KEYWORDS IN MUSICAL FREE IMPROVISATION

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some keywords and concepts concerning free improvised music and its recent developments drawing from ongoing bibliographical research. A radical pluralism stems from musicians' backgrounds and the mixtures and fusions of styles and idioms resulting from these mixtures. Seemingly very different "performance-driven" and "play-driven" attitudes exist, even among musicians who share the practice of performing at concerts. New models of musical analysis aiming specifically at free improvised music provide strategical observations of interaction and structure.

INTRODUCTION

Recent trends that examine music in its social context[1] have emerged partly as an extension of on-going research in the sociology of music since the 1970s. To some extent, this examination of music in and as culture has emerged as a reaction to traditional musicology, which, during much of the 20th century, often treated the discipline of musical analysis in an objectivistic way. If one applies an 'either-or' view, one could study the musical text, to obtain a fuller and more complete perception of its sonic details and how they function together. Or one may engage in philosophical speculations about the overall meaning in music and other art forms. Another possible form of semantic inquiry would be to practice hermeneutic and phenomenological studies departing from individual listening experiences. Alternatively, one could adopt sociological methods in order to give people and their musical and cultural behaviour their deserved place in these fields.

Fortunately, we do not have to accept the dilemma of choosing between these different modes of analysis. Indeed, music *is* worth examining from various perspectives; we *do* indeed ascribe meaning to it, and it *is* connected to our behaviour. Most musicians usually engage in some way with all three of these levels. This article is written within the frame of my earlier scholarship (Bergstroem-Nielsen, 2002), representing cumulative bibliographical research into writings about free improvisation and other related topics. Writings about free improvisation now have quite a history that began in the 1970s and attracted more academic interest in the 1990s (see Stewart 2016). But even before that time, many musicians contributed text and documentation, as well as with their thoughts on what they were doing.

The following is an effort to gather various keywords that have emerged for me in literature related to improvisation in an attempt to learn more about its key characteristics. I present

1 Concerning journals, these include the present one [Music and Arts in Action] and Critical Studies in Improvisation.

some of this keyword research, which I think especially characterises free improvisation and could be worthy for further reflection and research.

KEYWORD 1: PLURALISMS

Free improvisation allows musicians with different backgrounds and musical preferences to collaborate with one another. It is especially noticeable that some musicians see this as not only a basic condition, but as a productive tension. Globokar (1972) speaks of an 'unmediated mixture', and Parker (as cited in Stanyek, 1999) moves further with coining the metaphor of the desirable 'cheese and pickle sandwich' containing such a mixture, to which he ascribes aesthetic value. He views this state as a middle way between 'total heterogenisation' and 'total homogenisation' and argues against both extremes, especially against the latter.

UNMEDIATED MIXTURE:	**A KIND OF TENSION TO BE MAINTAINED (= CHEESE AND PICKLE SANDWICH):**
"It is too much of a simplification to state that this way of free improvisation is only the last consequence of a development within post-serial music. [...] If, by incidence, someone appears in the group who has played only jazz or Indian music, the result changes fundamentally. It becomes a peculiar and unmediated mixture of two worlds. I would like to add immediately that this unmediatedness is not necessarily a negative factor". *Vinko Globokar (1972)*	"There is a kind of tension to be maintained between total heterogeneity (where there is no cheese and pickle sandwich) and total homogenization where all identity markers are flattened out and we arrive at a kind of filtered 'new age-world music' pap. (Like a cheese and pickle sandwich in the blender!) The aim as I see it is to initiate and to respond to the initiatives of others in proportion to a sense of demands made by the particular piece of music as it unfolds." *Evan Parker as cited in Stanyek (1999)*

Figure 0: Cheese and pickle sandwich – Parker's metaphor for healthy co-existence...

In Figure 1 below, I have sought to illustrate the playing situation as Parker describes it in a triangular pattern. Players are seen as independent forces, between which ‘initialising’ and ‘responding’ takes place, and the third interacting force is the musical language. Parker describes different levels of the musical language in an interesting way, which will be discussed in more detail later.

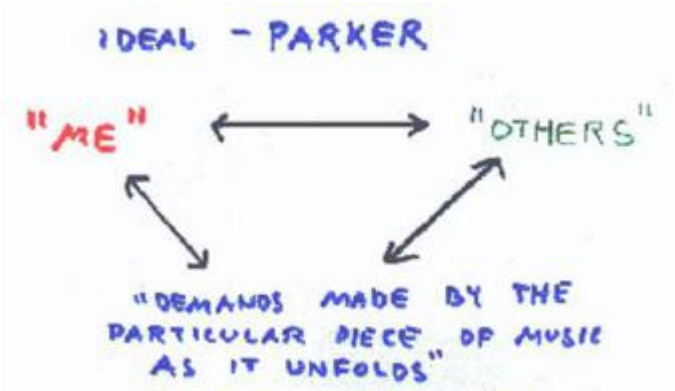

Figure 1: Concepts from Parker (as cited in Stanyek, 1999)

KEYWORD 2: CONFLICT

Given such views that stress the positive aspects of pluralism and difference, it is only natural that one must reflect on the role of conflict itself. Beresford (as cited in Cusack, 1978) maintains vigorously that without acceptance of conflicts, there will be an unhealthy and ungenuine situation: “The improvised music performances which don't work for me are those which are exactly trying to project an image of pure music which doesn't have the same problems that most music has and that most life has".

