

## Democratic Theory and Musical Improvisation

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Is improvisation democratic? Unfortunately, this cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, but rather involves asking first whose democracy and whose improvisation is in question. In short, just as there are a myriad of theories of democracy, there are equally diverse accounts of improvisation. By reviewing the two most popular types of democratic theory (liberal and radical) we will be able to see how popular conceptions of musical improvisation can align themselves with opposing democratic traditions, both of which claim to be democratic, even though they are polemically opposed to one another. However, by also looking at Gary Peters' recent work, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009), where he explains what is required for something to claim improvisational status, it will become clear that, if we can accept Peters' position, we can amend this impasse in the relationship between democracy and musical improvisation by affirming the latter as democratic, yet only in regards to democracy's radical articulation.

### Liberal and Radical Democratic Theory

Ian Shapiro examines the traditional accounts of democratic theory in *The State of Democratic Theory* (2003) and explains how the most common positions in liberal democratic theory are those of aggregate and deliberative democracy. In both instances, "democracy should be geared toward arriving at some notion of the general will that reflects the common good" (Shapiro 2). That is, democracy is primarily concerned with being a form of government that acts according to the will of the people, and aims to have as little breakdown as possible between the acts of governing and the representation of what people desire (as is seen in the peoples' representatives – elected officials and parties, as well as the results of voting). Basically, the goal is for those who govern and those who are governed to be, as much as possible, mirror reflections of one another. In this way, the 'general will' – the representation of the people by political parties, governors, etc. – guides the activity of the government in order for it to come as close as possible to the 'common good' – the actual desires of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, April Carter and Geoffrey Stokes comment, in *Democratic Theory Today* (2002), that deliberative democracy is "distinguished by its emphasis upon 'equal and effective opportunity to participate' in processes of will formation" (11). They explain that this participation in 'will formation' is interpreted in two ways, which stem from the two historical schools influencing deliberative democracy: republicanism and liberalism. Deliberative democrats under the influence of the former depict participation as an activity of citizens and "small unified communities...[while]...liberals limit deliberation in larger and complex societies to elect representatives" as the deliberative voice of the people (Carter and Stokes 11).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Historically, the aggregate position is drawing primarily from the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, while the deliberative approach draws from Aristotle. For further reading see Rousseau (2009) and Aristotle (1992).

<sup>2</sup> For more reading on the historical position of liberalism see Locke (2009) and for republicanism see Machiavelli (1998) and Dahl (2006).

These traditional accounts of democracy have been held in contempt by recent authors of what has been coined ‘radical’ democratic theory. These theorists, with Chantal Mouffe (2007) and Ernesto Laclau (2005)<sup>3</sup> as their foremost advocates, find their influence from the Marxist tradition in general, as well as 20<sup>th</sup> century political theorists Louis Althusser (2006), Carl Schmitt (1996), and Claude Lefort (1988). In Mouffe’s opinion, liberal democratic theory’s failing lies in its belief that it can attain a “universal consensus based on reason” (11). For her, this is the latent principle of democracy’s traditional desire to create a society where there is no divide between those that govern and the governed: by different methods and deliberative techniques, we can have a spot at the table for any group that feels as though they are outcast and, in some way, unequal to others. Mouffe thinks that this drive to include everyone is actually a depoliticization of society, given that “consistent rationalism requires negating the irreducibility of antagonism” (12). In short, in Mouffe’s estimation, the push toward deliberative and consensus-based democracy creates a situation wherein the differences between political parties and positions becomes so minimal – given that consensus is the driving aim – that this actually leaves people without a choice in political discourse. One joins the popular (and, for Mouffe and Laclau, hegemonic) discourses in contemporary politics, or one is without a political voice or representation. That is, there is no option for a dissenting voice that is counter the very consensual impetus of the liberal democratic program: either representation is sought in accord with popular discourse, or there is no taking part in politics. For Mouffe, democracy and politics must necessarily thrive on antagonism and *actual* party politics (i.e., parties divided by *real* constitutive differences), otherwise we will digress, like liberal democracy, into a consensus politics that actually excludes many and discourages any difference that is not willing to agree to the tenets of consensual politics.

