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The Field of Musical Improvisation, Marcel Cobussen

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Book Review

The Field of Musical Improvisation

Marcel Cobussen
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Reviewed by Gretchen Schwarz

The Field of Musical Improvisation by Marcel Cobussen, published in 2017, is an open-access downloadable book, available in both EPUB and PDF formats. This format allowed the author to insert links for easy cross-referencing throughout the document and to offer abundant musical material—audio and video—that illuminate his points of argument and enhance the reader's experience. He makes thorough and effective use of both of these features.

There is sufficient background material here for those who have not yet read a great deal of academic literature on the topic of improvisational music, and—far from being a dry rehashing of what philosophy-oriented improvisation scholars have already contributed to the field—this work is alive with musical examples of what excites the author about improvisation.

One of Cobussen's stated intentions is to contribute to the growing body of scholarly literature on musical improvisation by presenting examples of this practice and contextualizing them within academic domains that are typically considered to be unrelated to music. This process uncovers significant evidence for his key presuppositions: that all music-making includes some measure of improvisation; that every improvisation is a singularity; and that a group improvisation embodies the attributes and essence of a complex system. Stating that his theories coalesced through the process of experiencing and examining this music, the author hopes that reader engagement with these selected musical works will generate additional insights (15).

Cobussen starts by considering how to begin and how to define the beginning, comparing book-writing to an improvisation. Gary Peters took this same approach in *Improvising Improvisation*, his second improvisation-related book that was also published in 2017. In addition to citing Peters's first volume, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Cobussen credits the work of other scholars including Ingrid Monson, Bruce Ellis Benson, and David Borgo for their contributions to the formulation of some of the theories included here.

Part 1: Marking

Cobussen introduces the notion he terms FMI, the Field of Musical Improvisation, by presenting some of the better-known theoretical views of improvisation from the past several decades, including those of Bruno Nettl, August Sheehy, Paul Steinbeck, and George Lewis. He reminds the reader that the components of the word "im-pro-vise" literally translate as "un-fore-seen," and suggests that, as a signifier, improvisational music is perhaps more easily grasped by considering what it is not, namely, music in the more conventional sense. The musicological world generally agrees that improvisation is the simultaneous creation and presentation of a musical work with decisions concerning its composition made as the performance proceeds. The author points out that this is not *creation ex nihilo*; the participant musicians are always interacting with whatever is presenting itself to them in real time and adapting to explicit or

perceived constraints that shift unpredictably. From those bases, they make musical choices in the moment.

The first three musical excerpts drawn from David Murray's *Baltic Suite* demonstrate two notions of interaction: that between the musicians themselves and that between the musicians and their environment. Interaction, in its many manifestations, is a core aspect of the study, and as the text continues, Cobussen points to some less obvious and generally overlooked examples of interaction, bringing in both concrete and abstract features that are present in the improvisatory space. In some cases, the musicians can choose to interact; in others, interaction is compulsory. Dynamics around interactions help solidify and support the theory that improvisation is an example of a complex system.

Part 2: Digging

The substance of Part 2 is a detailed presentation of the theoretical material that Cobussen wishes to convey through his study. It is drawn from the work of six well-respected non-musician thinkers from the twentieth century: Bruno Latour, Gilles Deleuze, Gregory Bateson, Mitchell Waldrop, Jakob Von Uexküll, and Pierre Lévy. All six reinforce aspects of two of the major elements of the book: complexity theory and singularity. Again, musical excerpts appear liberally throughout each sub-section.

Bruno Latour is credited with the term "actant" that Cobussen uses to denote any entity/network that has agency in the improvising space. He wants to emphasize that improvisation is not necessarily musician- or anthropocentric, rather that each human is only one actant within a dynamic complex system in which all of the components/actants interact with all of the others and with any unexpected events that occur within the field. The relationships between the actants are ultimately more important than the actants themselves.

Cobussen applies the Deleuzian concept of *assemblage* to an organizing of collaborative social relations that actualize as musical codes during the process of an improvisational performance. The FMI is a location where all human and non-human actants engage in an *assemblage* consisting of actions, reactions, and interactions, and in this process, relationships and connections are created.

