncertain conditions. Indeed, Ries goes so far as to claim that learning is the most vital function of startups as they navigate through the ambiguities and unpredictabilities of early business development.

Within the context of agile software development, learning is not quite as heavily emphasized as in agile business development. However, the last of the *Agile Principles* claims that “At regular intervals, the team reflects on how to become more effective, then tunes and adjusts its behavior accordingly.”¹⁴¹ Like the build-measure-learn loops, this process is also iterative, yet differs from it in that it is mostly inward looking. The Customer Development model, with its emphasis on getting out of the building, turns the look outward: who the customers will be and what they value in a particular product.

In addition to the internal-external divide, Blank contrasts the product development and Customer Development models by claiming that the former “emphasizes execution. The Customer Development process emphasizes learning, discovery, failure, iterations and pivots,”¹⁴² thereby endowing his method with more improvisatory characteristics than the more linear steps of pre-agile product development. However, as seen in the MVP system, product development can be as iterative and as pivot-positive as Blank’s method. Similarly, although seemingly opposed to the term MVP (he prefers “prototype”), Kornel, in his text on improvising startups, notes the iterative process of developing products and using iterations to fuel learning loops.¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Beck et al., *Principles*.

¹⁴² Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 52.

¹⁴³ Kornel, *Spinning into Control*, 22–23.

Returning briefly to Ries's argument on using (validated) learning as a balm to the failings of classical business planning, it warrants mention that this opposition is one of the core interventions of the lean methodology, from the beginning of Blank's first tome on the approach. He claims that "In the early stages of a startup, focusing on 'execution' will put you out of business. Instead, you need a 'learning and discovery' process so you can get the company to the point where you know what to execute."¹⁴⁴ Since execution of a preconceived business plan is unlikely to lead to success, entrepreneurs are charged to learn about their customers first, before moving to aspirational or fictional sales projections.

However, the limitation to the "early stages" of a business's development is significant. Later, as the startup matures, execution becomes important again. But before then, Blank and Dorf maintain that "Startups can't learn and discover while they're busy executing."¹⁴⁵ This stands in stark contrast to what many scholars of organizational improvisation claim to be one of the benefits of the practice: the ability—and sometimes necessity—to learn while doing. To a certain extent, it is also incongruent with much of Blank's and Ries's paradigms of Customer Discovery and lean methodologies, much of which charges founders to *do* in order to learn.

The section in which the improvisatory ethos of the Customer Development models is particularly thin pertains to sales: the creation of a "sales roadmap" that is to be discovered (by doing) before salespeople should be hired to follow the roadmap. Along an anti-improvisatory vein, Blank and Dorf state that "With the sales roadmap in their hands, the members of your sales force will be able to focus on actual sales instead of the hit-and-miss experimentation you'll undertake as you move through the customer validation process."¹⁴⁶ Yet the search for the roadmap is done by

¹⁴⁴ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 20, see also 8; and Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner's Manual*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner's Manual*, 282.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 344.

finding customers and selling to them, updating the sales roadmap as founders learn about the sales process. Once the sales roadmap is confirmed, it essentially becomes a classic business plan that the growing sales department can execute. This point is one of the few areas in the Customer Development methodology that takes on a less improvisatory tone and, in a way, serves as a point of separation between a startup as such and a more established type of company: the point where improvisatory and iterative learning is replaced by following a plan, even if that plan was created in an improvisatory fashion.

Yet throughout the lifetime of a company, a keen ability to learn allows firms to compete in turbulent environments. The jazz metaphor literature points this out as early as 1992, when Neilson maintains that “organizational adaptation become key attributes which are needed to maintain a competitive position”¹⁴⁷ in increasingly dynamic markets. Rapid cycling through OODA loops for an increased pace of learning is recommended to mature firms and startups alike. Cho’s OODA-loop-cum-jazz-metaphor recommendations are aimed at companies looking to foster or rekindle innovation, while the Boston Consulting Group, a management consultancy typically hired by large firms, proposes the method for dealing with crises or disrupting their industries through innovation.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, fast cycling through learning loops benefits startups as well: Ries states that “we can get through the Build-Measure-Learn feedback loop more quickly than our competitors can. The ability to learn faster from customers is the essential competitive advantage that startups

¹⁴⁷ Neilson, “A New Metaphor for Strategic Fit,” 3.

¹⁴⁸ Cho, *The Jazz Process*, 104; François Candelon et al., “How scenarios can help companies win the Covid-19 battle,” April 23, 2020. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/win-covid-19-battle-with-scenarios> (accessed July 13, 2020), 4; George Stalk and Sarn Stewart, “Tempo and the art of disruption,” February 28, 2019. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2019/tempo-art-of-disruption> (accessed March 4, 2021), 3.

must possess,”¹⁴⁹ thereby adding a competitive aspect to the centrality of learning in growing businesses.

Continuous, iterative learning allows startups to thrive since it supplies them with the necessary information about customers, their needs, how the product ameliorates those needs, and how the product is to reach customers by following a sales roadmap created through improvisatory learnings. All of these learnings combine to give a startup a competitive edge. Yet learning frequently comes at a cost as founders flail and fail their way through wrong assumptions, hypotheses that aren’t validated, and strategies that don’t pan out.

3.4.2 Learning through failure

In all the discourses I bring together in this document—jazz, critical improvisation studies, organizational improvisation, the popular business press, and the trade manuals on agile and lean—failure gets proclaimed as the gateway to learning. The core tenets of this perspective are twofold: learning cannot occur without failing and failure might produce advantageous results.

Evidence of the former tenet can be seen in Ries’s validated learning model. In addition to the assertive quote in the introduction of this subchapter, he insists that “Failure is a prerequisite to learning,”¹⁵⁰ urging startup founders to embrace failure since they would not be able to perform the cardinal function of entrepreneurs—learning—without it. Similarly, Blank and Dorf contend that those launching businesses have to be celebrate failure, though only when they learn something from it.¹⁵¹ This notion of learning from failure has spread from the world of startups to the world of

¹⁴⁹ Ries, *The Lean Startup*, 192–193.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 154.

¹⁵¹ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 14.

high finance. In his influential book, *Principles*, Ray Dalio, manager of the world's largest hedge fund, avers that "the key to success lies in knowing how to both strive for a lot and fail well. By failing well, I mean being able to experience painful failures that provide big learnings," and adds that "being painfully wrong a fair amount" applies to entrepreneurship as well.¹⁵²

Less stridently than Ries, Paul Newton, in the jazz metaphor literature, argues that risking failure provides the greatest opportunity to learn.¹⁵³ Jazz has long been characterized as an art form based on an aesthetic of imperfection¹⁵⁴ and musicians and improvisation scholars alike have emphasized the positive outcomes of mistakes and errors.¹⁵⁵ Pianists like Art Tatum, Herbie Hancock, and Bill Evans have all made statements that are variations on idea that there are no mistakes, only incorrect ways of dealing with them.¹⁵⁶ One pianist takes it a step further; Kenny

¹⁵² Ray Dalio, *Principles: Life and Work* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), xii, xiv.

¹⁵³ Paul Newton, Paul M. "Leadership Lessons for Jazz Improvisation," *International Journal of Leadership in Education* 7:1 (2004): 98.

¹⁵⁴ The idea of an aesthetic of imperfection and some of the discourse around it warrant a slight digression here as a result of the overlap between the people-centricity of agile and lean (the subject of the first section of this chapter) and the human-centeredness that the aesthetic espouses. The notion of an aesthetic of imperfection in improvised music is attributed to jazz historian Ted Gioia, yet his formulation is critiqued heavily by philosopher Andy Hamilton, who claims that Gioia's perspective on imperfection is negative or focuses on deficiencies rather than positive attributes. However, in my view, Hamilton misreads, or at least only selectively reads Gioia and ignores the historian's claim that "an aesthetics of imperfection [is] one which accepts [a] human element in art." Through two articles, separated by two decades, Hamilton eventually (also) comes to the conclusion that "The value of imperfection...is a human value" and regards this as the positive formulation that Gioia allegedly lacked. According to both authors, the benefit of an aesthetic of imperfection is that it not only takes humanness into account, but instead celebrates it, much like individuals and people are celebrated and centered within the discourses around agile and lean startups. Ted Gioia, "Jazz: The Aesthetics of Imperfection," *Hudson Review* 39:4 (1987): 600; Andy Hamilton, "The Aesthetics of Imperfection Reconceived: Improvisations, Compositions, and Mistakes," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 78:3 (2020): 298. See also Ted Gioia, *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Andy Hamilton, "The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40:1 (2000): 168–185.

¹⁵⁵ See for example Lydia Goehr's formulation of a felicitous "improvisation *improptu*." "Improvising Improptu, Or, What to Do with a Broken String," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol 1, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 470.

¹⁵⁶ See for example those quoted by Alessandro Bertinetto, "Do Not Fear the Mistakes—There are None: The Mistake as Surprising Experience of Creativity in Jazz," in *Education as Jazz: Interdisciplinary Sketches on a New Metaphor*, eds. Marina Santi and Eleonora Zorzi (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 88.

Barron contends that “If you do not make mistakes, you do not play jazz,”¹⁵⁷ espousing a sentiment similar to Ries’s insistence on the ubiquitous presence (and, by implication, the necessary embrace) of failure in startups.

Thus, just as making mistakes is an essential feature of jazz—at least according to Barron—failure is a central feature of entrepreneurship in the lean mold. This embrace of failure is firstly a stance of realism, since most startups do fail and, even in the ones that don’t, many ideas will fail to get the validation they need from customers; and secondly regarded as a productive site for progress, as demonstrated through the link between learning and failure.

The fact that failure cannot be avoided finds an expression in the notion that startups exist to seek out what customers desire, rather than executing a business plan.¹⁵⁸ Such rote execution of product development, sales forecasts, and growth leaves no space for mistakes or missed targets, which in turn leaves no space for iterations or pivots away from ideas that will not work within a particular market. Furthermore, Blank and Dorf are at pains to make a key differentiation: “A pivot is not a failure” since “Pivots happen often in the Customer Development process,” which is required to attain entrepreneurial success.¹⁵⁹

However, not all agree with such an embrace of failure. In a 2012 conversation with Ries at the Lean Startup conference, famed venture capitalist Marc Andreessen said “The pivot. It used to be called ‘the fuck-up.’ Taking the stigma out of failure is very exciting. ...but you don’t want people to be intentionally encouraged to fail. Maybe it’s time to add a bit more stigma.”¹⁶⁰ Kornel, who

¹⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵⁸ See Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 12 and 15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Eliza Kern, “Marc Andreessen: Not Every Startup Should Be a Lean Startup or Embrace the Pivot.” *Gigaom*, December 3, 2012. <https://gigaom.com/2012/12/03/marc-andreessen-not-every-startup-should-be-a-lean-startup-or-embrace-the-pivot/> (accessed June 23, 2021).

advocates for an explicitly improvisatory approach to startups, quotes this passage by Andreessen and later notes that “‘Fail fast’ and ‘fail often’ have been reduced to mindless dictums in entrepreneurship in recent years,” yet softens his approach, noting that, since failure is unavoidable, it is better to fail in a way that provides learning.¹⁶¹

The encouragement to fail does indeed appear in the lean methodology literature, as well as in that of organizational improvisation. Kao, in outlining a core set of values for a jazz-embracing corporate credo, notes the honorability of failure,¹⁶² while Cunha et al. maintain that “Being agile can be tricky when the organization is inclined toward zero-defect types of environments,”¹⁶³ or, stated differently, those that disincentivize rather than encourage failure.

