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Musical improvisation and the system of art

This essay discusses some of the ways in which the formation and continuous reproduction of the Western system of art has influenced contemporary discourses and practices of musical improvisation. Several moments in the history of Western musical improvisation are revisited, illustrating the consequences of romanticist and modernist conceptions of art, which continue to inform contemporary discourse and practice of improvisation in and beyond music (Landgraf 2011).

First, the emergence of the modern, Western system of art is revisited, and some of the consequences of this system in relation to musical improvisation are discussed. In the 19th and 20th centuries, romanticist and modernist demands of autonomy and originality in works of art became entrenched in the conceptual framework of Western art music. The romanticist tendency to value autonomous musical works over other aspects of music led to a general dismissal of improvisation from the spheres of high art. Since then, musical improvisation has often been considered as an art form inferior and opposed to that of the precomposed musical work.

Second, developments related mainly to jazz music in the second half of the 20th century are described, illustrating how musical improvisation has begun to be recognized as a legitimate form of art in its own right. By ascending to the status of a modern art form, musical improvisation inherits many important notions and expectations that accompany art in general – such as originality and autonomy. These notions and expectations are incorporated in contemporary discourse on improvisation and embodied in improvised musical practice. Finally, I argue that as a consequence of the modern system of art, improvising musicians who hold artistic ambitions today are, paradoxically, “bound to be free”.

The modern system of art and the decline of improvisation

Toward the end of the 18th century and in the early 19th century, a series of profound changes in the world of art occurred; as Paul Kristeller famously pointed out, the modern system of art gained its autonomy in these years, paralleled by the philosophic doctrine of aesthetics developed primarily by philosophers Baumgarten and Kant (Kristeller 1951). Before the 18th century (in medieval and renaissance times, for instance), sculptures, paintings, and music (to name but a few examples) were produced in order to serve a purpose defined by societal institutions external to the arts themselves (such as religious institutions, the nobility etc.). Premodern art was, in

Kristeller's view, mainly functional. Propounded perhaps most of all by the emergence of a bourgeois audience in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Johnson 1995), art began to differentiate from other parts of society (Kyndrup 2008); with institutional independence and conceptual autonomy, art emerged as a field with its own purposes and social conventions. The causes of this development and the ramifications of art's new role in society have already been discussed to a considerable degree (see Shiner 2003 for an overview). In the following, I hope to discern the impact of the modern system of art on discourses and practices of musical improvisation.

Autonomy and originality in works of art

Though most widely recognised for his theory of social systems, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has provided an analysis of the emergence of the modern system of art that is relevant in our contextⁱ. According to Luhmann, premodern forms of art were produced and valued according to well-established programs (sets of rules and guidelines relative to the purpose of the art form) founded prior to the production process; in a very wide sense, premodern art was mimetic, dependent upon external predispositions. In contrast, modern art is characterised by the production of self-programming works of art; every single work of modern art has to set up its own program, providing rules and guidelines according to which the work should be produced and valued (Luhmann 2000; see also Landgraf 2011). In Luhmann's analysis, the notion of artistic autonomy thus literally applies to individual works of art (in the sense that these works are expected to operate according to their own unique "laws").

The concept of the autonomous, individual work of art soon became one of basic tenets of romantic discourse. The early romanticists furthermore combined the idea of artistic creativity with the idea of *ex nihilo*-creativityⁱⁱ (which literally means "creation out of nothing"), resulting in a conception of artworks as completely original objects with no relation to preexisting structures or dispositions (Mason 1988: 707, Pennycook 2007: 581). This "*transition to a musical practice in which the focus was on the production of complete, discrete, original, and fixed products*" (Goehr 1994: 205) is perhaps one of the most important events in the (conceptual) history of Western art music. Prior to this transition, the so-called work-concept was usually less important or simply absent from musical practice (ibid.: 176), but around the turn of the 19th century, the notion of autonomous, musical works became extremely central to the sphere of art music.

Since then, the powerful concept of the musical work has continued to inform basic understandings of music and art. The copyright system, for instance, is built upon the idea that music consists of "complete, discrete, original, and fixed products". The discipline of musicology has, historically, been largely devoted to the study of musical works and editorial work on scores by canonised composers. In terms of performance practice, musicians and conductors still aspire to perform works in the manner most faithful to the composer's original intention. Much more can

be said about the work-concept and its import into academic discourse in the discipline of musicology (see Goehr 1994 for an initial overview), but for the current purposes, we now turn to the specific context of musical improvisation.