Bateson's contribution comes from his work in ecology, specifically his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. If we view the improvising group as an ecosystem formed from the collective behavior of the actants, the instruments, technology, and the surrounding environment, then changes in any of those elements will necessarily reshape the whole. The main point here is to reiterate that the environment, the social, and the musical are all interconnected.

Jakob Von Uexküll (1864–1944), was a German biologist credited with the creation of biosemiotics. His early work, which supported the notion of subjective perception, included studying the relationship between organisms and their environments, concluding that the mind/body/environment is a conjoined system in constant interaction. Von Uexküll's theories led to the development of situated cognition, which forms the basis for embodiment theories. Applying this to an improvisational context, he might say that the music is produced by the interactions of the nervous system, body, and environment and not by the body as willed by the nervous system.

Waldrop's contributions center on complexity theory with four factors relevant to improvisation: 1) the organization and dynamics of the interactions determine the essence of the system; 2)

the system self-organizes based upon feedback from its environment; 3) agents co-evolve in adaptation to one another's actions; and 4) complex systems are always in dynamic transition, seeking—but never achieving—homeostasis. In the same way, improvisational music sessions are understood not as the product of a group of individual musicians, but as systematic, highly-interdependent, interactive structure.

Lévy's theories suggest an application of the concept of collective multidimensional intelligence to the improvising experience in the sense that a group of improvising musicians appear to have the tendency to shift together in the moment in reaction to either an environmental phenomenon or a gesture initiated by an actant.

Part 3: Implementing

In Part 3, Cobussen invites the reader to consider sixteen possible representations of entities that could function as actants in improvisation, and includes music excerpts with sufficient diversity to support the claim that improvisation is part of all music-making. Introducing this part with an interesting reflection on characteristics shared by improvisation and complex systems, the author uses each of the following sub-sections to describe specific actants, their interactions, and their relationships.

Michael Moore, Han Bennink, and Will Holshouser – Human Actants

In a successful group improvisation, music emerges from the dynamic human interconnections that form within the social context and are then expressed synchronically. The players are sensitive to one another's energy, intentions, and inspirations, and the sound emanates from the group as a unit in a continual feedback loop, with every thought, feeling, and gesture contributing to the whole.

Brian Ferneyhough – The Mistake as Actant

In this subsection, Cobussen introduces his notion of positive and negative improvisation, reminiscent of Isaiah Berlin's *Two Concepts of Liberty*, with positive improvisation as a pro-active, voluntary expression of creativity, and negative improvisation as one's only recourse in a given situation. Or, what one does when one has no other choice.

Although all music performance contains the element of risk and potential mistakes, due to the complexity of the notated music of Brian Ferneyhough, failure is a built-in feature. Those who attempt his compositions can realistically achieve a competent performance of approximately sixty to eighty percent of the score and are forced to choose how to navigate, improvising in the negative sense, since it is the only means to proceed.

Jean Gilles and Skip Sempé – Authenticity as Actant

As outlined by Derek Bailey in his 1993 book*, Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, improvisation was an integral part of Renaissance and Baroque music, and it lived on beyond that period and into the early twentieth century in pipe organ performance. In order to be considered authentic, modern day improvisation in the performance of so-called classical music requires adherence to specific formalities of the historical period and a consideration of the intentions of the composer.

Alfred Brendel and W.A. Mozart – The Score as Actant

The score can be considered a tool of communication, serving as an interface between the composer who created it and the performer who interprets it. Since some of the elements necessary to the performance are impossible to notate, musicians improvise these, using subjective criteria in choosing a strategy.

Paul Craenen – Technology as Actant

This section includes an interesting example of how agency can be shared between performers, technicians, and a constructed environment. Sound is generated by the reactions of objects within the environment, and no one is really in control. Results vary with each performance and are unpredictable.

DJ Spooky – Records and Files as Actants

How does a DJ improvise? Samples are pre-composed, so the performance consists of the ways in which they are put together; how decisions are made; and the preparation, planning, and practice that are essential before a DJ can present the material.

Fred Frith – The Instrument as Actant

"If complexity can be regarded as sets of relationships between parts or the play between parts of a system, the most obvious relationship in a musical improvisation is the one between a musician and his [*sic*] instrument" (121).

