

Rancière, Resistance, and Musical Improvisation

Joshua Mousie

How are we to conceive the potential for political resistance within musical improvisation? When we say that musical improvisation has been, and can still be, an effective force for social transformation, what exactly in a jazz performance, for instance, are we speaking about? As Daniel Fischlin (2003) notes, “nothing in sound is intrinsically revolutionary, rebellious, or political,” yet, on the other hand, “[w]e define communities by the sounds they make – and the sounds they refuse” (11). In this sense, music is always found within a larger social and political context but, historically, this has meant that certain types of music are considered resistant sounds since they are counter to status quo musics. Hence, it is difficult to say that there is something essential in the sound of musical improvisation that is innately resistant; however, we cannot overlook the importance of it being the musical form practiced regularly by resistant peoples.

Most often, the freedom and spontaneity of musical improvisation has been said to lend itself, quite easily, to people who are themselves fighting for freedom and civil rights. Yet, if we examine this explanation more closely, it will become clear that freedom of expression itself is not enough to explain why musical improvisation is consistently the chosen musical form of resistant sounds and peoples. By looking at leading philosopher and aesthetician Jacques Rancière’s formulation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and what art as resistance can mean given politics’ and aesthetics’ rapport, we will be able to provide a better answer to the question of how musical improvisation can be said to take part in political resistance. To conclude, we will see how Rancière’s formulation can be exemplified, and bolstered by, Ajay Heble’s discussion of the musical improvisation of Sun Ra and his pedagogy of resistance. In short, it will be shown that for musical improvisation to be politically resistant, more than performativity is required.

Freedom and Resistance

Jesse Stewart (2003) aptly explains how the freedoms often associated with political resistance in musical improvisation are best articulated under the classic framework of the two dominant forms of freedom in political theory, which Isaiah Berlin (1997) discusses in his essay, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Traditionally, freedom has been conceived of as having negative and positive manifestations: negative freedom being equated with *freedom from* social and political realities that limit and restrict, and positive freedom being the *freedom to* exercise one’s ability and creativity for its own sake (i.e., not to get away from limiting circumstances). Stewart connects these two notions of political theory to the activity of musical improvisation (jazz specifically) by explaining that *freedom from* can be seen historically in how jazz musicians, during the civil rights movement in the 1960s,

gave their works politically suggestive titles and wrote liner notes dealing with political issues...[and]... performed at benefit concerts for organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and other groups connected to the push for Civil Rights in America. (93)

In all of these instances, Stewart believes that jazz can be seen as enacting a political and resistant form of freedom that aims to release people from limiting socio-political realities.

Freedom to, however, can best be seen in how the practice of playing jazz affords jazz musicians the opportunity to push the envelope in musical practice and, at one and the same time, play tributes to traditional pieces while simultaneously giving them new directions and meanings. Stewart comments that this positive freedom found in jazz music is seen in “the improvising musician’s ability to draw on and articulate an intercultural network of musical styles, techniques, and histories” (99). In short, it is “a musician’s freedom to organize sound in the jazz context” (96), and Stewart thinks that this too is important when analyzing jazz’s ‘rebel’ qualities, given that it becomes a resistant sound only within a larger political context where its production is counter traditional sounds and music. Stewart sees the Art Ensemble of Chicago as being a key example of positive freedom in jazz music. This ensemble “has, for more than thirty years, created music that references and juxtaposes a wide variety of musical traditions and histories,” enmeshing dixie, bebop and free jazz (to name a few) to combine new music out of the rethinking and amalgamation of old traditions (97). The goal of the ensemble was, then, to create free musicians that could combine traditions and stimulate thought. Lester Bowie is quoted by Stewart as saying that he believed that the work of the ensemble would ultimately affect the world by making it “*a better place to live in*” and this would enable people “*to function better together and really elevate their whole existence*” (99).