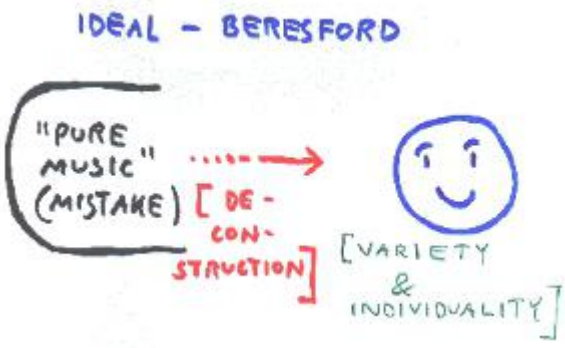

Figure 2: Against Pure Music

Taking Beresford’s terminology slightly further, one could speak of his ideal as an act of deconstruction done to the mistakenly ‘pure music’, a deconstruction that clarifies the situation and which may be acting in a liberating way as well as to restore variety and individuality.

KEYWORD 3: IDIOMS

The notion of idiom also illuminates how free improvisation has developed pluralistically. When Bailey (1992) coined his classical term of non-idiomatic, there still existed a need to distinguish between traditional styles and genres and the way they were made relative in the new improvised music context. In later developments, this relativity of styles and genres have become increasingly a matter of course.

IDIOMS AS PREREQUISITES

"Idiomatic improvisation... is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation... is most usually found in so-called 'free' improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity...". *(Bailey 1992, p. xi)*

"Single idioms are no longer regarded as prerequisites for the music making but as tools which can in every moment be used or not used". *(Munthe 1992)*

"Free improvisation takes place on top of everything else the musician in question has dealt with."
(Rizzi 2000)

KEYWORD 4: COMMUNICATIVE CONTEXT

In his doctoral dissertation, Stephen Chase (2006) unfolds a view of two opposing views of improvised music making: one that is “performance-driven” and one that is “play-driven”. In the quotations provided here, musicians from both sides place a high value on communication, but they do so differently. On the performance-driven side, musicians emphasise the needs and expectations of the audience; on the play-driven side, musicians emphasise the experience of the performers.

PERFORMANCE-DRIVEN	PLAY-DRIVEN
“The meta-musician looks for meaning, and for music with meaning, and looks to invest as much meaning as possible in the music. The intention is to transcend all previous experience of music production and music consumption. The intention is making music, and listening to it as if for the first time.” *Eddie Prèvost (1995), p.3*	"Giving his reasons for being an improvising musician, he states, “I think the answer is I enjoy doing it. I enjoy that interplay of working with other people..." ...
“...if you’re going to contribute, make sure that it’s something that’s worthwhile. I mean, people have got out of bed to come and hear you play … and not only that, some of them have paid for it... there’s quite a responsibility. It’s not just amusement, it’s deadly serious, especially as we [AMM] have … dedicated most of [our] lives to improvising and making music... *(Interview with John Tilbury).* *Chase (2006), p. 101*	"It’s that word *play*. You know one of the things I talk to the students here a lot about is, you know, ‘What do you do? You say you play music, what does *play* mean?’ You know, I think most people actually *work* music...." *(Interview with Hugh Nankivell)*. *Chase (2006), p.104*

As Chase states, the performance-driven and play-driven approaches are not mutually exclusive. It could well be that Nankivell is not speaking of other free improvisers when referring to “work” music rather than to “play music”. The play-driven attitude is concerned with a special characteristic of the genre, while the performance-driven one is strongly influenced by the grand concert tradition and views improvised music as a valuable outgrowth of it.

KEYWORD 5: ANALYTIC APPROACHES

There is no shortage of analytical approaches to studying music. For instance, applying a semiologic perspective[2], we can talk of syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects that are vividly interrelated and we can see them as levels of one and the same sign system, just as language appears on all three levels in everyday life. The analytical views cited below illuminate, in different ways, how some aspects of behaviour are related to syntactical phenomena.

The syntactical level, recalling Evan Parker's beautiful statement above (cf. Figure 1), is the place from which musicians gather "a sense of demands made by the particular piece of music as it unfolds" while, on the behavioural and pragmatic level, musicians "initiate and ... respond to the initiatives of others". They are mutually dependent on each other on this level. An entity results in which these levels are interrelated and appear "in proportion to" each other. Clearly, the musicians involved strongly influence what kind of language is created in free improvisation, and some expectations and ideas of what to play or not to play stem from the music they hear.