The allusion to zero-defect types of environments gives rise to the question of what the stakes of a particular failure might be. In small companies with only a handful of employees, even a relatively catastrophic failure—closing up shop—only leads to the loss of a few jobs and the loss of equity that venture capitalists like Andreessen view as a cost of doing business. The failures of larger firms, with larger employment and ownership reaches, carry far greater stakes. Furthermore, the scale of large firms can cause outsized effects of even small failures. Between 2007 and 2010, Toyota had to recall 5.7 million cars because floor mats could slide under the accelerator pedal causing cars to take off uncontrollably, as was the case in an accident that caused the death of a 77-year-old woman in Michigan in 2008. By 2010, the death toll potentially related to unintended accelerations reached 89 as a result of the rather mundane defect. In the late 1980s, Toyota’s response to defective Lexus models—a swift recall with excellent customer service—built customer loyalty. Yet the same

¹⁶¹ Kornel, *Spinning into Control*, 142; the Andreessen quote appears on 26.

¹⁶² Kao, *Jamming*, 181.

¹⁶³ Cunha et al., “Improvising Agility,” 242.

type of response could not be mustered in the aughts because of “The company’s secrecy and tendency to centralize decision-making...contribut[ing] to the public relations debacle.”¹⁶⁴ The supposedly low-stakes realm of jazz and other forms of art-making, where even the most serious failures on the bandstand lead only to bad reviews and reputational loss, seems like a metaphor mismatched to large-stake scenarios where even a floormat can cause the death of dozens of people.

Even the proponents of the lean methodology eventually veer away from failure. In the first two of the *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, failure is encouraged in order to facilitate and optimize learning. But by the time founders reach the third step, customer creation, the overall approach morphs into the approach condemned in the first two steps: “Customer creation is a radically different stage during which the company suddenly shifts from ‘searching to a business model’ to ‘executing one.’” Blank and Dorf continue that “It’s no longer celebrating mistakes and wrong turns. It shifts full-throttle into ‘execute’ mode, with revenue targets and timetables to hit, products and plans to deliver,”¹⁶⁵ etc., thereby, in effect, changing the business’s perspective from that of a startup in an uncertain environment to that of a mature business in a predictable market. In addition to the change in perspective, this point in the company’s trajectory also signals a need to scale up the number of employees, create more formal departments, as opposed to cross-functional teams, and, eventually, reach the fourth step: company building.

The recommendation seems to be that many of the tenets of improvisation are to be left behind in the freewheeling early stages of a startup’s lifetime, when the company is still small and navigating a considerably uncertain environment. However, as the preceding chapters have shown,

¹⁶⁴ Nathan Layne, Taiga Uranaka, and Kevin Krolicki, “Inside Toyota’s Epic Breakdown,” *Reuters*, February 9, 2010. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-toyota-specialreport/inside-toyotas-epic-breakdown-idUSTRE61851220100209> (accessed July 22, 2021).

¹⁶⁵ Blank and Dorf, *The Startup Owner’s Manual*, 46.

even mature companies find themselves in increasingly turbulent environments and need improvisatory responses to changes in market dynamics and competitive landscapes, and to remain at the cutting edge of innovation. The next chapter delves into the questions of implementing lean startup approaches in large firms and achieving agile at scale—through improvisation.

Chapter 4: Towards an Improvisatory Agile at Scale

Agile and lean methodologies for business development emerged and flourished in the context of startups, since these organizations frequently consist only of small teams working under conditions of extreme uncertainty. Founders and developers can improvise their way through this turbulent environment by listening and learning, and responding by embracing change and failure. They do so within the context of a relatively flat organizational structure; there are relatively few employees, policies, and protocols, since such small groups mutually adapt rather than generating processes and documentations.

However, an agile approach becomes difficult to sustain as a company grows, and more employees, layers, and operating procedures demand standardization and crystallization. Since the spread of agile and lean methodologies, from product development to business development, has delivered impressive results in startups, many established companies have tried to emulate their core tenets—reaching for “agile at scale”—to varying levels of success, in order to capitalize on the gains that they’ve seen lean startups make. Companies and consultants have proposed various strategies to scale up agile, yet many of these strategies are partial; most still use agile startups as their basis, rather than creating their own models.

In this chapter, I work toward a model of scaling agile to large corporations by using the improvisatory underpinnings of both large-company corporate management and agile startup methods as a bridge. I start by laying out some of the challenges that scaling up agile presents, including team size and standardization of procedures; the next portion of the chapter then turns to some of the solutions proposed in the business press during the last five years. Then, in an extension of the organizational improvisation discourse, I draw on musical models of large-group improvisation that emerged in the 1970s and 80s and argue that these genres provide critical insights

for scaling up small-team managerial and business development practices. Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Music, John Zorn's game pieces, and Butch Morris's Conduction® serve as illustrations of large-group musical improvisational models that demonstrate solutions to problems with types of material or work that resist improvisational treatment as well as difficulties in leading large groups of improvisers. Insights taken from these systems of improvisation are finally presented as recommendations at the end of the dissertation.

Both the jazz metaphor for management and the principles of agile and lean emphasize grouping workers together in small teams so as to maximize responsiveness to each other and to the ever-changing external environment. Large firms with entrenched hierarchies and operating procedures struggle to replicate such a small-group approach and, contrary to what some organizational improvisation scholars imply, a bebop combo does not provide an exceptionally good model for organizing a multinational corporation since there is an inherent incongruence between their respective group sizes. Furthermore, the change- and failure-embracing approach of agile, analogized through improvisatory musicking, is not suitable to all the different parts of such a large organization. What is needed are forms of improvisation that specifically engage with the issue of improvising in large groups to provide a more imitable and integrative model. While the jazz metaphor discourse as well as critical improvisation studies frequently disavow any arguments for partially centralized leadership, large-group improvisations headed by a coordinating and responsive leader illustrate that clear leadership, when conducted in an improvisatory "when-not-what" fashion, providing context rather than instruction, strikes the right balance between freedom and collective alignment that growing or large companies need to achieve agile at scale.

4.1 The problems with agile at scale—and proposed solutions

An agile approach to business is particularly well-suited to small, growing startups dealing with uncertain environments. However, as these startups grow, they eventually mature into larger established companies and, though constant experimentation and hypothesis verification, remove some of the uncertainty, making agile more difficult to maintain. The methodology—somewhat interchangeably referred to as agile or as lean, though I tend to use “agile” in this chapter unless the lean origins are particularly relevant—relies on small, adaptive teams that manage themselves, rather than the top-down leadership hierarchies that have historically allowed firms to scale up. As companies grow and hire more employees, the small-team structure of the initial founding team cannot be maintained. What frequently happens is that the improvisatory working methods of the small team, which led to innovations during the company’s exciting early stages, become ossified in the larger, more bureaucratic organization. Safi Bahcall identifies group size as the “control parameter” that determines whether a company is in an innovation phase, in which they foster the creation of what he calls “loonshot” inventions; or has solidified into a stable bureaucracy, or what he calls the “franchise” phase. Bahcall explains that “As a group grows, the balance of incentives shifts from encouraging individuals to focus on collective goals to encouraging a focus on careers and promotion. When the size of the group exceeds a critical threshold, career interests triumph. That’s when teams will begin to dismiss loonshots and only franchise projects...will survive.”¹

The natural “critical threshold” is estimated to be around Dunbar’s Number of 150. Anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar finds that 150 is around the maximum number of relationships a single person can have at any given time. The finding was initially driven

¹ Safi Bahcall, *Loonshots: How to Nurture the Crazy Ideas that Win Wars, Cure Diseases, and Transform Industries* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2019), 186.

by brain size: maintaining social relationships requires brain power. While the number was first derived from extrapolating a straight line from monkey brain sizes to human brain sizes, data from Christmas card mailing lists, telephone records, and historical village sizes also stand as evidence for a limit, on average, of 150 relationships an individual can sustain.²

Bahcall, a trained physicist and management consultant, does not simply rely on a base number, but has a tailor-made formula to determine the critical threshold, including inputs like how much stake individuals have in project successes, how many layers there are between the CEO and most junior worker, the average number of direct reports managers have, the size of raises that accompany promotions, and the ratio between a “return on project work” (or, how good you are at your job) and “return on politics.” By tweaking any of these inputs—say, by hiring better employees or altering the increase of salary that comes with a promotion—the critical number beyond which a firm’s incentive structure engenders bureaucratic organization can be increased or decreased.³ Increasing the number allows the company to grow to a much greater size while still retaining the benefits of the agile development methods that drove the initial success of the startup.

In addition to the number of employees, the systematization of procedures also inhibits agile behavior as organizations grow. In the lean startup methodology, the initial steps (though especially Blank’s first step, Customer Discovery) emphasize the iterative generation of processes like sales roadmaps that can, once formalized, be followed without variation to achieve success. The sales roadmap is one example of such a standardization, yet other functions within a company also

² Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of our Most Important Relationships* (London: Little, Brown, 2021), 28–36.

³ Bahcall, *Loonshots*, 195–202.

benefit from standardization and, due to factors like regulation, might be adversely impacted by the failures that learning and experimentation necessarily entail.⁴

Similar problems of agile at scale appear when a company that grew through non-agile means attempts to adopt an agile approach to their operations after maturation. These firms have seen the powerful benefits to innovation, productivity, and company culture that have allowed lean startups to grow rapidly and, in some cases, disrupt the industries in which the established companies find themselves. In contrast to startups, these bureaucratic organizations typically have top-down leadership structures that govern large departments and standard operating procedures entrenched.⁵ Plans are made months or years in advance and processes take long to make it through the relevant bureaucratic systems and chains of decision-makers. Shifting to agile from such a baseline proves difficult for the same reasons as those that impede startups in their attempts to remain agile as they expand, with the additional obstacle to overcome resistance to change.