Improvisation and the fixed work: A dichotomy and a value hierarchy

The consolidation of the work-concept initially had several interrelated consequences for practices and discourses of musical improvisation. First of all, the intense focus on the production and performance of fixed, musical works led to a diminished presence of improvised music within concert hall repertoires. An example of this tendency can be found in the history of performance practices with regard to, say, violin concertos composed by Mozart. When these works were performed in the late 18th century, the cadenzas were not fixed in musical notation – they were freely improvised (often played by the composer himself). However, during the 19th century, the cadenzas gradually congealed. Today, the cadenzas are, with few exceptions, performed as a fixed addition to the score. In the case of Mozart's violin concertos, scholars have scrutinised the composer's personal sketches and ideas for the cadenzas, and authoritative editions of the cadenzas have been reconstructed for performers to use instead of improvising (Berkowitz 2010, Levin 1992). In the end, perhaps the idea of faithfulness toward a fixed work has simply been more powerful than the idea of maintaining improvisation as an element of classical performance practice.

This leads to my main point regarding the initial consequences of the work-concept in relation to musical improvisation: As a consequence of elevating the autonomous, musical work to the highest level of importance, the Western system of art music placed its emphasis firmly on the written text and the fixed object. This preference might have been a strategy for ensuring the autonomy of the musical work, as Goehr suggests; a strategy inspired by arts such as painting or sculpture in which the singular object held a high value and endured for a long period of time (Goehr 1994: 173). By adopting this strategy of fixation, the system of art inscribed the fixed, musical work on the positive side of a conceptual dichotomy in which its opposite – the unfixed, musical improvisation – was, inevitably, also inscribed. The term “improvisation” emerged in its modern form in the early 19th century (Blum 1998: 37) and was thus at the outset defined in opposition to ideas of fixity (as is still the case, should we consult contemporary dictionaries). The differences between musical improvisation and precomposed music might seem obvious today, but actually this distinction is the product of a particularly modern, Western system of art. As Bruno Nettl has pointed out so often, not all musical cultures distinguish between improvised and precomposed music (Nettl 2009: xi). Furthermore, in an article on medieval song practice (which arguably involves improvisation), Leo Treitler has remarked that a sharp distinction between improvised and precomposed music did not exist in the earliest centuries of known music history (Treitler 1991: 67), thus confirming the thesis that this distinction pertains to a more recent period in time.

Besides being conceived in opposition to the fixity of the musical work, improvisation has also been considered to be an inferior art form to that of the precomposed work. This idea is expressed implicitly in the words of the famous, romantic music critic Eduard Hanslick: “*The composer works slowly and intermittently, forming the musical artwork for posterity.*” (Hanslick, quoted and translated by Treitler, *ibid.*). Hanslick does not mention improvisation, though he does articulate part of the usual argument in favour of precomposed music; the composer can make drafts, edit her score, and build up complex structures in order to construct a musical work of high quality. In comparison, the argument goes, the improviser has to work from scratch and is thus severely limited by the situational immediacy.

Into the 20th century: Valuing and labelling improvisation

We find a similar, explicitly critical perspective on improvised music in the writings of modernist music philosopher Theodor Adorno, whose critical views on jazz improvisation have been subject of much debate. For Adorno, the problem of jazz improvisation lies within its alleged tendency to rely on reiteration of standardised musical structures (Adorno 1941) such as a 12 bar blues or a 32 bar song, leading to repetition and lack of originality. While Adorno has been scolded for his views on jazz more often than not, to be fair, most readings of his work do not take into account the full context of his observations. For instance, what little amounts of the jazz music of 1930’s Weimar Germany Adorno was exposed to in his early years of writing was not comparable to the American jazz tradition of his timeⁱⁱⁱ. Adorno’s modernist critique of jazz improvisation has certainly received its share of critical reception, and many contemporary improvisation scholars would probably find his understanding of improvisation very superficial. Nonetheless, the critique still stands as a particularly modern way of conceiving of improvisation in (negative) contrast with composition.

Further into the 20th century (what is sometimes referred to as the second generation of musical modernism), several Western composers begin to experiment with the boundaries of the work-concept. Most obvious, perhaps, are the experiments with open forms, in which some composers chose to relinquish parts of their compositional power. Interestingly, many of these composers introduced what could easily be considered improvisational sections and other chance elements in their compositions, but very few of them seem to be willing to apply the label “improvisation” to their music.

