

Critical Studies in Improvisation Études critiques en improvisation



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Volume 15, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092927ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.7119>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

McNeilly, K. (2022). Improvisation and Emergence, For Frédérique Arroyas. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 15(1), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.7119>

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Improvisation and Emergence, For Frédérique Arroyas

Kevin McNeilly

1.

As I start to draft this editorial, again, in early April on the West Coast, at the turning of the third year of a global pandemic, I'm haunted by lines from the American poet Charles Wright, who frequently returns in his 1995 collection *Chickamauga* to a fraught temporality at the intersections of words and music. He opens his brief elegy for Miles Davis—dated “Sunday, the twenty-ninth of September, 1991,” the morning after the trumpeter's passing—with a difficult call to start over, to write something more: “Those two dark syllables, *begin*, / offer no sustenance” (59). Finding the means to craft anything of substance in the wake of such an ending, anything that might sustain his voice in the aftermath of loss, means for Wright to return to the anaformative impulse¹ within those vestigial syllables, to the nascent musical textures of inception, even if that return offers no guarantees, no obvious sustenance. He concludes the poem by starting over:

From the top . . . Beginning in ignorance, we stick to the melody—
Knowledge, however, is elsewhere,
a tune we've yet to turn to,
Its syllables scrubbed in light, its vestibules empty.

Wright's poem is autumnal, mournful, and valedictory, not exactly the hopeful stuff of spring, but it resonates with me nonetheless at this moment because of how it wants to begin (and to re-begin) to map the risk of unknowing, of opening ourselves up to an extemporaneity, to an unfixing of time—potentially gesturing emptily and elsewhere, if not scrubbed with syllable-sized glimmers of hope, toward a yet-to-be composed line that's often deeply challenging to access—and to nurture our capacity to turn our co-creative intelligence in uncharted and other “directions” (Miles Davis's term): to let ourselves go, and go on. To get started, again. And maybe to emerge with something sustained and sustaining to sound, and to say.

2.

Frédérique Arroyas is a founding editor of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, together with Ellen Waterman and Ajay Heble. In [the editorial for the first issue](#) of this open-access journal, published in 2004, they set in motion the critical, creative, and scholarly mapping of an emergent, uncharted interdisciplinary field, Critical Studies in Improvisation:

CSI/ÉCI's goals are to promote inquiries into how improvisation expresses notions of race, culture, ethnicity, class, nation, and gender, as well as how improvisation might prompt new or revitalized understandings of history, community, memory, agency, and difference. In an effort to understand how improvisation produces its social effects, CSI/ÉCI will give voice to investigations examining practice and grounding theory in site-specific contexts, assess the (often utopian) claims made for the social and cultural impact of improvisation, and, finally, promote an awareness of intercultural and transnational discourses on improvisation. We are committed to providing a forum for voices that are all-too-often unheard in discourses on improvisational music, and we encourage diversity of expression.

The editorial is offered as a welcome, as an opening into the development of diversely committed and engaged critical thinking around “the social and cultural impact” of an

improvisational practice, its relevance. It's important, I think, to return at this moment to the journal's beginnings, to our on-going project, poised with rigorous uncertainty at the brink of hope and unknowing.

Threaded throughout Frédérique Arroyas's writing and thinking around improvisation, over the past two decades, is a careful and necessary critical interrogation of this utopianism, an imperative to "question the limits of improvisation as an ideal" as she writes, together with Ellen Waterman, in "Reaching Out: Improvisation's Potential and Limitations," [the editorial for issue 4.1](#), from 2008. Two years earlier, in [the editorial for issue 2.1](#), "Vers une parité de participation et de représentation," she had already scrutinized this exact question by nuancing the tensions between the semiotic and the material, between the aesthetic and the political, between representation and enactment:

S'il est vrai que de cette vision découle un certain optimisme approchant l'utopie, il faut toutefois se rappeler qu'une fonction importante des utopies est d'aborder une réflexion critique sur le réel. Les pratiques de l'improvisation musicale collective constituent des actes qui seraient une amorce, un point d'entrée dans la sphère politique et sociale. [. . .] C'est dans ce sens que pourrait se concevoir le fléchissement des oppressions hiérarchiques, permettant la coopération et la contribution d'individus, la possibilité d'une parité de participation et de représentation.

Borrowing from work by Ernst Bloch, Michel de Certeau, and Nancy Fraser, she notes the fundamentally critical impetus of utopian idealism, that utopian thinking disrupts as much as it affirms. Improvisational practices gather possibility into a divergent *amorce*, a calling into being or a point of entry that signals a weakening of hierarchical and oppressive socialities and allows for a nascent parity of access, of being seen and heard. (An *amorce* can also refer to an angler's bait, or to the primer in a cartridge or shell—a first, explosive bite—resonances rooted in the Latin verb *mordēre*, to bite, which suggest an English homophone that shares its etymology: a morsel, a bit.) This potential moment of opening in and out, as a material means of initiating participatory, isonomic space, lies at the heart of what improvisational work wants to do.