Laclau bolsters Mouffe’s account by illustrating how the connection between liberalism and democracy is actually a contingent one. Since ‘the people’ and the ‘general will’ can be seen as representations that only include those that agree to the overall consensual outlook of liberalism, Laclau explains that this consensual structure is actually what is at the basis of liberal democracy politics, not an understanding of democratic practice. With this in mind, we can understand radical democratic theory’s break with traditional theory as primarily a dispute concerning representation. For Laclau, the mirroring effect between the will of the people and legislation passed in the name of the people is a false one, since it only involves representing people who participate in popular, consensus politics. The liberal framework of consensus politics, then, is said to be an inaccurate depiction of democratic politics (i.e., where discussions and disagreements are not simply working toward an overarching goal of consensus and resolution, but are actually incommensurable) and, thus, democracy, as a practice, can be detached from the liberal framework and stand on its own. In this way, radical democracy can be the practice that allows people to find representations for themselves, by themselves, and without it being under the strictures of popular discourse and consensus with others. Here, “a ‘people’ is no longer the direct effect of any particular framework, the question of the constitution of a

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<sup>3</sup> Their classic work on the meaning of radical democracy is without a doubt their joint work (Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

popular subjectivity becomes an integral part of the question of democracy...” (Laclau 2005, 167).

Thus, in Mouffe’s case, radical democracy is indicative of a politics that reintroduces true party politics: antagonisms that stand on true, core differences between groups, and whose purpose is not to resolve issues between themselves (coming closer and closer together, in order to find the ‘actual’ voice of the people). Rather, it admits that the diversities of people are irresolvable. With this recognition, politics can only represent ‘the people’ by having political parties that are not guiding by an overarching ideal of consensus. Laclau, though, goes one step further and does not ascribed radical democracy to political parties, but wants democracy’s practice to be that of any group forming their political stance and voice together without ‘any particular framework’ (i.e., that of popular discourse or political parties). This self-made group, for him, is rightly called a ‘people’ of democratic politics. So, while Mouffe would be content with a heightened and revised version of the parties that are already on the scene of politics (Right, Left, etc.), Laclau encourages politics as the creation of peoples outside of constituted frameworks, a classic example being Woolworth’s lunch counter in 1960 (i.e., where four black college students became a political voice by asserting their social and political equality, without senators, parties or referendums). Amid their different articulations, Mouffe and Laclau are both espousing a reformulation of democratic politics that avoids depicting consensus as an underlining commitment, since they both see this as a gesture that depoliticizes politics (i.e., reduces politics to popular politics).

### **Theories of Improvisation**

Theories of musical improvisation have striking similarities to the two dominant trends in democratic theory. In her discussion about jazz and musical improvisation, Ingrid Monson explains that in traditional accounts of jazz, where jazz seeks to legitimate itself as a ‘proper’ study amongst other traditional music composition, theorists use the framework of absolute music to support their arguments, contending that all music whatsoever has, at bottom, the same skeletal structure. As she explains it, a conception of absolute music is “one that views analytic frameworks as neutral and objective and structural values as timeless and universal” (4). All music, at its core, can be transcribed into scores and can be captured as ‘works’ of music that can be repeated by others – improvisation pieces the same as Mozart. Even if improvisational jazz has a bit more freedom in its reproduction, there is an underlining structure to a piece that makes it recognizable as the piece that it is; such structural elements include “sophisticated harmony, complex voice leading, thematic integration...and large-scale planning...” (Monson 4). Hence, commenting on the writings of Lewis Porter (1985) and Gunther Schuller (1968), Monson describes how these theorists of absolute music attempt to depict jazz improvisation as a form of music that necessarily follows the strictures of music in general, and in this light can be represented alongside of, and doing the same thing as, music forms that at first sight seem to belong to another classification altogether.

However, Monson is critical of this position and her book’s aim is to develop a theory that takes seriously the knowledge of the musicians and players of jazz improvisation when

theorizing the improvisational moment unique to jazz. She claims that what is needed is an *intensification* of the understanding of jazz improvisation:

In analytic discussion of through-composed scores,<sup>4</sup> the identification of such structural articulations and formal coherences has been among the most important criteria in defending the aesthetic and artistic merits of particular musical works... In rethinking analytic priorities for approaching the larger-scale dimensions of jazz improvisation, I would like to suggest that we not be content with identifying structural shapes alone; we should be concerned as well with the interactive processes by which they emerge. I am using *intensification* as a deliberately amorphous term that combines musical events internal to a particular performance that contribute to the feeling of musical climax (such as changes in dynamics, rhythmic density, register, timbre, melody, harmony, interaction, and style of groove) with intermusical aspects of performance (such as quotation, irony, and parody) that link it to issues of history and the African American sensibilities of ‘taking it to another level’ and grooving. (139)

