



Musical Improvisation and the Academy

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ABSTRACT

Academic interest in musical improvisation has increased significantly in recent years. This is evidenced not only by the increasing number of publications focused on improvisation, but also by the growing number of improvisers to have received academic appointments at major universities. In this essay, I examine the changing historical relationships between musical improvisation and the academy, as well as some of the implications of those relationships for both the academy and the field of musical improvisation itself.

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Academic interest in musical improvisation has increased significantly in recent years as evidenced by the growing number of scholarly publications focused on improvisation (this volume included), and by the number of improvisers to have received academic appointments at major universities.¹ In the present essay, I examine the changing historical relationships between musical improvisation and the academy, as well as some of the implications of those relationships for both the academy and the field of musical improvisation itself.² But first, I would like to briefly discuss the history of improvisation in Western art music.

It is well documented that there were numerous traditions of musical improvisation in Western musical discourse prior to the twentieth century. Many of the great classical, Baroque, and Romantic composers including Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Liszt were accomplished improvisers in addition to their talents as composers. Improvisation took place in the ornamentation of notated parts, in solo preludes and cadenzas, in fugal church organ playing, and more (Ferand, 1961; McGee, 2003). With the exception of improvised church organ music, most other improvisatory traditions within Western art music had greatly diminished, if not disappeared entirely, by the mid to late nineteenth century. There are several reasons for this disappearance, notably changes in the political economy surrounding music precipitated by the dominance of printed sheet music.

By the nineteenth century, sheet music had firmly established itself as the primary medium for the dissemination of music. This effectively turned music into a commodity that could be copyrighted and mass-produced, exposing composers' music to a much wider market and allowing for a potentially far greater monetary return. It seems quite likely that the eventual dominance of the printed score contributed to the near disappearance of improvised modes of music making in the Western classical tradition. Improvised musical performances simply were not as marketable or profitable as printed music.

With the near erasure of improvisation from Western art music came corresponding shifts in the discourses surrounding Western art music; improvisation came to be thought of as “the other” of musical composition, not only as a musical process, but also in terms of its social status. This “othering” of improvisation is implicit in some of the earliest dictionary usages of the word improvisation (and variations thereof). For example, the 1795 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary states:

“The Italian improvisator never attempts a ballad without striking his mandolino”. The 1811 edition of the OED associates improvisation with “the flexibility of Italian and Spanish languages. . . [which] renders these countries distinguished for the talent of improvisation” (qtd. in Fischlin and Heble, 16). As Fischlin and Heble note, encoded within these statements is an incipient “ethnic othering in which the

¹ A partial list of improvisers who hold or have held academic appointments includes: Wadada Leo Smith, Charlie Haden, and Vinny Golia at the California Institute for the Arts; Anthony Braxton at Wesleyan University; Roscoe Mitchell and Fred Frith at Mills College; George Lewis at Columbia University; Anthony Davis and Mark Dresser at the University of California, San Diego; Milford Graves and the late Bill Dixon at Bennington College; Nicole Mitchell at the University of California, Irvine; and Pauline Oliveros at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

² I am writing primarily about the relationship between improvisation and the academy in Canada and the United States specifically, where the majority of my professional life has taken place. I will leave it to scholars of improvised music in Europe and elsewhere to discuss the situation in their own countries.

consistent association between improvisatory discourse and Latin/Mediterranean cultures are implicitly opposed to Anglo-Saxon culture” (16).³

By the early twentieth century, this process of musical and cultural othering took on new dimensions, especially in North America where improvisation came to be identified increasingly with African American expressive culture, further reinforcing the divide between improvisation and composition, as well as their perceived class and race affiliations. This constructed—and profoundly false—binary persisted well into the 20th century, being actively maintained by a variety of institutional contexts surrounding the music, notably university music departments and institutionalized forms of music education more generally.⁴

Things began to change, however, by the middle of the 20th century as musical improvisation began to re-enter western musical discourse. A variety of factors contributed to this re-emergence including the desire among composers of new and experimental music for new sounds, including those that could not be notated using traditional Western notation. In addition, recording technology may have played a role. In much the same way that technological innovations (namely the ability to produce sheet music) contributed to the demise of improvisation in Western art music more than a century earlier, the invention and eventual widespread circulation of sound recording technologies may well have contributed to the re-emergence of musical improvisation in that they allowed improvised musical performances to be recorded, evaluated, circulated, and sold.