The relationship between the musician and the instrument is fraught, with the goal being a unity between the two. Instruments respond sonically to human touch and/or breath, never really surrendering total control to the human agent. In this section, the author examines neurologist Charles Limb's research on the differences in brain activity when someone is playing familiar music as compared to when they are improvising. The results of this research have been cited by those wishing to justify adding improvisation to school music curricula.

Edwin van der Heide – The Audience as Actant

This example of a performance based entirely upon the transmission of audio signals, five of which can be perceived simultaneously from up to two-hundred meters' distance using a custom-built receiver, confirms the importance of listening. In this scenario, there are no performers, only a composer who sets up the transmitters. The audience members have agency, and they control which sounds they hear by moving closer to or further away from each of the signals, as preferred.

Heiner Goebbels – Theater as Actant

This subsection features an example of a theater performance that combines improvised and predetermined components. Preplanned space for theatrical improvisation and indirect improvisatory elements is built into the program, and the exact course of events is determined by the director in real time as the performance takes place. Some examples of these improvisational strategies include musicians switching instruments, choreography added spontaneously, and the use of techniques that add chaos and indeterminacy.

Keith Jarrett – The Spiritual and the Body as Actants

Jarrett's method of improvised performance is to create a structured composition in real time. The process by which he is able to achieve this result is to take time pre-performance to quiet his thinking mind, and to allow his body and spirit to unite metaphysically with the instrument.

Miles Davis and Teo Macero – The Producer as Actant

For Miles Davis's famous genre-inclusive album *Bitches' Brew*, the post-production work involved a great deal of editing, which ultimately determined the quality of the end result. Improvisation is commonly considered to be the work of the musicians in real time, and not a pastiche arranged by the producer afterward, so Cobussen explains how Davis's and Macero's post-production intentions contributed to the improvised musical product.

Alain Renaud – The Internet as Actant

Given that visual gestural cues are valuable when improvising, Renaud came up with a way to include them when musicians play remotely and are not visible to one another. Videos of abstract images respond to the sonic material produced by individual musicians and are projected onto a screen that is networked in such a way that all musicians can then see and play along with them. Latency issues are minimized by reverb and echo. Some of the visual cues are lost, however players can communicate as though they were improvising in the same physical space. I think that this is probably one of the coolest things in the whole book.

Vlatko Stefanovski – The Past as Actant

When improvising using traditional folk songs as musical material, the previous iterations of each piece inform the current performance; so, in a sense, the performer is improvising with the past. Different interpretations and developments of familiar music can extend the life of a tradition and can enliven a meaningful relationship with a standard by which originality, predictability, and transformation can be compared.

Steve Coleman – Rhythm and Musicians as Actants

This section revisits Lévy's notion that improvisations result from a group's collective intelligence and not from the sum of the autonomous actions of individual group members. The groove is a good example of an interactive process that coalesces in real time through group adaptation. It represents a unification of the complex rhythmic patterns offered by individual members, is self-organizing, and confirms the important premise that group improvisation is an intersubjective social activity that works to build community.

The Taku Sugimoto Quartet and Johnny Chang – The Space as Actant

What happens when the musicians regard the sounds within the venue as the referent with which to improvise? In a sort of Pauline Oliveros Deep Listening™ exercise, members of the Taku Sugimoto Quartet perform silence, foregrounding the ambient sounds in the space to which they then react, adding very quiet sonic material. In this way, the space becomes a functioning part of the music created.

Yo La Tengo – The Audience as Actant

In the second iteration of "The Audience as Actant," Cobussen points to a specific concert by Yo La Tengo as an example of a potential outcome when the audience is granted agency by the musicians. During this particular performance, the audience was invited to ask the band questions, and the exchange informed the remainder of the show.

Part 4: Exceeding

Cobussen devotes Part 4 to discussions of improvisation as situated within non-musical contexts: personal, social, and cultural. While acknowledging that playing music can be a far less risky setting in which to improvise, he wants to remind the reader that improvisation need not be limited to music. The same improvisational principles and structures can be applied in the fields of management and politics, for example. We can consider actants in a holistic fashion working within complex intersubjective and interobjective systems, and we can view each iteration as a singularity. Responsibility to the group and awareness of the results of our interactions are equally applicable to improvisations outside of music.