The first analytical system is Couldry's (1995) distinction between 'parallel voices' and 'group voice'. These approaches to improvisation target characteristically different ways of improvising in an ensemble. Both approaches can be said to create polyphonic structures. It is not difficult to find examples of them among recordings of free improvisation (and references abound in Couldry's book). How do different modes of musical communication form musical languages or meta-languages, and how do they influence individuality and collectivity in musical improvisation?

ENSEMBLE IMPROVISATION	
PARALLEL VOICES: "Parallel voices approach, whose preference is for each instrumental voice to be... an unmistakable and more or less continuous direction of its own..." *Couldry (1995), p. 9*	**GROUP VOICE:** "... *Group voice* approach. As gestures succeed or overlap each other, the aim is to achieve a completely natural flow *without* relying on one or more players appearing to drive it forward individually..." *Couldry (1995), p.9-10.*

Further, both Lutz (1999) and Nunn (1998) provide systems of classification for different communicative codes within improvised music, modes of musical interaction and negotiation.

2 I use the European word semiological rather than the Anglo-Saxon semiotic here. Traditions are different – while the latter concentrates on how language refers to reality, writers like Guiraud (1972) take a more integrative approach. The underlying inspiration comes from Jakobson who formulated his model 1960 – see Jakobson (1971).

SYSTEMS OF LUTZ AND NUNN	
SYSTEM OF LUTZ (complete)	**SYSTEM OF NUNN (a few examples)**
COMMUNICATION 1: between two or more individuals, as concrete musical dialogue	IDENTITIES: anything... that identifies or draws perceptual attention to itself in some way and maintains identity within the music for some time [roughly=section] IDENTIFICATIONAL PROCESSES – Creating Identities (establishment) CONTINUITY PROCESSES – maintaining identities (extension/development)
COMMUNICATION 2: between individual and the whole ensemble, as a common musical reaction to an individual idea	CATALYST – an action to stimulate change in the musical character. SOUND MASS – a collective complex sound made up of a number of "voices" that are roughly equal in contribution
COMMUNICATION 3: Implicit communication which does not manifest itself in concrete dialogue nor in concrete reactions but, for example, as mutual agreement on musical aspects such as expression, dynamics, distribution of roles	SUDDEN/UNEXPECTED SEGUE – unprepared, immediate change with unexpected continuation FEATURE CHANGE – gradual change of one feature that redirects the Flow (usually subtly) FEATURE OVERLAP – one feature of antecedent section is sustained and becomes part of the consequent section FRAGMENTATION – gradual breaking up, or fragmenting, of the general texture and/or rhythm
From Lutz (1999)	*From Nunn (1998)*

It is interesting to note the similarity between ‘Communication 2’ from Lutz (1999) and Nunn’s (1998) ‘Catalyst’ element: “an action to stimulate change in the musical character” - marked with brown colour in the table. Indeed, these are integral characteristics of free improvisation. Other authors have described this as well: Walduck (1997) describes it as ‘ice-breaking’ (p.70) and I have described it as ‘spontaneous agreement’ (2003). Some of Nunn’s other notions, such as ‘Identities’, ‘Feature Overlap’ and more, may combine with - and extend - traditional analytical terms centered around motivic work and thematic dualism (Cf. Nunn 1998). Classical and Romantic concert music developed such thematic processes. The differentiated processes we cultivate in free improvisation seem, however, less centered around isolated “motifs” but rather work in a more holistic way as suggested by Nunn’s notion of “identity”[3]. - Two of Nunn's notions dealing with change and development that seem especially characteristic to me for free improvisation are marked with yellow colour in the quotations above.

CONCLUSIONS ON FREE IMPROVISATION

What can we learn about the specifics of free improvisation from these keywords?

- Free improvisation may easily lead to pluralist situations. They arise out of direct encounters between musicians. One could name this a direct form of polyphony; unlike the concept of polyphony within Western classical music in which the polyphony is pre-imagined by one person, polyphony in free improvisation is the result of real-time musical interaction among a group of improvising musicians.

- Free improvisation emphasizes play, which may be mixed in different proportions with an emphasis on performance.

- Music can be studied as a sign system, much like language, allowing an integrative approach to its study and analysis.

- Creating and interacting in the moment entails certain recurrent communicative codes and structures in the music. The Parallel and Group Voice approaches (Couldry, 1995, referring to two kinds of polyphonic structure) and classification systems like those by Lutz (1997) and Nunn (1998) may be used to describe and further understand such typical structures.

3 The notion of “identity” is a general one calling for further specification of how identities differ. Descriptions according to musical parameters may be applied. I have used such a system in Bergstroem-Nielsen (2006)

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