Another factor that played a vital role in the re-emergence of improvisation in Western art music was increased contact between musical traditions and systems of musical logic from previously disparate cultural and social locations. Indeed, current conceptions of improvisation in the West are largely the result of the encounter between two streams of music and culture in particular, one with roots in the African diaspora and another with roots in European art music. Despite the widespread vitriol towards jazz and other forms of African American expressive culture in the opening decades of the 20th century⁵ and the fact that many elite-supported cultural institutions (including universities) had wilfully ignored those forms until the 1950s, modern jazz posed significant challenges to the musical and cultural status quo. There is considerable evidence to suggest that those challenges did not go unnoticed by composers rooted in the Western art music tradition who began to leave increasingly substantive musical decisions to the discretion of the performers of their works, thereby re-introducing musical improvisation into Western musical discourse. A clear example of the tendency towards improvisation can be found in the development of graphic scores in the 1950s and 1960s, pieces of music that eschewed traditional forms of notation in favour of diagrammatic musical instructions involving varying degrees of abstraction. Graphic scores placed a great deal of creative agency on the part of performers and effectively reintroduced musical improvisation into the tradition of Western art music.

³ In an essay titled “Terrorism and the Politics of Improvisation”, Rob Wallace persuasively argues that a similar pattern of discursive ethnic othering persists in contemporary uses of the term “improvised”, which is followed more often than not by the words “explosive device” in mainstream media reports.

⁴ See Lawrence Levine’s *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (1988) for a discussion of the ideological forces that contributed to the bifurcation of American culture along lines of class and race in the final decades of the nineteenth century and opening decades of the twentieth.

⁵ For a survey of racist rhetoric in early jazz criticism see Anderson (2004).

In an essay titled “Improvised Music Since 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives”, George Lewis convincingly argues that the re-emergence of improvisation in Western art music was, in part, a response to improvisatory musical traditions emanating largely from African American communities historically. His insights are worth quoting at length:

Already active in the 1940s, a group of radical young black American improvisers, for the most part lacking access to economic and political resources often taken for granted in high-culture musical circles, nonetheless posed potent challenges to Western notions of structure, form, communication, and expression. These improvisers, while cognizant of Western musical tradition, located and centered their modes of musical expression within a stream emanating largely from African and African-American cultural and social history. The international influence and dissemination of their music, as well as the strong influences coming from later forms of “jazz”, has resulted in the emergence of new sites for transnational, transcultural improvisative musical activity. In particular, a strong circumstantial case can be made for the proposition that the emergence of these new, vigorous, and highly influential improvisative forms provided an impetus for musical workers in other traditions, particularly European and American composers active in the construction of a transnational European-based tradition, to come to grips with some of the implications of musical improvisation. (Lewis 92)

I regard the re-emergence of real-time modes of music making, by which I mean improvisation and cognate musical processes such as indeterminacy and aleatoricism, as one of the most significant developments in Western musical discourse over the past half-century. Contemporary composers and performers working in a wide variety of musical and cultural locations have embraced improvisatory approaches to music making. In some cases, like those of Giacinto Scelsi and Lukas Foss, composers have used improvisation as part of their compositional methodology. However, for many creative practitioners, including Derek Bailey, George Lewis, Anthony Braxton, William Parker, and John Zorn to name only a very few, improvisation is a significant and important mode of musical activity in its own right that deserves public recognition and support.

Thanks in no small measure to the efforts of improvising musicians, academic interest in improvisation has increased significantly as well. A few scholars, notably Bruno Nettl and Stephen Blum, wrote important essays on the subject of improvisation in the 1980s. However, it was not until the late 1990s that the first academic conferences focused specifically on improvisation began to take place. One such conference titled “Improvising Across Borders: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Improvised Music Traditions” took place at the University of California San Diego in 1999 and was organized by improvising pianist Dana Reason who was a graduate student there at the time. One of the interesting things about the participants at that symposium, and about the emergent field of improvisation studies more generally, is the fact that relatively few scholars of improvised music come from a disciplinary background in music. David Borgo has suggested that within the academy historically, jazz has been “too ‘Other’ for musicology and not ‘Other’ enough for ethnomusicology” (qtd. in Ake, 1). I think this has been largely true in the case of musical improvisation as well. As a result, scholars hailing from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds have contributed to the study of improvisation in important ways.

