

Improvisation and Ethnomusicology

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Definition

“Improvisation” means different things to different people in different places at different times. Although English folk songs vary according to personal interpretation, musicians talk about personal versions within a particular local tradition of a song rather than improvisation per se. Although south Asian musicians talk about improvisation, some musicians appear to memorize their ‘improvisations’. This is also true of some jazz ‘improvisation’. Some Japanese musicians maintain there is no improvisation in their music yet comparisons of different performances of the same piece of *shakuhachi* music may differ greatly in form, length, and some content.

Improvisation is often defined in its relation to pre-composition¹. In general, what performers are expected to do and how they prepare to meet these expectations differ in the context of pre-composition and improvisation. Although both processes share some features, improvisers make significant creative decisions about music during its performance.

Improvisation is present to some degree in most musical performance, but most scholars, musicians, and commentators use the term when a performance differs substantially from a point of departure or when a society explicitly distinguishes between pre-composition and improvisation.

Although there are important differences between the two, including the kind and degree of education and preparation required for improvisation and the role of oral and written transmission of improvisatory processes and materials, Nettl (1974) argues for a music-making continuum instead of a

¹ This article will use the term “pre-composition” to distinguish it from what we usually refer to as “composition” because improvisation is also a kind of composition.

dichotomy, with composition at one end and improvisation at the other, sharing features, and recognizing that neither exists in any pure form. In South Indian Karnatak music, both composition and improvisation share formal techniques such as repetition, variation, and melodic sequencing. Some 19th century improvised fugues were so well crafted that it was difficult to tell them apart from composed fugues.

Even though what counts as improvisation may vary from place to place, there are some common features. Risk is one. Making decisions on the spur of the moment takes one into unexplored territory. At the same time, the improviser is obliged to coordinate these explorations with the guiding principles of musical style.

The character of risk can vary. In Bebop the performer risks getting lost in the structure that is being followed by other members of the band. In fugue improvisation, one runs the risk of breaking the rules of the form. In South Indian Karnatak music, rhythmic tension, created by a performer's cross-rhythms, must be resolved with the underlying tala (rhythmic cycle).

Balance between taking risks and adherence to musical givens seems to be another typical feature of improvisation. Improvisers are often evaluated on the basis of how they balance obligatory musical features, thus honoring the tradition and exhibiting knowledge of stylistic constraints, while at the same time creating new music.

Another common feature of improvisation is the value placed on technical or intellectual virtuosity. But over-reliance on technical virtuosity usually leads to criticisms of superficiality.

All improvisation has obligatory features, that is, points of departure, or models, which vary by culture and genre. Musical points of departure contain musical building blocks, a kind of vocabulary upon which the musicians can draw. The methods of combining, juxtaposing, and otherwise arranging building blocks to create music in a particular style, is one concern of ethnomusicological research. Although there are building blocks in composed music, there are fewer in improvised music – perhaps

to facilitate spontaneity and oral transmission. Improvised musics can differ in terms of the relative prominence, density and audibility of these building blocks, and in how the performer uses and departs from them. The relationship between a point of departure learned by the improviser and the product that is created in the course of performance is another area of ethnomusicological research.

One common point of departure is the musical mode, especially in South, Central, and West Asia, North Africa, Indonesia, and to a limited extent, jazz. "Mode" is another word that has been used to refer to different kinds of musical phenomena depending on context. In this case, it has to do with making melodies. At the very least, "mode" refers to a set of particular pitches used in pre-compositions or improvisation, which is often characterized by typical motivic features and a hierarchy of pitch relationships. *Raga*, a modal system from South Asia, is, among other things, a hierarchically related set of pitches from which typical and sometimes obligatory melodic motifs, practices and ornaments, are drawn. *Raga* is shared by improvised and pre-composed music.

Maqam in Arabic traditions, *makam* in Turkey, variations of this term in other parts of the Arab world, and *gushe* in Iran, are the names for related modal systems that are less constrained than *raga* and allow for more than one mode in one performance, often moving from a principal one to secondary ones and back again.