4.1.1 Issues with team size and governance

The most obvious discrepancies between an agile startup and a large company are the number of employees they have and how these employees are grouped or teamed.⁶ At the early stages of a startup, the founders and early hires can all be part of the same team even as they fulfill different roles in the development of the business and product. Indeed, this cross-functionality is a

⁴ Steve Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany: Successful Strategies for Products that Win* (Pescadero: K&S Ranch Press, [2005] 2013), 210. Cf. Chapter 3 for a much deeper dissection of Blank and the lean startup methodology.

⁵ Kaj Burchardi et al., “Five Secrets to Scaling Up Agile,” February 19, 2016, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2016/five-secrets-to-scaling-up-agile> (accessed February 28, 2021), 1–2.

⁶ The issue of group size in bureaucratic systems and improvising teams has received ample attention in the organizational improvisation literature, as demonstrated by the opposition between a symphony orchestra and a jazz combo. See Chapter 2.1 and 3.2 in this document.

core component of agile teaming. However, once the startup expands, the founding team no longer has the capacity to conduct all the necessary operations and the payroll swells. At some point, the number of employees exceeds what can usefully be accommodated on a single agile team (a common heuristic is the “two-pizza rule” invoked at Amazon, which states that no team should be larger than what can be fed by two pizzas when they’re working late into the night) and eventually crosses the Bahcall’s “critical threshold” when incentives shift the focus from collaborative efforts to individual ambition.

Within the realm of critical improvisation studies in music, Thomas Stanley notes that “The question of how to bring large ensembles into form, focus, and flexibility of small group improvisation...had been a stubborn one.”⁷ Stanley cites Jean Martin, who finds “improvisations with small ensembles or solo performers more interesting than large ensemble improvisations... They are too complex, it can fall apart into anarchy.”⁸ As improvising groups, agile teams thus find it difficult to maintain some of the advantageous qualities associated with smaller groups, as they grow larger. It is therefore frequently necessary for a single team to divide into two or more teams so that each team can remain small enough to reap the benefits of inter- and intragroup improvisation.

As teams proliferate in mitogenic fashion, they typically lose some of their cross-functionality as they crystalize around specific functional processes. Even Blank, the champion of the lean startup methodology, notes that “Unfortunately, a Customer Development team without functional organization cannot scale. To remedy this, the company now needs to organize into departments that aggregate specific business functions that would have been counterproductive at

⁷ Thomas Stanley, “Butch Morris and the Art of Conduction®” (PhD diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2009), 62.

⁸ Jean Martin, “Derek Bailey Interview,” August 16, 1996. <http://www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk/fulltext/mbailin2.html> (accessed July 28, 2021).

earlier stages—principally sales, marketing, and business development—and organize them appropriately.”⁹ He does add the caveat that these departments should be “fast-response” departments in order to maintain agility, yet does not specify how they do so other than remaining open to change.¹⁰ However, these functional departments usually have a clear leader who then reports up to a more cross-functional top-leadership team that resembles a traditional C-suite.

This bureaucratic departmental structure is in many ways antithetical to agile in that it is, to some extent, a problem with the traditional business approach that agile aims to solve through cross-functionality and distributed leadership structures. In large companies with already-established functional departments and reporting channels, agile methods of organizing the workforce present a shift that is difficult to implement without disrupting operations, requiring retraining, and a wholesale overhaul of business processes. Unsurprisingly, managers are apprehensive about mandating such deep change in reorganizing hierarchies into cross-functional and self-managing teams.

4.1.2 The issue of standardization

Another barrier to agile is the fact that some business processes are simply not amendable to the improvisatory, failure-friendly, and change-embracing stance that lean and agile methodologies promote. Since agile emerged as a method for software development and focuses on customer interaction, it is well suited to the parts of a company that deal with product development and client engagement. However, it is less suited to some of back-office sections of the company, including HR, finance, and legal, that demand consistency, regularity, and, in certain cases, regulatory

⁹ Blank, *Four Steps to the Epiphany*, 239–240.

¹⁰ Ibid., 247; see also Wouter Aghina, Aaron De Smet, and Kirsten Weerda, “Agility, It Rhymes with Stability,” *McKinsey Quarterly* (December 1, 2015): 1.

compliance.¹¹ Two former Amazon executives warn that “Agile is a highly effective tool for product development, especially software-driven offerings. But as companies expand its use into new areas (budgeting, talent management), agile is too often used as an excuse to avoid careful planning and preparation.”¹² Yves Doz and Maria Guadalupe similarly caution that agile is not equally suited not only to functions within a single company, but also to companies within particular industries. They note that agile “is a natural fit for traditionally customer-facing domains that would benefit from incremental innovations... Whichever industry you’re in, rushing headlong into Agile without due consideration could hobble rather than improve your business.”¹³ In addition to support functions like finance or HR, adopting improvisatory methods in functions that minimize failure in segments of the business that have exacting requirements and/or carry particularly high stakes—such as plant maintenance or safety inspection on vehicles, as illustrated by the lethal Toyota floormat example in the previous chapter—might also have adverse effects. It seems clear that agile only benefits some portions of what an established company does and might actively disadvantage others.

One elementary solution to this issue is to simply create separate streams of organization within the large company: implementing agile in the functions that benefit from experimentation and gathering constant feedback, while keeping some functions in their more traditional standardized and standardizing structures.¹⁴ However, the parallel streams need to interact from time

¹¹ Tom Relihan, “Agile at Scale, Explained,” July 6, 2018, <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/agile-scale-explained> (accessed August 5, 2021); Darrell K. Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Andy Noble, “Agile at Scale: How to Go from a Few Teams to Hundreds,” *Harvard Business Review* 96:5/6 (2018): 91; Darrell K. Rigby, Sarah Elk, and Steve Berez, *Doing Agile Right: Transformation without Chaos* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2020), 148.

¹² Colin Bryar and Bill Carr, “Have We Taken Agile Too Far?” *Harvard Business Review*, April 9, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/04/have-we-taken-agile-too-far> (accessed April 12, 2021).

¹³ Yves Doz and Maria Guadalupe, “Not Everyone Can Be Agile,” INSEAD Knowledge, February 16, 2021, <https://knowledge.insead.edu/strategy/not-everyone-can-be-agile-16091> (accessed August 17, 2021), 3.

¹⁴ The process as explained here pertains to large companies adopting agile; agile-native startups reverse the process, keeping development agile while implementing more traditional structures as standardization is required during growth.

to time, such as when a new product development project is financed, and frictions are inevitable when operating models differ as widely as the traditional bureaucratic method and the agile method that serves as an intervention thereto. Darrell Rigby, Jeff Sutherland, and Andy Noble warn that, as established firms adopt agile in some of their functions, “it’s not unusual to launch hundreds of new agile teams only to see them bottlenecked by slow-moving bureaucracies.”¹⁵ Dividing company operations into agile units and bureaucratic units works well enough internally, yet integration and cooperation among these units will suffer if there isn’t an active attempt at harmonization.

4.1.3 Proposed solutions

A popular approach to the issue of agile at scale does indeed focus on harmonizing the agile and more traditional parts of the organization. Advocates of the “partially agile” avenue (frequently management consultants) note that bureaucratic systems do have their advantages and should be maintained where appropriate. In their tome on *Doing Agile Right*, Bain & Company’s Darrell Rigby, Sarah Elk, and Steve Berez claim that “What the agile-everywhere zealots fail to understand is the time-tested virtues of bureaucracy—in some places and contexts.”¹⁶ One way of visualizing this separation, as well as the importance of the bureaucratic segments, is presented by Daniel Brosseau and his colleagues at McKinsey & Company, who maintain that

The organizational backbone comprises the stable components of an agile operating model that are essential to enable agile teams. Typically, these backbone elements include core processes (for example, talent management, budgeting, planning, performance management, and risk), people elements [etc. ...] In trying to scale up, many agile transformations fail by simply launching more agile teams without addressing these backbone elements.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble, “Agile at Scale,” 90; see also Rigby, Elk, and Berez, *Doing Agile Right*, 60.

¹⁶ Rigby, Elk, and Berez, *Doing Agile Right*, 11; see also 51.

¹⁷ Daniel Brosseau, Sherina Ebrahim, Christopher Handscomb, and Shail Thaker, “The Journey to an Agile Organization,” May 10, 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-journey-to-an-agile-organization> (accessed February 28, 2021), 7.

However, all of these consultants insist that the bureaucratic backbone elements and agile elements need to interact in a way that does not stifle the work of either, and managers instead have to foster a symbiotic relationship between the segments. With a different set of co-authors, Rigby maintains that “The scaling up also brings agile values and principles to business operations and support functions, even if many routine activities remain.”¹⁸

The influence of agile on bureaucratic units include the shortening of timeframes so as to better respond to feedback and change (for example, creating quarterly budgets for projects rather than generating annual funding plans), as well as decentralizing decision-making so as to empower those employees closest to the problem. According to Scaled Agile, a company that sells services related to their Scaled Agile Framework® (SAFe), “less energy [should be] devoted to top-down hierarchy and more to inside-outside symbiosis. Command-and-control is replaced by sense-and-respond.”¹⁹ Of course, this relinquishing of control comes with the sorts of trade-offs between control and freedom or between order and chaos seen elsewhere in the organizational improvisation literature.²⁰

In the “partially agile” approach, bureaucratic business units exist alongside agile units. These units support each other and mutually inform and strengthen each other’s processes. For this

¹⁸ Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble, “Agile at Scale,” 96.

¹⁹ Scaled Agile, “Agile at Scale: Making the Case for Business Agility,” <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/2495218/Making-the-case-for-business-agility-ValueGlide.pdf> (accessed August 9, 2021), slide 10). Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble similarly maintain that “In companies that have scaled up agile, the organization charts of support functions [facilities, finance, HR, etc.] generally look much as they did before, though often with fewer management layers and broader spans of control as supervisors learn to trust and empower people. The bigger changes are in the ways functional departments work.” “Agile at Scale,” 95.

²⁰ See Chapter 3.3.3 in this document. For instances of the emphasis on trade-offs in the agile at scale literature, see Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble, “Agile at Scale,” 95; Rigby, Elk, and Berez, *Doing Agile Right*, 19; and Aghina, De Smet, and Weerda, “Agility: It Rhymes with Stability,” 1.

arrangement to be optimal, managers must carefully balance the parts of the company that engage with flexibility and improvisatory innovation and the parts that provide stability and sustainability.

Whereas the “partially agile” configuration keeps agile and traditional teams separate, an alternative organizing method—teams of teams—creates a structure in which functions are more thoroughly integrated. The idea that undergirds the formation of teams of teams is that each individual team is cross-functional and self-managing and that the team of teams is similarly self-governing, rather than hierarchical.