A case in point is the “Improvisation, Community and Social Practice” (ICASP for short) research group with which I was a research co-investigator. This international team of researchers consisted of academics hailing from disciplines including not only music, but also anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, race and ethnic studies, gender and women’s studies, philosophy, performance studies, English literature, law, and more. In 2007, the ICASP project received a \$2.5 million dollar “Major Collaborative Research Initiative” grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada that funded a variety of interrelated research projects on improvisation over the seven year duration of the award. In addition to multiple books on the subject of musical improvisation, the ICASP project spawned dozens of journal articles on improvisation, over 20 colloquia at 3 Canadian universities, and 3 intensive Summer Institutes for doctoral students. The project funded over 200 graduate research positions and 14 postdoctoral fellowships related to the study of improvisation.

In addition to its activities inside the university environment, ICASP developed improvisation-focused initiatives in conjunction with a variety of not-for-profit community partners. These initiatives included improvisation workshops with disadvantaged youth, with individuals experiencing homelessness and poverty, and with children with physical and mental disabilities. The ICASP team also developed a series of online resources for educators wishing to incorporate improvisation into their classroom (see <http://www.improvcommunity.ca/projects/toolkit>). In addition, ICASP inaugurated the on-line peer-reviewed academic journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, published twice a year. Through all of these activities, the ICASP project played a significant role in shaping the field of improvisation studies and in forging new interdisciplinary relationships between improvisation and the academy.

The ICASP project concluded its seven-year funding cycle in 2014. However, in its wake, a new initiative known as the “International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation” (IICSI) has been established, which received another seven-year 2.5 million dollar grant through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2014. Like its predecessor, the institute involves an international research team of more than 50 scholars from 20 institutions, as well as more than 30 community partners.

Underpinning both the ICASP and IICSI projects is the utopian ideal that musical improvisation serves as “a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action”, to quote from the ICASP website. Similarly, the tag line from the online announcement regarding the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation reads: “Institute to explore improvisation as key to world harmony.” These are laudable sentiments that I am invested in as both a scholar and creative practitioner. But I am also inclined to raise some critical questions about them. This is not a case of biting the academic hand that feeds, but rather a self-reflexive critical engagement with the discourses surrounding the ICASP and IICSI projects—and surrounding improvisation studies more generally—with a view of understanding more fully the changing relationships between improvisation and the academy.

Unfortunately, improvised modes of musical discourse do not always function in a utopian manner. Improvising ensembles are often rife with power asymmetries that

operate under the guise of supposed musical freedom. Whether it is intentional or not, improvising musicians frequently make musical choices that have the effect of silencing other members of an improvising group. In my experience as both a performer and educator, I have found that such musical deployments of power often fall along gender lines or other forms of difference. As a result, I think it is important that we critically examine the utopian ideals that underpin much of the discourse surrounding the ICASP and IICSI projects. Those ideals are certainly worth striving for, but they run the risk of blinding us to the power dynamics that are always involved in musical performance, improvisatory or otherwise.

I also worry about the effects of increased institutionalization on improvisation, a mode of music making that has valued innovation and risk-taking historically and has developed and thrived creatively precisely because it has operated outside of dominant institutional contexts. In this regard, I look at modern jazz—notably bebop and its derivatives—as a cautionary tale. To be sure, the increased institutional acceptance of jazz over the past half century or so has had many positive effects: it has given many musicians access to the obvious economic advantages that go along with academic appointments and increased institutional visibility, and it has equipped many young musicians with a high level of musicianship. But it has also come at a cost: in many respects, the institutionalization of jazz has had a reifying effect on the music, minimizing the emphasis on innovation and musical freedom that has animated jazz from its earliest days. I worry that a similar process of reification could happen to musical improvisation more generally as more and more improvisatory modes of musical discourse are welcomed into the academy as objects of study. I take some comfort in the fact that much of the academic work that is being done on improvisation—through the ICASP and IICSI projects, and more generally—is not taking place in music departments, but rather in a wide variety of disciplinary and—crucially—interdisciplinary contexts. If musical improvisation is to remain (or truly become) “a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action”, I feel as though it must continue to develop in the spaces between disciplines.

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Jesse Stewart, PhD is an award-winning improviser, composer, researcher, and educator dedicated to re-imagining the spaces between artistic and scholarly disciplines. He has performed and/or recorded with musicians including Hamid Drake, William Parker, Pauline Oliveros, Ernst Reijseger, Joe McPhee, Jandek, Michael Snow, Pandit Anindo Chatterjee, Dong-Won Kim, and many others. His music has been performed at festivals throughout Canada, Europe and the United States. His writings on music and art have appeared in such journals as *American Music*, *Black Music Research Journal*, *Contemporary Music Review*, and in numerous edited anthologies. He is a professor of music in Carleton University's School for Studies in Art and Culture in Ottawa, Canada.