However, Stewart sees *freedom from* and *freedom to* as ultimately less important than *freedom how*. That is, how do we get from music on the one hand to social change on the other? Citing the examples of William Parker’s 1999 performance at the Guelph Jazz Festival and the insights of Christopher Small’s *Music of the Common Tongue* (1998), Stewart explains that the experience that occurs between musicians and participants in a performance is the grounds for the social and political capabilities of musical improvisation (101). Although Stewart admits the difficulties of theorizing how musical practice effects change he ultimately agrees with Small, who argues that music moves us “because musicking creates the public image of our most inwardly desired relationships, not just showing them to us as they might be but actually bringing them into existence for the duration of the performance” (Small 69-70).¹ In other words, the resistance found in musical improvisation comes from an experience of the performance, where there is freedom found in the musical form itself (it combines traditions freely) and in the fact that such freedom brings to life the musicians’ and observers’ social and political reality (i.e., it creates the public image of the inner relationships we desire most).

Rancière’s Politics of Aesthetics

The question, then, which Stewart does not seem to fully elucidate, is how freedom found in musical practice carries over and affects society. If something is found in a performance that moves us and shows an audience member and performer something, does it not need more direction than affectivity alone to move us toward political resistance? Rancière’s formulation of the relationship between politics and aesthetics can help us in this instance to rethink our ideas about how, and in what way, musical improvisation can be said to be a resistant practice.

¹ Small uses the term “musicking” to draw attention to the fact that music is not a static thing (i.e., a noun), rather it is an activity we engage in, hence its verbal construction. For more, see Small, 50.

For Rancière, what is at issue in both art and politics is what he calls the distribution of the sensible. In politics, there are specific principles that order society and determine how people are bound together and said to be seen inhabiting a common space. To have a part in the public, common sphere, you (as a person) are a counted and visible part of the public sphere only insofar as you fall under these ordering principles. Examples of these founding principles are young/old, rich/poor, educated/uneducated; the contingency of these principles is never admitted in political constitution, and thus old, rich, and educated are assumed to be better criteria for governing others than their opposites (Rancière 1999, 5-6). In short, society is ordered by these, and similar, contingent principles, and when we consider who counts as part of society, we choose those who we can recognize and see in light of such principles. Although this ordering of society, and this deciding the status of who can govern and who must be governed, is what is typically considered politics, Rancière believes that, in reality, this is merely a policing of the public sphere (a privation of the public sphere, as he refers to it; Rancière 2009, 72-73). He argues that actual politics refers only to those moments when the part that has no part (in regards to how a society is ordered) asserts itself as an equal and common part. This is a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible in the sense that through such acts a new part is counted, which disrupts the previous order of the public sphere. Examples of Rancière's politics could be seen in the episode of Rosa Parks, as well as moments in the fight for women's suffrage (and the feminist movement in general). In both instances, a part of society that was considered as belonging to the private sector (i.e., women and black Americans) asserted its equality and disrupted what, at the time, made sense and was counted as a public (i.e., political) concern. Hence, these assertions disrupt the distribution of the sensible, and we are forced, in these instances, to see the public sphere differently (i.e., in the civil rights movement, white Americans came face-to-face with the equality of black people through the resistant measures taken up by the latter group).²

Correspondingly, this model of politics is reflected in art in that there is typically a certain order in aesthetics. Painting and sculptures, for example, stand out as objects that are pieces of art that are juxtaposed to ordinary non-aesthetic objects (i.e., roads, street signs, rocks, etc.). Like the police order in politics, art “develops into forms of normativity that define the conditions according to which imitations can be recognized as exclusively belonging to an art and assessed, within this framework, as good or bad, adequate or inadequate: partitions between the representable and the unrepresentable...” (Rancière 2009b, 21-22). For Rancière, then, art should refer to moments when specific pieces make us rethink our field of visibility: they make us redefine the line between what are considered aesthetic and what are considered non-aesthetic, everyday objects. Rancière gives Chantal Akerman's film, *De l'autre côté*, as an example of this redefinition. In his opinion, she captures an ordinary object (the fence that runs along the US-Mexican border) and transforms it from “an economic and geopolitical issue into an aesthetic matter...[by producing] a confrontation between two sides, and a series of conflicting narratives around the raw materiality of the fence” (Rancière 2010, 150). Akerman successfully creates art, in Rancière's mind, because she does not simply “point out the contradictions that exist between the realities of the US economy and the injustices and prejudices of US nationalism,” like most artists do, but rather she shows the fence as a simple object *and* as an object that represents “the hopes, attempts and failures on the Mexican side, or the concerns and fears on the American