However, different iterations of the teams-of-teams model approach the question of the system’s relationship to hierarchy in different ways. On the one extreme, there is the flexible model used at Spotify, a frequent poster-child for agile teaming at scale. The music streaming service organizes their workforce into squads, tribes, chapters, and guilds, all of which are “loosely coupled and tightly aligned.”²¹ Squads are small, cross-functional agile teams that work on particular problems; tribes are amalgamations of squads whose focal problems are all related to a larger business issue to be solved, like a new product to be launched; chapters are essentially functional areas like sales or engineering, but their members are divided among different squads in order to ensure cross-functionality; finally, guilds are interest groups that anyone can join.

²¹ Michael Mankins and Eric Garton, “How Spotify Balances Employee Autonomy and Accountability,” *Harvard Business Review*, February 9, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/02/how-spotify-balances-employee-autonomy-and-accountability> (accessed August 30, 2021); Eric Garton and Andy Noble, “How to Make Agile Work for the C-Suite,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 19, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/07/how-to-make-agile-work-for-the-c-suite> (accessed February 28, 2021). For a more detailed description of the Spotify model, see Rigby, Elk, and Berez, *Doing Agile Right*, 66–67.

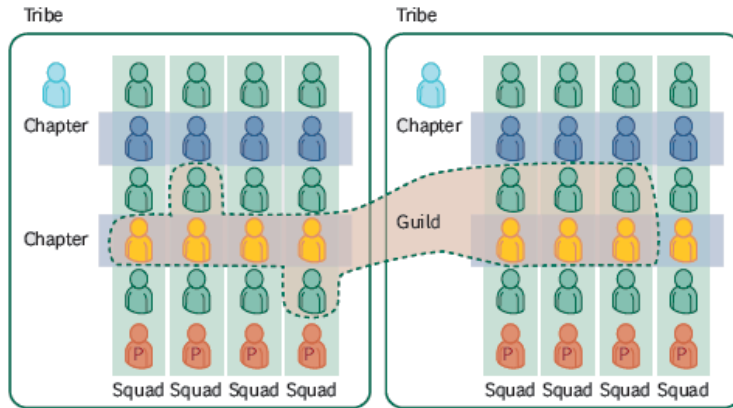


Fig. 4.1. Organizing the Spotify way²²

For large projects like developing medical devices or aerospace and defense systems, SAFe recommends a similarly fractal approach to teaming, yet with a much stronger sense of hierarchy in terms of reporting structure and leadership. At the lowest rung, agile teams (similar to Spotify’s squads) are led by a Scrum Master and a Product Owner, both of whom report one level up to the Release Train Engineer and Product Manager who run the Agile Release Train that forms the grouping of agile teams. Multiple Agile Release Trains are grouped together to form Solution Trains, which are in turn run by a Solution Train Engineer and a Solution Manager.²³ The Solution Train deals with a similar magnitude of problem as Spotify’s tribes, yet SAFe adds an additional level (the Agile Release Train) between the tribe and squad levels. At this point, the organizational structure begins to resemble that of more traditional bureaucracies, even if individuals in the smallest teams conduct their work in an agile way.

²² Figure taken from Burchardi et al., “Five Secrets to Scaling Up Agile,” 5. The P on the bottom row of each squad stands for “product owner”; for more detail on the important role of the product owner, see below.

²³ Scaled Agile, “Agile Release Train,” 2021. <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/agile-release-train/> (accessed August 10, 2021); “Solution Train,” 2021. <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/solution-train/> (accessed August 10, 2021).

A type of middle ground is to create team of teams framework at one level of the organization, yet retain the upper strata in the decision-making hierarchy. McKinsey's internal Agile Tribe propose that "Agile organizations maintain a stable top-level structure, but replace much of the remaining traditional hierarchy with a flexible, scalable network of teams. Networks are a natural way to organize efforts because they balance individual freedom with collective coordination."²⁴ This balance is, of course, at the heart of improvisation yet the two-tier framework provides a model found in the organizational improvisation literature, which tends to posit an idealized egalitarianism as a foil to the command-and-control hierarchies associated with twentieth-century bureaucracies. Near the end of *Doing Agile Right*, the authors attempt to clarify the relationship between teams of teams and hierarchies by differentiating the manner in which agile leaders direct their teams. Rigby, Elk, and Berez claim that "Teams of agile teams, and teams of teams of agile teams, create reporting structures that look a lot like hierarchies. Yet product owners are not traditional bosses: they do not predict, command, or control the work of teams. Nor do they assign tasks to individuals or set deadlines—the team works together to do these things. Despite all the criticisms of hierarchies, they, too, work well with agile mindsets and agile methods."²⁵ Achieving agile at scale seems to be impossible without some sort of leadership structure that serves smaller agile teams by supplying direction and coordination.

Considering the improvisatory nature of agile, the branches of organizational science that focus on improvisation as a model for structuring businesses are well-suited to generate metaphors

²⁴ Wouter Aghina et al., "The 5 Trademarks of Agile Organizations," December 2017. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations> (accessed March 7, 2021), 9. In crisis situations like the initial outbreak of covid-19, the consultancy recommends a more detached method: "create a robust network of teams that is empowered to operate outside the current hierarchy and bureaucratic structures of the organization." Andrea Alexander, Aaron De Smet, Sarah Kleinman, and Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi, "To Weather a Crisis, Build a Network of Teams," April 8, 2020. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/to-weather-a-crisis-build-a-network-of-teams> (accessed July 16, 2021), 2.

²⁵ Rigby, Elk, and Berez, *Doing Agile Right*, 159.

for the types of configurations necessary to succeed in agile growth, in the case of startups, or agile transformation, in the case of established companies. Yet the musical metaphors that dominate the organizational improvisation discourse fail to model the type of stratified system that balances the flexibility of agile work with the leadership that allows agile to scale up effectively.

4.2 Musical models for twenty-first-century management

Chapter 2 in this document outlines the reasons why organizational scholars have proposed jazz as a metaphor for doing business. I spend a considerable number of pages examining their strategy of presenting a circumscribed view of jazz, limiting themselves to the repertoires and performance practices of the swing, bebop, and postbop eras (more or less 1930-1965). These scholars emphasize the usually small group size of bebop combos and the egalitarian leadership structure they engender, as well as the need for constraints to spur improvisation that, on the jazz side, entails the use of jazz standards and musical and social conventions that accompany the narrow slice of the jazz tradition on which these authors focus.

I conclude that chapter with by focusing on the handful of moments in the jazz metaphor discourse when authors acknowledge the value of improvised music produced after 1965, rather than disparaging free jazz as noise or chaos. However, I also note that these moments are not followed through with correctives. In response to the 1998 special issue on organizational improvisation in *Organization Science*, Michael Zack warns that “overemphasizing the structure of traditional improvisational genres may limit the power of using jazz as a metaphor for innovation,”²⁶ and continues to argue for a free jazz approach to improvising upon structures rather than within them. His article—more of a rebuttal—is unfortunately too short to apply his proposed model in

²⁶ Michael Zack, “Jazz Improvisation and Organization: Once More from the Top,” *Organization Science* 11:2 (2000): 228.

any way beyond his final charge to lean deeper into the improvisatory models of free jazz without the constraints of traditional forms of jazz. In a much longer article, Morris Holbrook notes the limitations of straight-ahead jazz as a metaphor and asks readers to “recognize the subtle complexities of differences among various kinds of jazz artists, what they have accomplished, and how these differences suggest complications in our perspectives in management practice.”²⁷ Yet, Holbrook fails to move beyond the very same repertory of jazz that he finds limited. Finally, in their 2015 review, Allègre Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose argue that free jazz in particular offers “multiple opportunities to illustrate the ambiguous, emotional, and temporal characteristics [such as] entrepreneurial ad hoc teams, nimble virtual organizations, [and] open innovation systems”²⁸ that mark the emerging agile management methods of the mid-2010s.

To a great extent, this section is an answer to the calls by Zack, Holbrook, and Hadida, Tarvainen, and Rose to consider more deeply what understandings of freer forms of improvisatory musicking afford organizational improvisation. I provide three systems of musical improvisation that emerged in the years after 1965—Cornelius Cardew’s Scratch Music, John Zorn’s game pieces (exemplified by *Cobra*), and Butch Morris’s Conduction®—and argue that these systems are better metaphors for management in the twenty-first century than those proposed by advocates of the jazz metaphor.²⁹ All three systems exhibit two important features that align them more closely with agile

²⁷ Morris Holbrook, “Playing the Changes on the Jazz Metaphor: An Expanded Conceptualization of Music-, Management-, and Marketing-Related Themes,” *Foundations and Trends in Marketing* 2:3-4 (2007): 206.

²⁸ Allègre L. Hadida, William Tarvainen, and Jed Rose, “Organizational Improvisation: A Consolidating Review and Framework,” *International Journal of Management Review* 17 (2015): 452.

²⁹ In his ethnomusicological dissertation on Butch Morris, Thomas Stanley notes that, by Morris’s request, he adds the “registered” symbol after the first instance of Conduction on each page. Considering the authority whence this directive arrives, I follow the same convention in the present document. The choice of registering the trademark—as opposed to copyrighting, which is the more typical avenue for intellectual property protection in the musical sphere—is an interesting facet in and of itself. As shall be seen below, the system lacks any features that might be copyrighted since there are no indicators of melody or beat, which are left up to the improvising musicians. The only element left that Morris can protect, then, is the name of the system he created.

at scale: free improvisation, i.e., improvisation not based on precomposed material like standards; and large group size.

The expansions of the improvisatory impulse beyond the tradition of standards or chord progressions, found in straight-ahead jazz, allow practitioners—of music and business alike—to gain more from the tenets of improvisation. Companies benefit from deeper embraces of change and failure in that it allows them to experiment and arrive at more innovative solutions than more risk-averse circumstances would allow. Because of this more open attitude to change, as well as an increased emphasis on gathering and analyzing feedback from the environment which becomes an important source of actionable information in the absence of pre-scripted plans and operating procedures, or even the types or frameworks or contingency plans that elements like chord progressions might represent, these companies are even better enabled to deal with turbulent environments.

Since a bebop combo, at least according to the jazz metaphor, is a small, egalitarian group in which leadership rotates among its members, it serves as an apt model for groups of limited size, like a single agile team or the entrepreneurial grouping of the founders and their first few hires. The large size of the ensembles that improvise in *Scratch*, *Cobra*, and *Conduction*® serves as a type of “bebop at scale,” without simply adding more and more musicians to the formation, and presents a model that facilitates many musicians improvising together. Returning briefly to Dunbar’s research on group sizes, it is worth noting that, in addition to the supposed upper limit of 150, there are also narrower layers around the self that average at 5, 15, and 50 (close friends, best friends, and good friends).³⁰ While the top-down hierarchies of yore center the ego in the middle of the concentric circles, the bebop model corresponds to the 5-layer, allowing for deviations like trios and sextets

³⁰ Dunbar, *Friends*, 71–72.

around that number; the large-group formats of Scratch, *Cobra*, and Conduction® hover around the 15-layer or even extend to the lower reaches of the 50-layer.