This Barthes-influenced politicizing of the participant reader-listener is already in play in Frédérique Arroyas's 2001 monograph, *La lecture musico-littéraire: à l'écoute de Passacaille de Robert Pinget et de Fugue de Roger Laporte*. To be *à l'écoute*—anticipating, perhaps, Jean-Luc Nancy's theorizing of inter-embodied listening—is to be actively, corporeally attentive to the co-creative, readerly music of the text, the dehiscent weave of fleshed resonance and responsive sounding:

Puisque, en fin de compte, c'est aux lecteurs que revient la tâche d'actualiser les ressources aurales du langage écrit, l'acte de lecture est en effet beaucoup plus qu'un simple décodage menant à la compréhension d'un texte : la lecture fait intervenir le corps, l'imagination, la mémoire. La « pureté » de l'enclos linguistique qui est le texte est pour ainsi dire envahie par la subjectivité de l'individu ou, pour dire cela autrement, c'est à la lecture que le texte devient un objet dynamique, qu'il devient signifiant et que son potentiel est actualisé. Ainsi en est-il pour la lecture nommée ici « musico-littéraire » — celle qui permet une interaction entre texte et musique dans la mesure où elle est amenée à considérer, à faire résonner, dans le texte littéraire, des composantes musicales jugées pertinentes pour l'interprétation du texte. (10)

Reading—as a practice of listening, of being *à l'écoute*—means disturbing the forced enclosures of the well-crafted artifact (whether book or poem or composition), upsetting its hypostatized utopian purity, and actualizing instead the dynamic, interactive potential (that is to say, the critical valences of the utopian) in the situated body, imagination, and memory of the attentive auditor: to turn listener into co-creative agent. While at this moment in her thinking she tends still to mark this actualizing of disruptive potential as a kind of phenomenological ideal, heard as hopeful kinetic resonance between text and reader, she also begins to test the limits of such resonances, what she calls *présences musicales*, as they register in the physiology of a performative body. She brings into audibility here a version of what Vladimir Jankélévitch, meditating on the *composantes musicales* of Franz Liszt, calls improvisation, the performative materializing in a text or score of its “fact of doing” (qtd. in Gallope 152).

She opens [her editorial to issue 9.2](#) (2013), “Improvisation’s Ebb and Flow,” by charting the emergent dialectics at those nascent *amorces*, the catch-and-release of craft and risk that subtends the commitment to spontaneity, the nascent politics of that doing:

Spontaneity relies on a discipline of readiness and an awareness of one’s environment. Hard work and commitment underlie the seemingly impulsive spontaneity of a performer’s gestures. Consider improvisation as ebb and flow between internalized skills and extemporaneous utterances, a continuous probing of acquired knowledge to pursue an adapted, and adaptable, form of expression.

A participatory politics emerges in the gestural give-and-take between disciplined self-expression and irruptive encounter, a politics that marks a foundational re-thinking of what and how we come to know ourselves, an ongoing re-imagining of adaptive community, of living and working together. “On le sait,” she writes in 2015 with her colleague Stéphanie Nutting on the pedagogical potential of improvisation,

l’improvisation permet de travailler la présence, l’engagement, l’énergie et la prise de risques. [. . .] L’improvisation développe également le rapport à l’autre, l’écoute et l’échange.

Improvisational presence, manifest in *présences musicales*, offers the willing collaborator a glimpse of risky but hopeful possibility, to begin to create a more just, inclusive, and open kind of community, as we foster our attentive rapport with others, our emergent divergences.

After 18 years serving as an editor for this journal—as a vital collaborator and crucial intellectual presence—Frédérique Arroyas is moving in new directions. Her deep wisdom and her commitment to the often unseen but demanding work of editing will be missed, but the influence of her thinking on improvisation and of her engagement with the transformative possibilities of spontaneous art will endure as a dynamic presence in these pages. I’m profoundly grateful for her collegiality and her friendship, and wish her nothing but bright moments—as Rahsaan Roland Kirk might say—in the days to come.

3.

The articles gathered in this issue of *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation* chart aspects of emergence—a nascent sociality—in improvisational musicking. Garrett Michaelsen amplifies and extends a pedagogy of interconnectivity close to what Frédérique Arroyas has developed, a practice that “opens a space for change that, like any collaborative and creative activity, involves risk and conflict, but has the potential to better represent the interests and identities of all those involved.” Nuancing tactics for this work of

opening offers us the basis of a method for negotiating risk and unfolding community. Peter J. Woods also describes the “matrix of interactions” in an improvisational pedagogy, aiming to develop “new ways of interacting as social actors and making meaning through emergent performance practices.” Kathryn Ladano, too, in a carefully attentive autoethnography, describes how free improvisation has “broken down barriers,” and allowed her “to form closer connections with others,” as she sounds the textures and valences of alterity, of intersecting divergences.

Sam McAuliffe, through an encounter with the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, re-conceives improvisation as a particular kind of conversation, not as “intersubjective dialogue” between discrete performers, but as a close attending to the dynamic, fleeting matter of those interstices themselves, of what exactly moves between us as the stuff of process: “To improvise is to engage with that which is beyond oneself and allow that thing to direct our thinking and doing, that is, we allow the world to elucidate the culture of our epoch.” Lauren Levesque’s lyrical meditation on the temporalities of intergenerational listening attends to the “feelings of instability, fragility, and vulnerability” in such conversations across the generational differences, pursuing on situated instance of that elucidation. And Jeremy Rose assesses the “healthy tension” between expressive coherence and individual autonomy in the extended performances of the Australian improvising trio The Necks—Chris Abrahams, Lloyd Swanton, and Tony Buck—whose work is also featured on the splash page of this issue. Their co-creative playing, Rose contends, overlaps “musical processes and social interaction,” offering “strategies for implementing change and innovation,” and sounding “a long arc of possibilities.” We hear not only their music, but also the unfolding emergent process of shared intention. That is, in the unclosed recurrences that their coming together sounds, we start again into—and out of—that resonant *amorce*.

Notes

¹ The phrase “anaformative impulse” is the late Richard Iton’s, which I’m adapting from [a recent talk by Katherine McKittrick](#). See Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Oxford UP, 2010.

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