Notes and Opinions

Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice

Improvisation and Pedagogy: Background and Focus of Inquiry

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By the end of the nineteenth century, the practice of improvisation as a form of professionalized artmaking had all but disappeared from Western classical music.[1] This gradual elimination of improvisation did not take place without resistance, most prominently including French organ performance. However, this break with what had heretofore been "the" Western tradition certainly constituted a radical rupture with over a half-millenium of canonical practice, and the extreme understatement with which the historiography of Western music treats this rupture justifies my ironic characterization of it as "The Silent Revolution."

By the 1960s, much academic work on improvisation was largely centered, not on professional training or aesthetic inquiry for adult musicians, but upon pedagogy for children and young adults in which improvisation was deployed therapeutically. The migration of the eurythmic methods of Emile Jaques-Dalcroze from its origins in conservatory study to its current status as a method of teaching young people is a prime case in point.[2]

Between 1920 and 1960, the rise of jazz as a potent competitor to the primacy of Western classical music reintroduced a notion of improvisation as a professional practice with an associated aesthetics that also articulated social and cultural instrumentality. Jazz improvisors, routinely caricatured as unable to theorize their own practices,[3] developed their highly influential musical directions in largely autodidact circumstances: private listening, practicing, and performing sessions, public and semipublic "jam sessions," home and talent show performance,[4] and professional touring bands.

During the 1960s, musicians extended this practice of autodidact pedagogy to confront the decline of jazz as a popular music, a fact that was believed to lead to a decline of the skills needed to perform the music. New rehearsal bands sprang up whose primary purpose was not to present performances, but to experiment with new models of music-making. Indeed, some of these groups never played a public concert.[5] Even more crucially, as jazz developed new and challenging models of form, style, and content, including challenges to traditional tonality and the recurring rhythmic patterns and cycles that marked earlier forms of the music, communities of autodidact pedagogy began to form, including such musicians' collectives as the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), the Black Artists Group (BAG), and the Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension, or Underground Musicians Association (UGMAA/UGMA). In these groups, the focus of self-instruction shifted radically; many of these groups connected the creation of new music with the revitalization of US communities of color in the face of severe economic privation.[6]

As the reliance on received styles and the codification of musical "best practices" appeared to wane, the roles of both teachers and students were radically redefined, to the point where no clear line of demarcation between them existed.[7] Musicians taught themselves and each other not only how to play, but how to teach. Moreover, these newer autodidact communities developed local variants of a practice of "open" or "free" improvisation that blurred the boundaries between improvisation as performance, as critical musical inquiry, and as political and social activism, all in the course of researching new sounds and modes of communication. Both in North America and in Europe, these communities redefined the role of pedagogy itself to include cultural and social critique.[8]

A parallel trend during the 1960s saw the development of an academic jazz pedagogy in which codifications of received styles—notably bebop, the previous generation's transgressive experimentalism—began to enter the US academy in earnest. Jazz schools sprang up, sometimes landing far from their origins; for instance, the Berklee College of Music, one of the most celebrated jazz schools in the US, emerged as an offshoot of the experimental musical systems and pedagogy of Russian polymath Joseph Schillinger, a system which was adopted and modified by AACM musicians in 1967 for their own creation of a free music academy. Meanwhile, itinerant musicians of the 1970s, notably the Vancouver-based New Orchestra Workshop and Karl and Ingrid Berger's Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York,[9] furthered the development of

hybrid pedagogies, combining the more stable structure of institutions with the dynamism and immediacy of itinerancy.

Another academic path runs from the short-lived Lenox School of Jazz's early 1960s adoption of composer Gunther Schuller's Third Stream experimentalism to its development into the New England Conservatory's "Contemporary Improvisation" curriculum, in which models, aesthetics, and methods for improvisation are conceived, synthesized, and even improvised, in view of a multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural landscape.[10] In an academic environment that foregrounds improvisation as both subject and method of inquiry, the elision of distinction between research and pedagogy—for instance, through think-tanks and extended residencies—was well represented by the University of California at San Diego's (UCSD) Center for Music Experiment under Pauline Oliveros, Keith Humble, Jean-Charles Francois, and John Silber, University of California professors who started a resident ensemble, KIVA, which was specifically devoted to research into improvisation.[11]

Newer developments in academia included the 1990s rise of a new jazz and improvised music studies that drew from the social sciences (sociology and social psychology, cultural studies), critical theory, and performance and film studies. The new field orientation augmented the increasingly focused challenges to musicology's traditional emphasis on the West, while at the same time complementing ethnomusicology's central focus on inquiries into practice with a renewed emphasis on historical research. A panoply of scholars, many of whom are associated researchers in our initiative in Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice, have made major contributions to the study of improvisation along these lines.