² For a great secondary source that covers all of Rancière's key concepts, see May (2008).

side” (150). By showing the dissensus between the fence itself and what it means for different people, she changes our field of visibility by making the fence become more than either one of these elements in isolation (i.e., not just an everyday object and not simply an economic and geopolitical issue).

Thus, for Rancière, any political impact that art is possible of possessing does not simply come from an experience with the object in question. He is opposed to both traditional mimetic models of representation, which he refers to as the pedagogical and archi-ethical models. The pedagogical model, coming from 18th century aestheticians like Moliere, Voltaire, and Lessing, contends that the person experiencing art understands the logic and intention that an artist is trying to convey in a performance, and thus the more people experience art, the more social change can occur by bearing witness to the direct meaning encountered therein. However, Rancière tells us that within the second, archi-ethical model (first articulated by Rousseau) there is no direct relationship between the artist’s intention and the lesson an audience takes away from the experience, but rather what is important is that art opens up a space that brings people together in solidarity, creating an ethos for a community. In the end, however, this also fails, in Rancière’s opinion, because it does not realize that the solidarity formed in an aesthetic experience is also something that is constructed and superimposed onto the experience. That is, a community is not a necessary attribute of an aesthetic experience and, as discussed above, Rancière sees successful art as referring to those pieces that create dissension and disrupt the shared distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2010, 135-137).

Hence, Rancière’s thinks that “[t]here is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from the intellectual awareness to political action” (Rancière 2010, 143). Because difference and multiplicity is a constitutive aspect of society, there will always be dissensus among people. In this way, artistic practices, like political ordering, will never simply be a simple equation where there is a specific meaning in an artwork, on the one hand, and the change that it effects, on the other, both of which rely upon the experience of art alone. Since there is no direct meaning that must be understood from any given artistic practice, Rancière says that “[p]ractices of art do not provide forms of awareness or rebellious impulses *for* politics. Nor do they take leave of themselves to become forms of collective political action” (Rancière 2010, 149). Instead, as in the case of Akerman’s film, practices of art change the landscape of the sensible itself and call into question what can be considered art and what cannot, just as politics decides who and what is to be considered a political issue.

Nevertheless, Rancière does think that resistance can play a role in art, but it is a very unique role that involves both politics and aesthetics at once, meaning art as resistance can never be reduced to one or the other. Since art is simply a change in how we see the world in general (i.e., what is ordinary and what is aesthetic), it does not carry with it a specific positive message that is required of a resistant politics. Hence, art can only be considered a matter of resistance when it becomes political (i.e., more than a distribution of the sensible), and “this realization amounts to tying the specificities of political or artistic invention to one and the same suprasensible sensible experience. The political becoming of art, then, becomes the ethical confusion in which, in the name of their union, art and politics vanish” (Rancière 2010, 182). Political art – art that can have a political effect and be resistant – can “only [exist] insofar as it is constructed case by case, step by step, in the singular strategies of artists...[meaning that any specific political content intended by an artist]...might become confused with another, with prose or the clichés of the world, from which no real barrier separates it” (Rancière 2010, 179).

Resistance requires more than an aesthetic experience: it involves an artist who does the work of continually constructing political meaning alongside of aesthetics. Furthermore, insofar as it is still a change in the distribution of the sensible (i.e., it is a culmination of both practices of art and politics and is, hence, ‘suprasensible’), the artist does not play the role of a specialist or theorist but is, rather, one without a part, asserting his or her equality through aesthetic and political means.