I begin by giving brief overviews of each of the systems in order to orient the reader (thereby acknowledging that none of them carry the cultural capital, and therefore renown, of traditional jazz). Following these descriptions, I extract the relevant characteristics to demonstrate how Scratch, *Cobra*, and Conduction model solutions to some of the difficulties of achieving agile at scale, most of which pertain to organizational structure and leadership.

4.2.1 Scratch Music

Cornelius Cardew, a mid-twentieth-century British composer, sought an alternative way for musicians—both amateur and professional—to make music together. Along with Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton, he founded the Scratch Orchestra and published an accompanying Draft Constitution.³¹ At the outset, the ensemble’s aims were centered on musical expression and musical freedom, yet overtly political elements, present though muted from the inception, became increasingly important during the evolution of the Orchestra.³² Cardew and several of the other founding members were committed to communist perspectives and increasingly injected drives toward egalitarianism through rotating leadership, despite many members’ aversion to the overtly political aspects of the group. The tension between these two groups—the communists and the bourgeois idealists—was eventually mediated by a shift “away from randomness and ‘freedom’

³¹ Cornelius Cardew, “A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution,” *The Musical Times* 110:1516 (1969): 617, 619.

³² Tony Harris, *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2013), 57–59.

towards music organized to express some intended content,”³³ giving both factions what they wanted: more control over musical and managerial outcomes.

The Draft Constitution lays out four modes of musicking that can be placed on a spectrum of reliance on precomposed material.³⁴ These modes correspond, to an extent, to differing levels of control over musical outcomes, with the greatest control found at the point of greatest reliance on and adherence to precomposed material. On the opposite end is improvisation, which, at its extreme, includes free improvisation which “may also be indulged in from time to time.”³⁵ Other improvisations are based on Fluxus-like prompts such as the following, penned by Richard Reason:³⁶

All seated loosely in a circle, each player shall write or draw on each of the ten fingernails of the player on his left.

No action or sound is to be made by a player of his fingernails have received this writing or drawing, other than music.

Closing rite: each player shall erase the marks from the fingernails of another player. Your participation in the music ceases when the marks have been erased from your fingernails.

Next on the spectrum is a system that Cardew calls “popular classics” in which one musician reads and plays a fragment of a well-known piece of notated music (he suggests, among others, Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony or Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto as examples, and insists that the piece carries its original title in the program booklet). Other musicians play along from memory and improvise “variational material” when memory fails. The ensemble is to “strive to act

³³ Rod Eley, “A History of the Scratch Orchestra 1969–1972,” in Cornelius Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974), 29.

³⁴ Cf. Bruce Benson’s laddering of improvisation, as well as similar ideas by Derek Bailey and Alfred Schutz around degrees of improvisation—instead of a dichotomy between absence and presence—found in all musical activity, discussed in the introduction.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 619.

³⁶ *Ibid.* Scratch music shares many traits with the Fluxus movement, including an emphasis on process over product, a do-it-yourself or bricolage-type attitude to creativity, and an anti-elite stance that welcomes amateur musicians. By including verbal or graphic directions—frequently in a DIY manner of performers writing in their own notebooks—rather than strictly notated ones, amateurs can follow the “score” in their own way, which might not have been possible in the context of notated scores with exacting technical demands.

concertedly rather than independently” as the reading musician proceeds through the fragment. Popular classics stand Western art music performance practice on its head by discarding any notion of *Werktreue* or accuracy in asking players to perform from memory or, equally validly, improvising along with the fragment from the canonic piece. The Scratch Orchestra’s popular classics caricature the Western notion of a Work³⁷ in its carnivalesque opposition between the player faithfully reading the fragment and the rest of the ensemble providing their bumbling support as best they can.

Closer to the fully notated end of the spectrum falls “scratch music.” Each musician in the orchestra generates and writes down in a notebook patterns of accompaniment that can be looped indefinitely as another musician takes a solo. Each player’s most recently notated accompaniment is their temporary solo part. However, the notated accompaniments, again in the Fluxus tradition, need not be in standard staff notation, but can incorporate graphics or verbal prescriptions as well; see Figure 4.2 for an example.

³⁷ For a thorough theorization of the work concept, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), particularly Chapter 4, “The Central Claim,” 89–119.

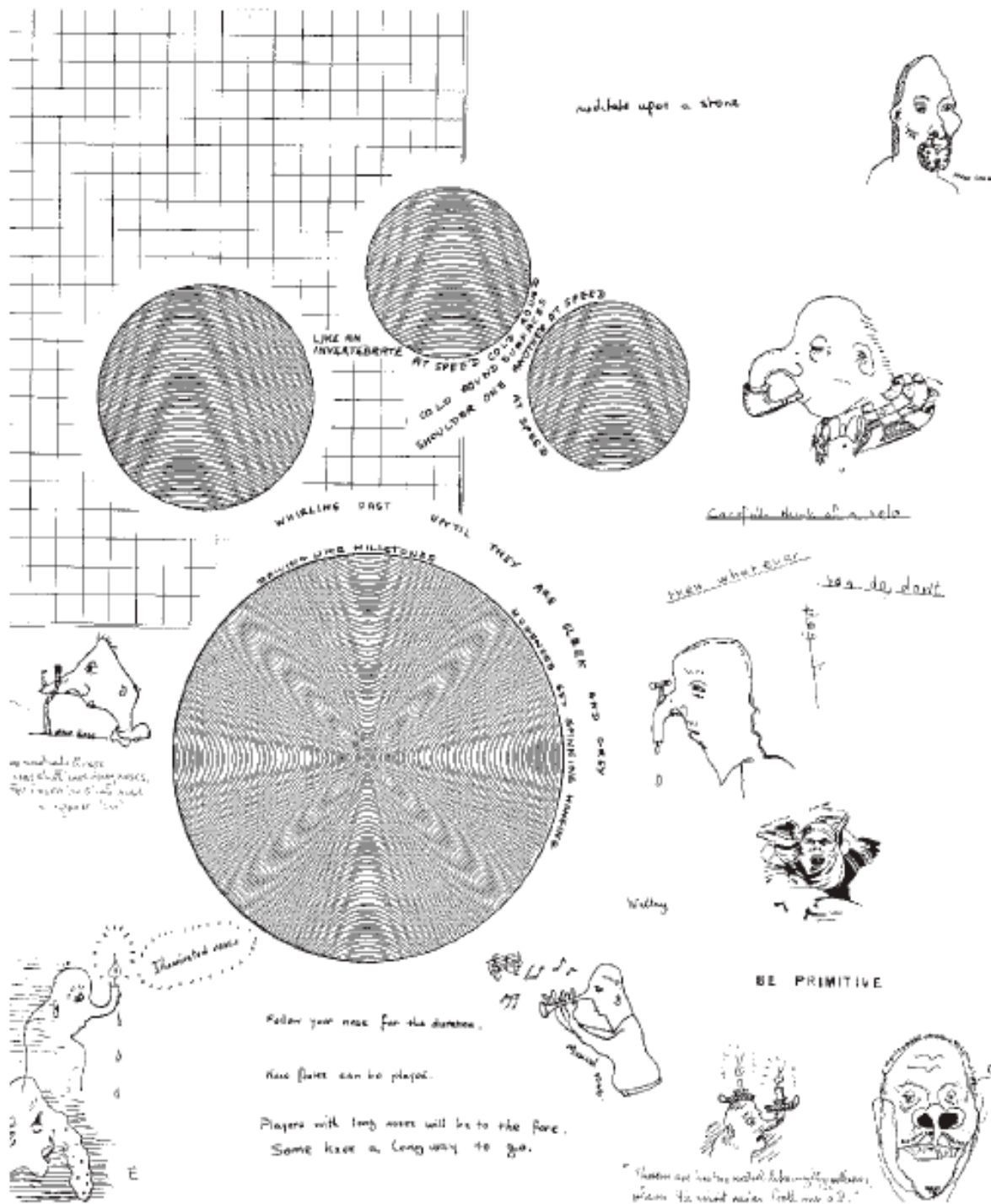


Fig. 4.2. A Scratch Music accompaniment, taken from an orchestra member's notebook³⁸

³⁸ Cornelius Cardew, *Scratch Music* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1972), 28. Cf. Prior footnote.

Scratch music grants musicians agency in three distinct ways: each player generates their own accompaniments, rather than being led by an external authorial figure; when playing, they have the freedom to choose any of their accompaniments when a soloist performs; finally, if using graphic, verbal, or otherwise musically ambiguous scores, they are able to work with considerable margins of interpretation.

On the least indeterminate point of the spectrum lies the category of compositions. When a scratch orchestra plays compositions, “all terms of the composition will be adhered to as closely as possible.”³⁹ However, if these compositions (provided examples include Riley’s *in C* and Stockhausen’s *Aus den sieben Tagen*) are repeatedly well-received, they may warrant ascension into the popular classics category, by which “adherence to the original terms of the composition would be waived.”⁴⁰ What this process indicates is a certain flexibility how material get categorized. Even material that is to be approached with a sense of *Werktreue* may be shifted into the carnivalesque category of popular classics, in which a fragment, still played with the appropriate reverence and fidelity, is pit against memorized and improvised accompaniment.

In the section on why proponents of the jazz metaphor oppose classical music, I remark on their focus on the tradition’s reliance on notation as the leadership structure found between conductors and symphony orchestras. Cardew’s scratch music clearly has a supple relationship with notation; drawing on the communist perspective followed by many of the ensemble’s members, it similarly distances itself from the command-and-control model of the tyrannical conductor found (or imagined to be found) on the symphonic podium. The Draft Constitution does not indicate how soloists for scratch music or readers for popular classics are selected, yet it would be consistent with

³⁹ Cardew, “Draft Constitution,” 619.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the Scratch Orchestra's communitarian ethos to have these leading musicians rotate. Extramusical leadership roles are dispersed among members of the orchestra. With regards to logistics, "In rotation (starting with the youngest) each member will have the option of designing a concert. ...all details of the concert of that person or his delegates."⁴¹ Furthermore, for compiling the list of compositions (those to be played faithfully), any member of the orchestra may suggest a piece and it will be given a trial run. However, Tony Harris notes that, despite this embrace of communism and egalitarianism, "The role of the leader, then, should not be underestimated, this being Cardew's own role in the Scratch Orchestra's performances," further noting that a Scratch Orchestra "warhorse," like Cardew's *The Great Learning*, "requires facilitation, if not direction."⁴² Occasional, temporary, and rotating leadership thus enables a scratch orchestra to cohere, even though it may consist of many musicians, many of whom may be amateurs, in contrast to the small groups typically associated with improvisation in the jazz metaphor literature. Welcoming non-professional musicians into the ensemble and allowing them equal decision-making powers as professionals are further extensions of the egalitarian and anti-bourgeois stance on which the Scratch Orchestra had been built.