In the 1960’s, German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen devised works of so-called “intuitive music”, where the performer receives only a short piece of text as an instruction. No musical notation in a traditional sense is involved, and the musician is, arguably, free to improvise within the framework of the instructions. In fact, many avant-garde composers explored auditory landscapes not entirely dissimilar to music traditionally conceived of as improvised music. Yet, “*despite any sonic similarities between the emerging avant-garde traditions, many contemporary composers have re-*

mained extremely critical of musical improvisation” (Borgo 2002: 169). For instance, American composer John Cage had several affiliations with jazz music and jazz musicians in the course of his career, but ended up dismissing at least the terminology of improvisation. Cage seemed to struggle with *the label* and *the concept* of improvisation much more than with the musical practices of non-predetermination and openness that arguably compare to various forms of improvised music (Kim 2012).

Whether or not we should force the label of improvisation upon music by these 20th century composers remains unclear. More importantly, we have shown how the concepts and values pertaining to improvisation that were established in the 18th and 19th centuries still seem to inform our understanding of improvisation, as evidenced by the reluctance of central composers towards the terminology of improvisation. In the following section, we turn to other forms of music that inherit this conceptual framework but operate somewhat differently.

Musical improvisation as art

From 20th century composers I now turn to a tradition (or a set of traditions) in which improvisation has taken on a distinctly positive value. In the second half of the 20th century, several movements in the history of jazz (roughly beginning with the advent of bebop) exhibit some of the features that we discussed in connection with the romantic work-concept, such as a central emphasis on originality and autonomy. This development may be a sign of the beginning recognition of improvisation as a legitimate mode of artistic production in its own right. With this recognition comes, however, several demands pertaining to the system of art. In the following section I thus discuss the ways in which discourses and practices of musical improvisation are shaped by the system of art as introduced above.

Bebop, free jazz, and free improvisation

When considering improvisation as a form of art, the subject of jazz history seems unavoidable. Improvisation, in the words of Gunther Schuller, is often construed as *”the heart and soul of jazz”* (Schuller 1968: 58). Jazz does seem to be what most people would associate with improvisation, but equating improvisation as such with the altogether very fuzzy and imprecise concept of *”jazz”* is counterproductive. Here, specific moments in the history of jazz are revisited in an effort to observe the interactions between jazz, other improvised musics and the modern system of art.

For starters, it seems clear that the earliest forms of jazz and blues improvisation did not exactly have artistic aspirations. However, at least from the advent of bebop in the 1940’s, it has also been clear that some forms of improvised jazz music definitely aspire toward ideals of autonomy

and originality^{iv}. And if bebop didn't succeed entirely in becoming an improvisational form of art par excellence, a musical concept developed toward the end of the next decade, so-called "free jazz", surely did. Providing the title for a recording of 1961, the term "free jazz" was coined by saxophone player Ornette Coleman. Along with fellow musician, piano player Cecil Taylor, Coleman is often credited as the founder of the so-called free jazz movement. Coleman and Taylor rejected the core repertoire of standard tunes and the conventional distribution of ensemble roles that had constituted the cornerstone of bebop practice (DeVeaux & Giddins 2009: 409-10). The recording entitled *Free Jazz*, for instance, features a double jazz quartet (one in each stereo channel) improvising freely, resulting in a very heavy sonic texture that was radically different from anything heard before and for some listeners as unintelligible as it was fascinating. A similar movement, named "free improvisation" began to form in Europe around the same time, with German saxophonist Peter Brötzmann and guitarist Derek Bailey as its pioneers. Brötzmann and Bailey were inspired by their American colleagues as well as by the experimental practices of European composers (Lewis 2004).

While free jazz and free improvisation did not enjoy the attention of a wide audience, jazz in general saw a decline in popularity in the following decades as well. The ideal and practice of free jazz lived on, however. Perhaps best illustrated by the oeuvre of piano player Keith Jarrett, who toured the great concert halls of Europe (the strongholds of Western art music) in the mid-1970's, performing a series of freely improvised solo concerts. According to Jarrett biographer, Ian Carr, Jarrett was the only jazz musician at the time to gain broad attention outside regular jazz circles (Carr 1992), and the solo concerts were generally well-attended. The most famous of the solo concert recordings, the *Köln Concert* recorded at the opera house of Cologne in Germany in 1975, sold more than 3.5 million copies (Fonseca-Wollheim 2008) – an unusual sales figure in the world of improvised music. The premise of Jarrett's concerts was simple; no musical material was to be conceived or fixed in a compositional framework prior to the performance of a concert. This so-called tabula rasa-aesthetic served to construe the improvised concerts as completely spontaneous and thus radically original pieces of music.