Pedagogy of Resistance

Such a conception of art can help us to rethink how we should conceive of musical improvisation as a practice of resistance. We cannot simply find something within a combination of the freedom of musical styles and the experience of a performance that is enough to create the possibility for resistance (Stewart). As Rancière has shown us, this is to cover over the fact that society – both in art and politics – is never a cohesive whole, and even if an artist takes on the task of creating a work that is to be a combination of politics and aesthetics, to become political art it must be more than freedom of expression and unique combinations of musical traditions. It would require an artist to actively and consciously construct such moments of resistance, which would mean becoming a figure somewhere between musician and political activist. Such an example would not simply be that of the pedagogical model (i.e., where the artwork itself can teach people), nor would it assume that art performance itself can form community, as the archi-ethical model presumes. A good example of such a figure can be found in Sun Ra, as he is discussed and evaluated by Ajay Heble.

In *Landing on the Wrong Note: Jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice* (2000), Heble, in questioning the possibility that jazz and musical improvisation can effect actual, resistant social change, depicts the life and work of Sun Ra as creating an overall atmosphere and way of life that promotes a ‘pedagogy of resistance.’ Focusing on three central elements that developed out of Ra’s music and relationships, Heble argues that Ra is a perfect figure to demonstrate how musical improvisation can become more than just an aesthetic experience.

First of all, Ra saw himself as functioning as an educator through his music, and this is not to be taken figuratively. As Heble explains, “Ra (who in fact studied to be a teacher) was notorious for lecturing his performers ‘on the history of black people and their role in the creation of civilization’...” (118). It was not assumed that some meaning could simply be gleaned from an experience of a performance, or by the mere musical form in which the pieces were played; Ra took an active role in educating alongside of playing with musicians. Secondly, Ra’s performances themselves were retellings of the history of different types of music, yet in these performances traditional pieces were not simply combined in a unique and free manner, juxtaposing old and new musical forms. Ra went further: in his retelling of music’s history, he aimed to show how “black art forms were co-opted by the white cultural mainstream...[as is seen by the fact that] Ra’s rollicking interpretation of [‘Big John’s Special] from [Fletcher] Henderson’s repertoire is itself an attempt to reclaim a misrepresented history” (126-127). Lastly, Ra’s art outside musical improvisation also bolsters this notion that Ra was artist who, in every aspect of his art, was interested in a pedagogy of resistance. For Heble, the best example of this is Ra’s work in cinema, as seen in his role in John Coney’s film *Space is the Place*. As Heble comments, “the film offers a twist on the familiar African-American theme of flying as a trope for liberation and freedom, and is explicit in theorizing outer space as a site of

resistance...[since] on Earth, black people don't exist except as myths because they have been denied rights and status" (131). Hence, Ra's work is not only about teaching people to resist contemporary discourses that are usually implicitly, if not explicitly, racist and that draw from a history of colonization and domination, but he is also interested (as is clear by his space references) in looking toward the future and toward unknown histories that can be constructed through resistant practices.

Thus, to conclude, we can see that artists like Sun Ra can provide us with examples for the best way to conceive of musical improvisation as a resistant practice. Following the insights of Rancière, such artists do not simply try to provide an aesthetic experience and feeling of freedom in hopes that this will somehow transform into political resistance. Rather, they take an active role in becoming political figures, just as much as aestheticians, by teaching and educating people, and by transforming the distribution of the sensible: they transform what we consider to be the parts that count in regards to art and politics. This can be seen in how Ra retells musical history always with an eye toward showing styles and people who have historically been oppressed. We can see from Rancière that, for musical improvisation to take part in politics, it requires mediation between politics and aesthetics, wherein an artist is not simply reduced to one form, but, rather, embodies the culmination of the two. Here, as seen in the example of Sun Ra, improvisation moves outside of the musical performance and playing itself and aims at educating people and actively (and explicitly) performing art that calls into question and exposes socio-political histories and discourses that have aimed to order society at the expense of those without a part.

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