4.2.2 *Cobra*

In the 1980s, composer and saxophonist John Zorn worked on several projects that he called "game pieces." He maintains that he was "Tying together loose strings left dangling" by composers like Cardew "to work out complex systems harnessing improvisers in flexible compositional formats."⁴³ Each game piece has a set of rules that distinguishes it from others, and

⁴¹ Ibid., 617.

⁴² Harris, *The Legacy of Cornelius Cardew*, 70.

⁴³ John Zorn, "The Game Pieces," in *Audio Cultures: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2006), 196.

players are mostly free to improvise within the rules of each game. Zorn is particularly interested in rules that dictate ensemble configurations: playing in duos or trios. The rules allow Zorn to solidify the structure of the piece, but none of the musical content that fills the sections of the structure. Of course, relinquishing such decision-making power demands that players are selected with care; he maintains that “To do this music properly is to do it with a community of like-minded musicians and an understanding of tactics, personal dynamics, instrumentation, aesthetics and group chemistry. It’s about cooperation, interaction, checks and balances, tension and release and many more elusive, ineffable things both musical and social.”⁴⁴

Cobra represents the apex of his series of game pieces. During a performance of *Cobra*, ensemble members make gestures, such as pointing to the mouth and followed by holding up two fingers, to suggest a particular scenario from the prompter, a key leading and regulating figure in the configuration. If the prompter accepts the suggestion (which they are quite likely not to, since many ensemble members sling out suggestions simultaneously), they hold up a card that indicates to the whole ensemble which scenario will come into being when they give the next downbeat. The mouth-then-two-fingers scenario, for example, is called “runner” and allows the player who made the suggestion point to any number of ensemble mates who are to start playing anything they want at the downbeat; the other musicians stop.⁴⁵ “Runner” demonstrates the core components of *Cobra*: musicians suggest; the prompter selects and initiates the scenario, which typically deals with interactions; and the musicians fill the scenario with unguided improvisations. Zorn notes that improvisers are typically resistant to strict perceptions on what to play (“They don’t want to be told what to do, they want to play their fucking *music*”) and explains how the prompter fits into this

⁴⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁴⁵ For a detailed explication of the various rules of *Cobra*, see John Brackett, “Some Notes on John Zorn’s *Cobra*,” *American Music* 28:1 (2010): 50–54.

musical structure: “I’ve got to create a structure that makes it my music as well. So I don’t tell people *what* to play but create a structure that tells them *when* they play.”⁴⁶ The division of roles is clear, and decision-making is broadly shared among musicians and between the musicians and the prompter: the prompter supplies structure; the musicians content.

Zorn adds a complicating element to the game. In keeping with the military theme of the title—taken from a 1977 boardgame that simulates a World War II skirmish—the rules of *Cobra* also allow musicians to embrace guerrilla systems, in which they, frequently in temporary alliances with ensemble mates, subvert the decision-making ability of the prompter by issuing their own scenarios and downbeats or ignoring those provided by the prompter. The inclusion of guerrilla tactics serves as a way to disrupt the straightforward balance of power that the suggest-select-improvise sequence cements, syphoning structural decision-making power away from the prompter into an even more decentralized system of dispersed agency.⁴⁷

4.2.3 Conduction®

In many respects similar to Zorn’s approach to large-group improvisation, composer and conductor Lawrence D. “Butch” Morris’s system of Conduction provides solutions to the difficulties of coordinating improvisation across an orchestra of musicians.⁴⁸ Morris states that

⁴⁶ Quoted in Edward Strickland, *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 136, emphasizes Zorn’s.

⁴⁷ John Brackett interprets the political element of the guerrilla groups in the opposite way. After describing *Cobra* as a conflation of the “anarchic” tendencies of free jazz (“no rules, complete freedom”) and the democratic ideals of straight-ahead jazz (“freedom within constraints,” à la jazz metaphor), he extends the political lens to also understand the guerrilla units “ability to ‘take control’ of other players” as fascistic rather than decentralizing (as I propose), even though he notes that “the prompter’s ability to ignore requests from the ensemble” also falls into the political category of fascism. Brackett, “Some Notes on John Zorn’s *Cobra*,” 55.

⁴⁸ A particularly direct link between Zorn and Morris’s Conduction is evident in the first moment of *Conduction #1*, in which Zorn’s saxophone provides the squeal that launches the performance, and the long string of Conduction performances that followed.

This really came from an idea I had years and years ago when I'm writing music and I would say 'how can I take a larger ensemble and play this music and have it sound like a trio? Have that kind of unity? Have that kinetic energy and unity that a trio has... How can I take an orchestra of improvisers (in the beginning) and have that kind of unity? How, how do I do it? Well, I had to go figure it out how. Because that's what I wanted—I wanted ensemble unity.⁴⁹

Facing similar questions as managers attempting to reach agile at scale, Conduction® was the system Morris created to generate ensemble unity at scale.

During a Conduction performance, a conductor makes signs and gestures drawn from a lexicon of standardized somatic expressions called directives (many of these are illustrated and explicated in Morris's posthumous *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*).⁵⁰ The conductor's gestures or signs may apply to the ensemble as a whole or only to select musicians within the grouping. Although directives all induce changes in musical behavior and leave important decisions to be made by individual musicians, they vary in how much interpretive latitude they grant. Directives range from the most limited open-hand-invitation "sustain," in which a musician is to simply choose a single pitch and hold it from the time of the downbeat until the directive is ended, to the beckoning-come-in "pedestrian." Morris explains that this gesture "means you can do whatever you want, basically. It doesn't mean you have to solo. It doesn't mean you have to take control of the room. It means you contribute in the way you want to contribute to the room."⁵¹ The "pedestrian" directives thus give the musician considerable freedom to interpret the sonic moment and decide how to augment it, without being constrained by other directives.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Stanley, "Butch Morris and the Art of Conduction," 113. Morris claims that his music is a continuation of the jazz canon, with its emphasis on small improvising groups, caveating that "I'm a jazz musician, but what you hear me do you may not consider jazz." Quoted *ibid.*, 119.

⁵⁰ Lawrence D. "Butch" Morris, *The Art of Conduction: A Conduction Workbook*, ed. Daniela Veronesi (New York: Karma, 2017), 52–156.

⁵¹ Quoted in Stanley, "Butch Morris and the Art of Conduction," 86.

More prominent than the facilitator in Scratch Music or the prompter in *Cobra*, the conductor takes a central position in Conduction® performances, both physically and metaphorically, retaining many trappings of the traditional symphonic conductor. Morris's obituary in *The New Yorker* states that he "reintroduc[ed] the conductor, the ultimate figure of Western classical hierarchy, as a means to organize improvised sound."⁵² He has faced criticism for the incorporation of a conductor, with all its authoritarian connotations, into the free improvisatory setting that a Conduction ensemble embraces. However, Stanley notes that the musical (and political) freedom associated with free improvisation still exists in Conduction, "even with the Conductor is pounding out downbeats... Under Conduction, the musicians are free to attend to the sonic individuality of what they are playing...and to enjoy an embodied collective agency that transcends the individual performer."⁵³ While the conductor in Morris's system is not subject to the guerrilla subversions written into the rules of *Cobra*, they serve a similar structuring function of dictating the "when," and sometimes the "how," but not the "what," which is left to the musicians in the ensemble. However, the conductor is also to take sonic cues, if not directives (or suggestions à la *Cobra*) from the orchestra. The conductor gives the first directive in the performance, from which the musicians make interpretive decisions and enact them at the conductor's downbeat; the conductor is then to listen to and to interpret the response and then to decide what the next directive should be and when it should arrive. Agency is therefore dispersed, not only in that the musicians have significant decision-making power in their interpretations of the conductor's gestures and the musical environment, but also in how these interpretations subsequently shape the future

⁵² Taylor Ho Bynum, "Postscript: Butch Morris (1947–2013)," *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/postscript-butch-morris-1947-2013> (accessed July 29, 2021).

⁵³ Stanley, "Butch Morris and the Art of Conduction," 124. He also claims that "Whatever perceived political or aesthetic contradictions others might claim to be attached to his baton are less than relevant to Morris." *Ibid.*, 63.

direction of the performance through the conductor's interpretations of their sonically-manifested decisions.

4.2.4 Improvising from neither score nor memory

To varying extents, *Scratch*, *Cobra*, and *Conduction*® leave musical choices up to individual members of the ensemble, rather than dictating what they are to play through a notated score, a memorized standard, or a precomposed pattern. *Scratch* has some exceptions to this overall idea, but *Conduction* and especially *Cobra* disavow any authority external to the performance. And even the *Scratch* modes that adhere more closely to precomposed material still offer flexibility in interpretation, such as with the graphic or textual scores, or fidelity, such as with the remembered/improvised accompaniment to fragments of standard repertoire.

Rather than provide content to be performed, the rules of Zorn's game pieces and Morris's lexicon of *Conduction* gestures supply guidelines to follow. These guidelines can be invoked in any order and serve as a set of principles that brings the members of the ensemble into alignment, while leaving them with ample space to improvise in and with these principles. The rules and gestures are far less constraining than the jazz metaphor's guide rails of standards and harmonic, rhythmic, and formal conventions. In this sense, these free jazz examples extend the benefits of improvisatory freedom that the initial jazz metaphor began to explore as boons to increased innovation and quicker response to environmental turbulence, both of which rely on expanded openness to embracing change and, in the case of innovation, failure.

An additional benefit that these principles demonstrate is that they are less tied to a particular performance tradition, such as symphonic music or straight-ahead jazz. This genre-deemphasis broadens the scope of the types of musicians that can be involved in a performance. Morris's *Conductions* have taken on vastly different shapes depending on the musicians playing,

ranging from funk to free-jazz configurations. Cardew's open approach to Scratch Music invites amateur musicians to partake in and contribute to the cocreative musicking practice, and the Draft Constitution emphasizes the flexibility in which material may be played (either as fully-adhered-to compositions or as "popular classics"), indicating that what might not always be considered improvisational may be recast in an improvisatory light. In *Conductions* and *Cobra* performances alike, non-western instruments are likely to be featured alongside western instruments. This instrumental and genre indifference shows that the guiding principles hold no matter the composition of the group and that multiple traditions—or, in the agile sense, multiple functions—can be guided by the same set of principles.

An inclusivity to membership with regards to skill level and musical background suggests not only that cross-functionality is tenable and potentially beneficial within groups of improvisers, but also that there isn't necessarily any function or background that would be incompatible with the process of improvisation. Just like Cardew's amateurs might not be as adept improvisers as Zorn's professionals, HR might be less amenable to fully adopt agile practices than software developers are. However, Scratch Music and Conduction® both indicate that differing levels of improvisational competency can co-exist within a single team, indicating that similarly differing levels of agile adoption can co-exist within an agile team or within a team of agile teams.