Autonomy and originality in musical improvisation: Bound to be free

The above digression into bebop, free jazz, and free improvisation should demonstrate at least one point clearly: Modern, musical improvisation can be practiced, understood and celebrated as a form of art. At least in the case of Keith Jarrett, the musician is broadly recognised as an artist, his improvised concert is considered an original piece of art, and the social system in which the improvisation takes place clearly operates autonomously, by its own purposes and internal logic.

There is one way, though, in which the practice of improvisation does not comply entirely with the demands of the system of art; improvisation is still opposed to the fixity of a musical work, exactly as was the case at the dawn of the romantic era. The whole point of improvised musics

such as Jarrett's solo concerts and Coleman's experimental practice, one could argue, is to transgress previous social and structural constraints altogether (Borgo 2002: 165), which seems to be the exact opposite of a fixed, musical artwork.

The solution to this puzzle is quite simple: In these cases of modern, musical improvisation that aspires or claims to be art, the basic distinction between the fixed and the unfixed is maintained, but the value hierarchy is reversed; freedom is favoured over fixity. The demands of autonomy and originality seem to be inherited as well, but how are they adopted in our understanding of improvisation?

Lydia Goehr has argued that a jazz improvisation may achieve the status of an artwork (and the improviser may thus be awarded the status of composer) only insofar as the improvisation is actually recorded, disseminated and perhaps transcribed into musical notation, in short, mediated and transformed into a material object (Goehr 1994: 287). To be sure, some improvisations become famous through audio recordings or transcriptions. The aforementioned *Köln Concert* has, for instance, been transcribed, and the score is available for study and re-performance like a classical piece of music. But what about the improvisations that are never recorded nor transcribed – can they not be appreciated as a form of art?

Three decades ago, philosopher Philip Alperson grappled with questions similar to these and ended up pointing out a paradox in the way we tend to speak of improvisation: Musical improvisation can denote both an activity and the result of that activity (i.e. as a product/work/object) (Alperson 1984). It makes sense to speak of improvising as an activity where one plays an instrument, sings etc., and it also makes sense to speak of specific improvisations, when we have the *Köln Concert* in mind, for instance.

It is this duality in our understanding of improvisation that allows us to appreciate musical improvisation, as a form of art, I would argue, even when the improvisation is not fixed in a recording. By conceiving of improvisation simultaneously as an activity and as an object, the expectations that we hold for artworks in general can be projected onto the activity of improvising. Goehr's view is thus not incorrect, but it fails to recognise the very profound consequences that the work-concept has had for artistic improvisation; insofar as it makes sense to talk about improvisations as singular, discrete phenomena, every single piece of improvisation that aims to be recognised within the system of art, must live up to the demands and expectations we usually hold for works of art (i.e. to be original and autonomous).

Since the distinction between the fixity of the musical work and the freedom of improvisation is still of great importance, improvisers with ambitions of being artistically relevant are thus compelled to be creative and original, but at the same time not to plan ahead and compose/fix the content of the improvisation. In a discussion of norms within the jazz community, jazz improvi-

sation scholar Ingrid Monson thus notes the following: “To say that a player [...] sounds as though he or she is playing ‘something he or she practiced’ is a grave insult.” (Monson 1996: 84).

Paradoxically, improvisers who aspire to gain recognition in the system of art are thus in some sense “bound to be free”. As a result, a core activity in artistic, musical improvisation is the indirect, uncertain staging of processes in which qualitatively new ways of artistic expression and experience may arise. Researchers in musical improvisation have only recently begun to unveil the ways in which this indirect staging occurs (see Borgo 2006, Dempsey 2010, Gustavsen 1999, Wilf 2010). As Edgar Landgraf has suggested (2011: 11), a way forward for research into musical improvisation would be to treat improvisation as a particular mode of *staging* art – a mode of staging art that operates within the demands of the system of art as described in this essay.

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ⁱ For Luhmann, the functional differentiation of society into specialised, social systems (such as art, economy, education, law etc.) is the mark of modernity (Luhmann 1995).

ⁱⁱ The notion of ex nihilo-creativity stems mainly from the Judaeo-Christian creation myth, cf. the Book of Genesis.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Robinson (1994) for a full discussion of this problem.

^{iv} I have argued elsewhere (as have numerous other writers) that the notions of autonomy which emerge in bebop and later iterations of the jazz genre must be seen in the historical context of a racially stratified musical culture and American society at large (Borgo 2002: 186, Eskildsen 2013: 19). In this essay, the focus is on artistic autonomy, but that does not exclude the struggles or positions of specific social or ethnic groups.