Complexity Theory

The first sub-section returns to elements of complexity theory, touching upon both the musical and non-musical and demonstrating that a musical improvisation embodies and displays the same characteristics of a complex system as do biology, neurology, economics, and ecology, namely multi-dimensional interactivity between agents as they connect, relate, and self-organize, never coming to a resolution. Similarly, improvisers can seek to create the best possible sounds in relation to what they hear in the environment, continuously adapting to the unpredictable and at times chaotic soundscape, expanding boundaries, aware that the inventory is infinite. Cobussen's main point appears to be that improvisation is a means by which to navigate any complex system whether musical or not.

Freedom

How can musical improvisation inform the notion of freedom outside of music? Theodor Adorno makes the claim that improvisation is not an example of true freedom, since it is something defined by a structure or form; because it has boundaries, it is not truly free. During free improvisation sessions, group members collectively choose the parameters of the form as the music-making proceeds, defining freedom by consensus. Ideally, interactions in the non-musical environment are characterized similarly: with accommodation for everyone's needs and awareness of mutually determined constraints. Freedom has no meaning without a context and improvising in a group creates an opportunity to establish relationships and allow the situation and the collaborators to define rather than to restrict freedom.

Management

This sub-section includes an acknowledgement of existing negative assumptions about improvising: for example, that it is a fall-back position when one has not planned ahead and/or cannot achieve one's goal through established means. In other words, improvisation is an inferior option. In a management context, improvising can be considered failure. In a musical context, partial notation with space to improvise offers qualities of both composition and improvisation: comprovised music. In non-musical situations such as management, including more freedom of choice and open-ended structures would officially recognize the

improvisational option, thereby elevating its status. Management could consider that simply imposing a routine or structure does not guarantee a specific end because every iteration is different and unpredicted events can arise. All approaches can work together, and improvisation is always present in every process of decision-making, whether it is recognized or not.

Play

How does improvisation inform notions of play as applied to games, sports, and music? As a signifier, "play" evokes fun, freedom, leisure time, and a release from work or duty, as well as some measure of structure, goal-directedness, order, rules, tension, and constraints. Players are expected to respect the rules of play and to find an agreed-upon balance between seriousness and lightheartedness. John Zorn's *Cobra* is an improvisation game that Cobussen examines here. Unlike a free improvisation, *Cobra* players follow rules and take on roles as leaders and followers to varying degrees such that the ultimate result, rather than being a consequence of the actions of any or even all individuals, seems to emerge by accident. *Cobra* has a formal structure, the rules are strict, and limits are defined by space, time, and both instrumental and social skills. Like any other game, *Cobra* is successful when players understand the process and follow the rules; however, some rules dictate specific ways in which other rules can be disregarded; in other words, where players can deliberately create disorder and/or ignore directives.

Politics

Using Jacques Attali's *Noise* as a point of departure, the final section of this book considers the political and economic implications of a new social order where the emphasis is on music creation rather than music consumption, where everyone can make music for its own sake, and where music is not limited to being a product or a marketed commodity. Cobussen draws comparisons between Attali's conceptualization of notated music and improvisational music, and he offers a score of his own that could be performed by anyone with a minimal understanding of notation. I found it reminiscent of Terry Riley's "In C," in that the motifs are offered in a format that allows the players to choose from a set of options rather than to adhere to a rigid structure. The political comes into play here, not as an overt statement, or even a vague reference to a political position or policy, but at what Cobussen refers to as the micropolitical level as suggested by Foucault, where social institutions make relatively minor efforts to impose structure and shape behavior of the groups within them. The existence of gaps in such a system allows for the development of a countermovement that resists the dominant power. Ultimately, improvisation does not function to impose a system, but to suggest possible methods to incrementally improve relationships through better communication and to build community in the process.

Ending

As with the beginning, Cobussen ends the book reflexively, examining endings in general and as applied to music and improvisation specifically. While many musics have conventional ending strategies, improvisations will end when they are over, as determined by those participating.