The key component in these large-scale improvisations is listening to what the other musicians are playing and responding thereto in a meaningful way. Feedback and being open to change as a result of such feedback are core tenets of agile and the manner in which these pieces promote sensitivity to the environment serves as an excellent model of how agile organizations can remain similarly receptive. In both *Conduction* and *Scratch*, the divide between soloing and accompanying is intentionally unclear; instead, musicians are asked to contribute what they think is best for the musical situation, rather than necessarily taking the lead and demanding support.

Since the environmental state is such an important driver of musical choices, each musician has considerable agency in shaping the direction of the performance even if there is a clear leader such as the conductor for Conductions or the prompter for *Cobra*. This sort of distribution-through-feedback finds a parallel in the SAFe dictum that “Command-and-control is replaced by sense-and-respond”⁵⁴ in organizations that reach agile at scale. Furthermore, the leaders themselves are required to remain responsive to the environment and react to environmental changes rather than simply steering the group in a dictatorial manner. In Conduction®, the conductor supplies the first directive, which the musicians interpret, and the conductor then responds to that interpretation with the next directive; *Cobra* runs on a similar cycle, though it starts with the musicians. Both cases demonstrate a way for rapid feedback, iteration, and the opportunity to shift direction during the performance, much as an agile team or team of agile teams would over the course of a project as they test hypotheses and incorporate feedback. They also show the reciprocal relationship between a leader and the rest of an improvising group.

4.2.5 Leading large improvising groups

While decentralized leadership and decision-making are certainly critical to the success of performances of Scratch, *Cobra*, or Conductions, the role of the leader qua leader should not be discounted. In both Conduction and *Cobra*, the designated leader—conductor and prompter, respectively—holds the power to shape the overall structure of the performance despite the general ethos of egalitarianism engendered by free improvisation and feedback cycles. Improvising guitarist Derek Bailey notes that people like Morris “like to try and turn large group improvisation into

⁵⁴ Scaled Agile, “Agile at Scale,” slide 10.

something else a bit more tidy; they usually do it by imposing structures of one kind or another.”⁵⁵ It seems important that, as groups grow in size, a central coordinator becomes necessary to organize individual and small subgroup improvisations.

Proponents of agile at scale similarly emphasize the importance of structure-forging leaders. These leaders are to create environments in which their improvising agile teams can optimally work towards an overall goal, yet without a stifling amount of oversight. Within agile teams, a key individual is the figure of the product owner, who coordinates the various people and functions involved in the process, keeping the bigger picture in mind. Michael Sherman and his colleagues at the Boston Consulting Group explain that “Great product owners do not make all the decisions; rather, they are collaborative leaders who get the best from their teams and other stakeholders and drive an inclusive, data-driven decision-making process.” At the same time, the product owners are also decisively in charge: “Product owners should be fully empowered to experiment, set priorities, and guide the agile development process on the ground.”⁵⁶ The careful balance between leading from a position of authority—like that of a conductor—and leading from a position of support—more like an ensemble mate—animates the productive dynamic found in large groups of improvisers under the soft charge of another improviser.

As for shifting an established firm into an agile mindset, SAFe insists that “Leaders *lead* (rather than support) the transformation by creating the environment, preparing the people, and providing the necessary resources to realizes the desired outcomes.”⁵⁷ The element of training those

⁵⁵ In Martin, “Derek Bailey Interview.” Bailey isn’t wholly convinced that this structured large-scale improvisation captures the risk-taking spirit of improvisation.

⁵⁶ Michael Sherman et al., “Agile Development’s Biggest Failure Point—And How to Fix It,” August 17, 2016, <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2016/software-agile-digital-transformation-agile-developments-biggest-failure-pointand-how-to-fix-it> (accessed August 12, 2021), 4.

⁵⁷ Scaled Agile, “SAFe 5 for Lean Enterprises,” 2021. <https://www.scaledagileframework.com/safe-for-lean-enterprises/> (accessed August 9, 2021), emphasis original.

involved manifests clearly in the extramusical leadership practices in both Scratch and Conduction®: the respective leaders share their methods with musicians in workshops and rehearsals beforehand,⁵⁸ not so that they can perfect the execution of a particular repertory, but rather to foster understanding of the principles that guide the eventual on-stage improvisations. While participants—both in musical ensembles and agile teams—are certainly encouraged to gain familiarity and comfort with these principles outside the communal setting, the leader retains the ultimate responsibility to ensure that everyone is adequately prepared.

Once prepared, members of large improvising teams can respond to leadership directives by making implementation decisions themselves. The concept of when-not-what leadership lies at the heart of improvisation at scale, whether musical or in a corporate setting. Both Zorn and Morris insist that, when leading a large group of improvisers, they merely generate the structure and leave the content for the musicians to fill; conveying to them when to play, but not what or how to play.⁵⁹ Demonstrating the aptness of the large-ensemble model for agile at scale, Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble give a near-perfect description of the group dynamics in Conduction:

Agile teams work differently from chain-of-command bureaucracies. They are self-governing: Senior leaders tell team members where to innovate but not how. . . . It also frees up senior leaders to do what only they can do: create and communicate long-term visions, set and sequence strategic priorities, and build the organizational capacities to achieve those goals.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Historically, the authors of these systems, Cardew and Morris, have taken on and retained the responsibility for training musicians, while also directing them in the musical performance. This stands in contrast to one of the precepts of agile management: that management functions like coordination, leading, and mentoring should be dispersed among different people in an organization. However, it is not necessary that the facilitator or conductor and workshop leader be the same individual in Scratch or Conduction performance occasions.

⁵⁹ Morris's Conduction lexicon is a little stricter than Zorn's prompts in that they sometimes carry some "how" information like modes of articulation or dynamics.

⁶⁰ Rigby, Sutherland, and Noble, "Agile at Scale," 91. McKinsey's Agile Tribe conveys a remarkably similar sentiment: "Leadership in agile organizations serves the people in the organization, empowering and developing them. Rather than planners, directors, and controllers, they become visionaries, architects, and coaches that empower the people with the most relevant competencies so these can lead, collaborate, and deliver exceptional results." Aghina et al., "The 5 Trademarks of Agile Organizations," 15.

Morris's approach to structuring the performance by delegating most of the musical decision-making to the musicians after training them in workshops beforehand allows him to focus on crafting the overall shape of the performance. His method models agile managerial behavior for leaders of large groups that are empowered to improvise their way forward, while group members and leader alike carefully and continually absorb and respond to environmental feedback.

This form of team empowerment manifests even more strongly in *Cobra*, although Zorn typically does not prepare musicians in the way Morris does, but rather select musicians with the relevant improvisational competencies and inclinations. This selectivity strips away the last remaining need of guide rails that musicians might require to reach the aesthetic aims of the performance. Whereas Zorn states that “In *Cobra* the musical materials are completely up to the performers. I have nothing to say about it. I make no musical decisions. I set the situation up, I set the rules up. *They* make the decisions,”⁶¹ a senior executive at an agile enterprise similarly emphasizes the strength of teams to make appropriate decisions: “We set the vision and define the outcomes that connect what we do to our purpose. Then the teams show us the way.”⁶² As in *Cobra*, leaders at the helm of large groups of agile practitioners should lead by setting up the context and clarifying the principles that allow teams to make individual, well-informed choices on how to reach the goals set out.⁶³

⁶¹ Quoted in Strickland, *American Composers*, 133, emphasis Zorn's.

⁶² Quoted in Nick James et al., “Outcome-Oriented Governance Unleashes Agile at Scale,” December 2, 2020, <https://www.bcg.com/capabilities/digital-technology-data/strategies-for-agile-governance> (accessed August 12, 2021), 1. This executive seems to follow Rigby, Elk, and Berez's advice that “Senior leaders tell team members where to innovate but not how.” *Doing Agile Right*, 39.

⁶³ Rigby, Elk, and Berez later states that “In an agile environment, leaders take a different approach. They may tell a team what to focus on, but never how to do it. Figuring out the *how* is up to team members themselves. Their job is to experiment, to test and learn.” *Doing Agile Right*, 91.

Coming finally to the question of modeling the team of teams approach, both Conduction® and game pieces provide compelling illustrations. During the course of performances of either Conduction or *Cobra*, improvisers band together in small groups and collectively play together, until disbanded by the leader. The manner in which the groupings are made differ among Conduction, *Cobra*, and other game pieces. In Conduction, the conductor points to various musicians when giving the somatic directive and subsequent downbeat that launches them into action. Whereas Zorn initially wrote the rules of various game pieces so as to saturate the possible ensemble member combinations—this was the aim of the rules of *Klarina* and *Archery*, for example—later game pieces like *Pool* and *Cobra* allow the prompter to improvise the groupings during the course of the piece, similar to the conductor’s groupings in Conductions.⁶⁴ However, *Cobra* adds three ways for the players, rather than the leader, to design the groupings: in their suggestions, they can point to some of their ensemble mates to request a duet or trio with them; some prompts, like “runner,” allow the player to choose partners after the downbeat falls; and finally, the disruptive guerrilla systems supply players with a way to form temporary squads that contradict the prompter’s instructions so as to further animate the improvisatory performance. Each configuration of improvising subgrouping lasts only until the next prompt or directive arrives (the guerrilla squads are also limited by the rules, which only allow seven downbeats of disruption), musically demonstrating the way that “Teams form and dissolve as strategic priorities change”⁶⁵ in the teams of teams context of agile at scale.

⁶⁴ Brackett, “Some Notes on John Zorn’s *Cobra*,” 62.

⁶⁵ Olli Silo, “How to Create an Agile Organization,” October 2, 2017, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/how-to-create-an-agile-organization> (accessed March 6, 2021), 15. With regards to this flexible teaming and changing priorities, Zorn asserts, “I can talk about *when* things happen and when they *stop*, but not *what* they are. I can talk about *who* and in what *combinations*, but I can’t say what goes on. I can say ‘A change will happen *here*,’ but I can’t say what *kind* of change it will be.” Quoted in Howard Mandel, *Future Jazz* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), 172, emphasizes Zorn’s.

Scratch music, game pieces, and Conductions not only demonstrate that large-group improvisation is possible in a manner analogous to agile at scale, but also provide models for how leaders of such groups—who are improvisers themselves—can draw the best out of their constantly reconfiguring teams by creating the environment and capabilities for improvisation and interacting with the members in iterative cycles of feedback. Such an approach broadens the scope of possible improvisations and possible improvisers, thereby allowing members with backgrounds unsuited to improvisation to participate in a meaningful manner alongside more expert improvisers.