Earlier models of improvisation pedagogy, often based in classical music culture, all too often neglected to consider the improvisor as a functioning role in social communities. Now, newer ethnographies and oral histories[12] have revitalized that segment of the literature on improvisation that centered on childhood development, largely through a simultaneous extending and challenging of the master trope of “play” that this earlier literature regarded as axiomatic. Concomitantly, recent developments at the nexus of music, social psychology, and cognitive science[13] are moving beyond the assumption that 1950s models of jazz music-making can serve as adequate models for modeling the dynamics of improvisation in everyday life.

Research Questions

This background presents an array of fascinating research issues for scholars working on contemporary articulations of improvisation with pedagogy. From within this array, these questions appear particularly pressing:

- What kinds of new theoretical and organizational models, as well as new practices, can be developed for the creation and nurturing of itinerant-institutional partnerships for the teaching of improvisation, the development of improvisation teachers, and theories of education that embed improvisation itself as a methodology?

Performer-centered models in which individual players adopt new skills, communicate cross-culturally, and articulate personal research directions, have found trenchant articulation in the musics routinely subsumed under the banner of "jazz." Accordingly, it is often asserted that orchestral performers "should learn to improvise"—whatever that may mean. For performers to learn new skills is only part of the issue, however; Christopher Small's remark that "the tension and the possibility of failure which are part of an improvised performance have no place in modern concert life" (284) refers not only or even primarily to performers, composers, or even listeners, but to the economic and social infrastructure that supports classical music itself. Performers operate as part of a network surrounding orchestral performance that includes not only musicians, conductors and composers, but also administrators, foundations, critics and the media, historians, educational institutions, and much more. Each of the nodes within this network, not just those directly making music, would need to become "improvisation-aware," and implementing a kind of interventionist, workshop-based pedagogy for administrators could have considerable impact as part of a process of resocialization and economic restructuring.

- How can we extend the ways in which methods of improvisation developed in music can migrate to inform pedagogy in other fields?

For instance, there is an extensive literature in organizational studies that views improvisation as an experimental method that turns opportunity and contingency to the benefit of students, teachers, and business models.[14] The influential successor to the improvisation experiments of the Center for Music Experiment was UCSD's graduate music program in Critical Studies and Experimental Practices, a program that was heavily influenced by the radical politically imbued pedagogy of Henry Giroux.[15] The aim was to foster the emergence of musicians who combine traditional methods and intellectual environments of scholarly inquiry with experimental performance and composition. Unearthing the histories behind these developments, through both archival and oral historicizing, can lead us to reconnect these earlier histories with newer possibilities.

In the past decade, transnational experimental free improvisation communities have arisen across North America, Europe, Latin America, and Asia, that interface with popular music.[16] This leads, inexorably, to a third area of interest:

- How can cross-cultural models of learning and teaching extend experimental learning and teaching methods? How can new musical communities and social formations that presume the importance of improvisation be incorporated into the academy? What kinds of new social models will result from such initiatives, and what can be gained from theorizing these newer models of music making?

To tackle these issues, ultimately, is to move toward the development of a new and exemplary literature on improvisation, a literature that theorizes, teaches, and historicizes, all at once.

Notes

[1] See Lewis “Afterword to ‘Improvised,’” Moore, and Sancho-Velasquez.

[2] See Chase.

[3] See Merriam.

[4] See hooks.

[5] See Lewis, “Experimental,” and Tapscott and Isoardi.

[6] See Radano, Lewis, “Experimental,” Looker, and Tapscott and Isoardi.

[7] See Bailey.

[8] See Carles and Comolli, and Willener.

[9] See Sweet.

[10] See Schuller and Yudkin.

[11] See Shere.

[12] See Gaunt.

[13] See Iyer.

[14] See Cunha and Kelly.

[15] See Giroux.

[16] See Stanyek.

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