In short, jazz improvisation is just as much a matter of the relationships that occur when it is performed – between musicians, communities, and social practices – as it is the notes and harmonies. Unlike other forms of music, improvised music does not simply rely upon its notes, harmonies, and structure when accounting for what it is that one is witnessing when it is performed. As improvisation, jazz is equal parts music and relationality. Its identity is as much a matter of the knowledge of the performers themselves as it is the analysis that can be done by music theorists. In the same vein, Ajay Heble, in his book *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (2000), insists that jazz is fundamentally about inventiveness and change, and this is highlighted by the fact that jazz, in its best moments, takes “cultural forms that accent dissonance and contingency...” (9). That is, jazz thrives on its difference from other musical genres, and collapsing the antagonism between it and classical forms (making it a type within a consensual whole) would be to change it constitutively.

### **Improvisation as Democratic**

On the surface, it appears that musical improvisational theories – both absolute and relational – correspond to democratic theories and can, likewise, both be considered democratic. Absolute music theory analyzes how jazz improvisation is just like any other form of music, and thus a consensus can be found that puts it into discussion – as equal (or identical) – with classical and dominant forms of music, just as traditional democratic theory focuses on having difference only insofar as differing people belong to the same overarching political structure. Relational theories, on the other hand, much like radical democracy, focus on the performer and the actual practice of improvisation to determine the identity of its practice, meaning that it is not to be grouped, homogeneously, with traditional forms of music.

However, Gary Peters’ insights about the nature of improvisation itself suggest that any form improvisation takes (musical or otherwise), if it is truly improvisational, can only actually be democratic in one way. Peters claims that improvisation must fundamentally be thought of as something that lacks the traditional notion of ‘work.’ Since improvisation is by definition required to be a spontaneous performance, without structure or plan, it is in this sense always beginning, and never repeating something pre-given that can be referred to as an actual work. He says, “...free-improvisation is able to achieve, or at least strive to achieve, a prior degree of

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<sup>4</sup> A musical piece that does not consist of repeated sections.

aesthetic erasure beyond the reach of other art forms precisely because its primary aim is *not* to produce works. Its primary aim is to produce *beginnings*” (37). What this means for musical improvisation, if we agree with Peters, is that any improvisation must always be thought of as a practice, and cannot have a focus toward complying with anything other than what it finds, itself, in the moment of its performance. It finds its identity and representation only in its activity of presenting itself. For instance, Monson, in her example of ‘Bass-ment Blues’ explains how jazz improvisation is not simply a matter of dynamics and notes that are transcribed in writing, but rather, as musicians’ own accounts corroborate, it is the relationality found in actually performing the piece that defines the constitution of the piece. Although an improvisational piece can be recorded and then transcribed, this does not mean that it can ever become a work to be replicated (i.e., where other performances can give different interpretations of the same piece). As the musicians explain it, this often has to do with a long history of playing with the same people, or with, conversely, playing with near strangers. In each case, however, the notation itself cannot bring about a copy of what occurred in the improvisation, because the relationality involved in the production is just as much an explanation as the notes themselves. Thus, another group playing the composition of ‘Bass-ment Blues’ would be playing a piece that is, at its core, a different piece (133-191).

In this way, musical improvisation, not limited to the framework of a ‘work’ (the written and transcribed artifact of music), stands apart from other forms of music that are guided by a consensually shared musical composition and which differ only according to different interpretations of a shared work. It appears, then, that musical improvisation can only be thought of as something unable to be spoken of ahead of time, before its presentation and performance. It is always up to its performers (i.e., their relationships and knowledge[s]) to decide which direction the spontaneous practice will take. In this way, musical improvisation will always find itself in contention with traditional theories that try to discover a structure and form that represents the substratum of its practice, which would reduce it to a music that is fundamentally (i.e., analytically) just like any other. Like Mouffe and Laclau’s radical democracy, where politics is based upon a fundamental antagonism that cannot be dissolved, and where traditional representation always gives false representations of the ‘people,’ musical improvisation is fundamentally in contention with other music in that it lacks a sense of ‘work,’ which also means, correspondingly, that its representation must maintain a sense of its practice (performance) and spontaneity as essential to its identity. It is in this way – in improvisation’s contention with traditional forms of music and its performativity-spontaneity - that we can claim that, if musical improvisation is to be considered democratic, then it is only in democracy’s radical articulation.

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