4.2.6 Conclusion

Businesses find it hard to achieve agile at scale, either as startups grow out of optimally agile sizes and flexible working methods or as companies that matured during the twentieth century now trying to adopt twenty-first-century management techniques like agile. The jazz metaphor, with its emphasis on small-group bebop combos, works well to model some of the tenets of agile, yet struggles to transfer onto larger organizations that attempt to reach agile at scale. Improvisatory music, broadly, does provide excellent models for improvisatory management, including responding to environmental shifts by relying on constant feedback; remaining open to change rather than sticking to a pre-scripted plan in order to avoid unexpected threats and to seize unexpected opportunities; and distributing leadership and decision-making power among members of the organization rather than retaining a rigid command-and-control hierarchy. Yet the jazz metaphor, in its circumscribed view of jazz, limits itself in how fully it is willing to embrace improvisation by refusing to meaningfully engage with jazz and jazz offshoots that emerged after the 1960s. Freer forms of improvisation, such as those presented by Cardew, Zorn, and Morris, offer expanded possibilities for modeling responsiveness, adaptability, and decentralization. Moreover, Scratch Music, *Cobra*, and Conduction® also provide exemplars of how large groups of improvisers can be

coordinated and structured, thereby going beyond the boundary of small-group improvisation, presented in the jazz metaphor literature, that fails to accommodate large-organization improvisatory behavior like agile at scale.

These respective systems demonstrate the importance for large improvising groups to have a clear leader, even if this leader is temporary (Scratch) or even usurping (*Cobra*). Yet the leader has to lead in improvisatory manner. Such a when-not-what style of leadership entails extreme responsiveness to the members of the group as well as the environment that they cocreate; and a dedication to providing structure to the performance and to trusting the team to supply the content. Leaders of agile teams or teams of agile teams would do well to emulate this style of leadership so as to reap the benefits of agile even in large groups of agile practitioners. Furthermore, the malleability of grouping members of ensemble together throughout the performance, with constant creative reconfigurations, models an approach that facilitates the consistent recombination of teams in teams of agile teams that agile at scale requires to effectively respond to feedback and other streams of environmental information in a coordinated fashion.

Cardew's, Zorn's, and Morris's systems also reveal a path for integrating different levels of improvisatory behavior into a single unit, from which leaders can draw inspiration to integrate functions that differ in how conducive their work is to agile into fully cross-functional teams. The spectrum of improvisatory behavior found in Scratch, as well as the openness to amateurs (Scratch) and non-western instrumentalists (*Cobra* and Conduction®) show how people with different skillsets and backgrounds can come together to work toward an ideal collectively.

The final section of this dissertation presents these insights, building on the jazz metaphor for corporate management to extend into agile at scale as afforded by large-group improvisation, as recommendations for leaders to follow in order to bring their growing startups or established companies toward the agile at scale that twenty-first-century management demands.

Recommendations

In this brief and concluding section, I summarize the benefits of the large-group improvisation model in the form of five recommendations. These recommendations will help founders and managers to reach agile at scale by acknowledging the improvisatory nature of agile methodologies and seeing how teams of teams of improvisers manage to co-create music. These recommendations urge managers to accept and adopt improvisation as a mindset for building agile businesses, encourage leadership styles that drive agile companies forward, and suggest a way to foster improvisatory and agile approaches within teams of people that differ in background and type of work for which they are responsible.

Five recommendations for an improvisatory agile at scale:

- 1. Keep improvisation top of mind when managing—in fact, lean into it even further than before**
- 2. Understand agile as an improvisatory practice**
- 3. Lead with when, not what**
- 4. Lead by responding to team feedback**
- 5. Team across cross-functionally and across improvisational aptness**

Recommendation 1: Keep improvisation top of mind when managing—in fact, lean into it even further than before

My critique of the jazz metaphor aims not to illustrate that it is devoid of impactful recommendations, but rather that the metaphor should be understood in a broader musicological context. Indeed, the underlying impulse—that improvisation is a useful and advantageous approach to contemporary corporate management—rings true and, if anything, deserves extension, which I attempt in the expansion of the organizational improvisation model into freer forms of improvisation that followed the apex of bebop in the 1960s.

The reality is, as repeatedly pointed out by scholars of organizational improvisation, that the business environment is turbulent and seems to be increasingly so. It is therefore critical to remain flexible, to stay open to change, and to accept and learn from failure—all tenets of improvisation. These need to be embraced by managers. Improvisatory music, whether the micro-improvisations that take place in symphonic performances, soloing over a standard bebop chord progression, or engaging in the freer improvisation of the large-ensemble practices discussed in the prior chapter, all provide models for the kind of improvisation necessary to be successful in the business world of the twenty-first century. However, the degree to which contemporary leaders are required to improvise are more closely aligned to the degree of improvisatory activity found in freer forms of improvisation, as illustrated by Cornelius Cardew's *Scratch Music*, John Zorn's game pieces, and Butch Morris's *Conduction*®, which rely even more deeply on gathering feedback from the environment, analyzing, and, as a result of particular judgements, making impactful decisions to bring about change to the overall environment.

Recommendation 2: Understand agile as an improvisatory practice

Foremost, connecting the improvisatory practice of agile to improvisatory practices in other spheres—such as art-making—reaffirms that improvisation can lead to great achievement and innovation. This should assuage some of the fears around embracing change or failure that many business leaders steeped in traditions that led to success in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as the waterfall method, command-and-control hierarchies, five-year plans, or functional areas, might harbor. It also provides a way for agile leaders to communicate to their teams what they expect—and why. Understanding agile as an improvisation allows practitioners to draw on existing discourses on organizational improvisation that aim to provide models for navigating an increasing turbulent business environment, as well as other aspects of their lives and experiences in which improvisatory behavior is particularly salient and constructive.

This perspective on agile stands to benefits to both startups that have been agile from the get-go, and to established companies hoping to adopt agile working methods in order to become or remain competitive in an ever-changing market. People-centricity, embracing change and failure with learning, and working toward efficiency and rapidity—hallmarks of agile, and of improvisation more broadly—should be internalized by startup founders and large-company CEOs alike. Seeing agile as improvisatory facilitates deep comprehension of these tenets and opens mental doors to other reconceptualizations of agile that can be tested and deployed as the corporate landscape continues to change.

Recommendation 3: Lead with when, not what

A balance needs to be struck in the strictness of leadership. Large groups require leaders. They require leaders to create structure and cooperation, yet must do so in an interactive manner, responding to change, rather than setting directives that promote simple execution instead of innovative improvisation. Fully egalitarian models, such as those promoted in the jazz metaphor literature, are appropriate for small groups but are misguided for larger groups. This is borne out by research in management science dating back to the 1970s. The coordinating leadership in *Conduction*® and *Cobra*, in which the conductor or prompter sets a direction and puts the group into motion at the next downbeat, serves as a model for providing when-not-what direction and grouping and regrouping teams continuously. What this model proposes is a process of showing team members what the goal is and when it should be done, then leave—and trust—they to decide how they want to reach it.

Scratch music, *Conduction* gestures, and prompts in *Cobra* intentionally give musicians ample room to interpret inputs. Furthermore, they interpret signals from the leader within the co-created musical context. Players are granted the agency to contribute in the way that they think is best for the situation at hand. This not only delegates decision-making power to those closest to the issues—a key point in the agile methodology—but also allows leaders to focus on the larger goals of the group rather than miring themselves down in minutiae. Team members are similarly freed to support each other and their goals in ways not bound by strictures imposed from above, in the case of leadership, or from conventions, in the case of standard operating procedures.

Recommendation 4: Lead by responding to team feedback

Members of agile teams rely heavily on feedback from customers and MVP testing; leaders of agile teams similarly have to respond to the interpretations and decisions of their teams. Reciprocal cycles of direction and interpretation in *Conduction*® and *Cobra* illustrate the type of exchange that has to occur between leaders and large teams. By constantly gathering information from the musicians, in the form of suggestions, interpretations, or improvisations, leaders can rapidly change the direction of the performance as players generate new musical ideas and configurations. The organizational improvisation discourse rightly emphasizes close listening to team members in small groups like bebop combos. However, in the context of larger groups with clear, though not dictatorial, leaders, listening and reciprocal feedback need to be reemphasized in order to avoid pitfalls of top-down methods of communication that hierarchies encourage.

Close following of team feedback allows leaders to act more rapidly, making the most of the optimized feedback cycles that their teams use with customers and prototypes. As new information emerges, teams adapt and pivot in agile ways, yet leaders need to keep a close ear to the ground to ensure that the overall goal that the leader sets and keeps the team working toward, retains a link with the realities of the environment in which the group functions. Furthermore, this recommendation of heeding and responding team feedback extends the decentralizing and agency-dispersing elements of the prior recommendation, thereby augmenting the benefits of flattening hierarchical structures and empowering those closest to the issues to make the relevant decisions.

Recommendation 5: Team across cross-functionally and across improvisational aptness

Cross-functionality requires inclusion and novel combinations of people and background lead to superior results. Building teams that have all the necessary personnel and components to see a project through, front to back, is a central directive of the agile methodology since it guarantees consensus from all the relevant stakeholders and reduces inefficiencies when work is transferred from one area to the next. In contrast to the circumscribed perspective of the jazz metaphor, which demands particular proficiencies and configurations, the openness to musical background, skill level, and instrumental choice exhibited by Scratch Music and Conduction® reveals a way to keep innovation at the forefront by combining groups of people that would otherwise not be able to collaborate. This is further facilitated by the absence of, or at least very loose adherence to, precomposed or preplanned material since each member is asked to contribute in a way that honors their training and experience.

Barriers to agile at scale can be overcome by grouping together people from typically agile and typically not-agile areas. Approaching collaboration in such a manner invites players from diverse traditions and of improvisational skill to improvise together, such as in Scratch Music and Conduction. Those with backgrounds associated with the avoidance of improvisation are encouraged to experiment alongside more experienced improvisers and to incorporate aspects of improvisation into their practice. This leads to a more flexible and change-embracing organization overall—one better enabled to weather the turbulent business environment of the present.

A glance towards the next thirty years

The jazz metaphor came about in the 1990s, before the rise of agile methodologies for product and software development, and proposed music from the 35-year period between 1930 and 1965 as an appropriate model for management. The present document provides a temporal update, drawing on music from the 35-year period between 1970 and 2005 to provide a model for management in the 2020s. Throughout, I encourage even deeper engagement with improvisation and an updated approach to leadership style and teamwork. My infusion of large-group improvisatory forms into the contemporary agile management discourse reveals advantageous mindsets and practical approaches for entrepreneurs and agile managers alike to adopt. I have no doubt that both improvisatory musicking and improvisatory management will continue to evolve and change shape over the next 30 years and I can only hope that my research is cited in a 2050 update, as an example of a then-outdated model to achieve an improvisatory agile at scale.

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