In Javanese gamelan traditions, the model consists of a skeletal melody, a mode (e.g., '*pathet*') and a specific pace and melodic density depending on the instrument.

There is a wide variety of kinds of models in sub-Saharan African music. Prominent among most of Africa is the use of improvised variation, where a short phrase is repeated with changes, consistent in length and rhythmic framework and setting up a complex relationship between repetition and variation. Call-and-response consists of a group refrain interspersed with a soloist's improvised variations. West African drum ensembles consist of a group of musicians who play interlocking pre-set short patterns

and a master drummer who improvises using these patterns as models.

A point of departure used by jazz musicians is the re-harmonized chord progressions of popular songs, mostly from the 1930s and 40s, and the pieces composed by jazz musicians. These provide melodic and harmonic material for jazz improvisation. Melodic ideas (formulas, motives, 'licks') heard on jazz records serve as another important basis for improvisation.

Over the last 40 years, the relationship between chords and scales has acted as another kind of point of departure for jazz improvising and for teaching jazz improvisation. This approach draws on the work of George Russell whose theory guided the jazz improviser through progressively more complicated and dissonant scales and their related chords and harmonic substitutions. Russell frames his theory as part of a spiritual philosophy that goes beyond formalism. Ingrid Monson points out that Russell means to move students away from musical standardization, suggesting a broader link between musical and other kinds of freedom.

European musical traditions offer a variety of improvisational points of departure. South Slavonic traditions of epic singing use stylistic, melodic, and textual themes and motifs, many of them formulaic, often sung by a *guslar* accompanied by the single stringed *gusle*. These epic songs can last several days.

Western art music has used a number of contrasting models. Keyboard players can use fugue as a model. Themes from a concerto were often used as a basic model for the improvised cadenza. A vocabulary of ornaments served as models in Baroque music. Improvised music of the second half of the 20th century used general style and sound ideals.

Improvisation as Culture

Improvisation may be a key feature in the ways music brings individuals and groups together or, at times, drives them apart. In cultures where pre-composed music exists, to improvise is often to

make a statement about freedom, musical and political. Improvisation can also act as a vehicle for sharing one's personality, for expressing one's identity, in ways that composed music doesn't encourage. Group improvisation encourages individuals to relate to each other in ways that musicians in other kinds of ensembles don't, and these ways of relating reflect, model, or express social relationships including power relationships. A subculture may express its individuality through participating in improvisation.

The prominence of improvisation varies greatly from culture to culture. It dominates in the music of South Asia, West Asia, Indonesia, and Africa. It typifies some individual genres such as jazz, *kulintang* in the Philippines and parts of Cantonese opera.

The value placed on improvisation and improvisers differs depending on the society. The view of improvisation as unplanned, whether true or not, has negative implications in some societies, but in others, such as the Middle East and India, improvisation and improvisers have high prestige.

In Western culture, musics that are mostly improvisatory, such as jazz, have been considered inferior to pre-composed music. This is partly due to the privileging of notated music over oral musical traditions even though not all oral traditions are improvised, and because of the view that Western culture, including the prevalence of pre-composed music, is more 'advanced' than other cultures where improvisation is the norm.

West Asian societies traditionally value improvised music, associating it with ideas of freedom and individual decision-making. Improvised genres, especially non-metric ones, have higher prestige than composed ones. Traditional Iranian culture values the learned amateur musician, who has the freedom to decide what, when and where to play; less valued is the professional who must play on demand. South Indian Karnatak musicians are judged on their knowledge of the repertory and their ability to improvise. Genres like the highly improvised *ragam-tanam-pallavi* have the most prestige. In Javanese gamelan music,

those performers who depart the most from the model are the most highly esteemed.

Some recent scholarly work has addressed the issue of the nature of a good improvisation by looking at past performances rather than prescription. The focus has been on interactive systems between musicians and between musicians and their audience.

Ethnomusicologists have also been concerned with how processes of improvisation are used in some musical cultures as a window on the entire musical system, including pre-composition.

Jazz and Asian music scholars have tried to answer questions about the creative processes of improvising musicians by comparing performances. In so doing, they have often taken their cues from the analyses of pre-composed music. But there may be limits on how well suited such analysis is for improvisation. What biases do we bring to the table when we apply the analytic tools meant for a piece by, say, Mozart to a solo by John Coltrane? Formulaic analysis originally applied by Lord to the improvised performance of Slavic epic poetry, later applied to Gregorian chant by Treitler, by Gushee to the improvisational style of Lester Young, and by Spring to the work of jazz guitarist Charlie Christian, may be more apt than traditional Western categories of musical analysis, which focus on the work as opposed to the performance of music.

Historiography

In his 1998 book (In the Course of Performance) Nettl calls the study of improvisation in the West a neglected art. By the 1960s only Ernst Ferand's 1938 Die Improvisation in der Musik had contributed a substantial synthesis to the study of improvisation, and this focused mostly on improvisation in the West. Ferand looked at improvisation as one kind of thing, emphasizing the commonality of oral composition, Baroque improvisation and 19th century improvised organ fugues. Later work recognized that the term improvisation covers a much broader range of practices and artistic, political, social, and educational values.

Before the 1960s musicologists tended to treat improvisation as a craft in contrast to the 'art' of pre-composition. Musicological neglect of improvisation may have to do with attitudes toward the societies in which improvisation plays a major role such as non-Western societies, folk cultures and the music of North American minorities. Pre-composed art music is seen as disciplined and planned, transcendent, reliable and predictable, associated with middle class morals. This is in contrast to jazz, for example, which is associated with unreliability and unconventionality. Although this view of jazz improvisation as a genre without planning, thought, and seriousness can be seen as racially motivated, often associated with black musicians, it has also suggested to Euro-American scholars and commentators that the in-the-moment nature of improvisation represents a kind of quintessence of musicianship and that somehow improvisations and oral traditions are more "real" in that improvising musicians have a kind of musical freedom not available in "art" music.

We can summarize, according to Nettl, the sometimes contradictory musicological thinking about improvisation up to the 1960s as follows:

- It is distinct from pre-composition
- It imitates pre-composition but without notation
- It is the essence of composition in aural transmission
- Our great composers excelled at it
- It is a craft but not an art
- It is to be evaluated along the same lines as composition
- It is a process that cannot be explained or analyzed
- it is a kind of music making that sets apart musical culture outside the western art music establishment.

Starting in the 1960s, case studies of improvisation started to appear with more frequency in the ethnomusicological literature, especially regarding the music of Southern Asia and Iran, and jazz. Scholars of Iranian musical improvisation were concerned with the nature and structure of the *radif* in its relation to improvisation. Jazz scholars researched analyses of individual performances and the techniques of individual musicians.

Scholars studying the Western art music tradition have mostly been interested in the performance practice of early music, an interest prevalent in the last half of the 20th century.

Ethnomusicologists tended to examine the structure and individuality of various improvisation types. These studies defined the approach of much subsequent scholarly research on improvisation. They included a number of themes and questions concerning the notion of improvisatory competence, interaction between musicians and between musicians and the audience, and the relationship of improvisation to culture.

More recently there has been an increase in research on improvisation as a central part of music making, not just as a craft or as a form of music relegated to the 'other'. There has also been interest in how an understanding of improvisation leads to the comprehension of music as a fundamental metaphor for structures and processes of society and culture.

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It is difficult to argue that improvisation is neglected by scholars at this point. This is perhaps less true in the field of Western art music, which remains, with notable exceptions in the work on Gregorian chant by Leo Trietler, work-oriented in practice and theory.

Although the study of practical improvisation has taken off in the last 30 years with university performance programs expanding in jazz, Gamelan, South Asian, and "new" music, and although more serious consideration is being given to improvisation by major reference works such as Groves Online, respect and understanding have not trickled down as much as some scholars of improvisation would have liked. For this to happen, a change of values would have to occur, placing improvisation at the centre of music studies.