

The Inseparability of Player(s) and Artwork in Improvised Musical Performance

Sam McAuliffe

Volume 15, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1092930ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.5408>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McAuliffe, S. (2022). The Inseparability of Player(s) and Artwork in Improvised Musical Performance. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 15(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v15i1.5408>

Résumé de l'article

Notions of subjectivity and individuality pervade the discourse around jazz and non-idiomatic improvisation. While subjectivity plays an important role in musical improvisation, the tendency to focus on the subjectivity of the player(s) – analysing their particular improvisatory approach(es) – has muddled the broader structure at issue: where the musical event goes beyond the players and leads them to unforeseen musical outcomes. In this paper I reassess the role of subjectivity in improvised music by interpreting it through a hermeneutic lens. I connect musical improvisation with three ideas characteristic of hermeneutics: prejudice/fore-understanding, conversation, and in-between. In each case I will describe how these topics describe improvisation and suggest means of arriving at a more nuanced understanding of the role of subjectivity in improvised musical performance.

The Inseparability of Player(s) and Artwork in Improvised Musical Performance

Sam McAuliffe

It is commonly understood that the dominant mode of conceptualising the practice of improvised musical performance betrays a certain preoccupation with the subject. Improvisation is largely theorised as something *subjects do*, thus discussions tend to focus on themes such as intersubjectivity, agency, interaction, collaboration, and so forth. Such a view separates the player(s) from the work, as if it were pertinent to discuss one *or* the other. The turn toward the subject is not new. Benson writes of art in general: “I think it’s safe to say that making art—somewhere between the Renaissance and romanticism—became such that it was less about the *object* depicted than the *subject* depicting it” (*Liturgy as a Way of Life* 154–5). But this thinking obscures an essential characteristic of art highlighted by Heidegger when he writes that “The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other” (“The Origin” 143). It also obscures the idea that, as Gadamer put it, “every performance is an event, but not one in any way separate from the work—the work itself is what ‘takes place’ . . . in the event . . . or performance” (*Truth and Method* 147). That is, both Heidegger and Gadamer highlight the essential interconnectedness or inseparability of subject and object—artist and artwork. In this paper I strive to (re-)connect artist and artwork—improviser and emergent outcome—by focussing on what one might describe as the transcendental nature of improvisation, where the event goes *beyond* the subjective intentions of the performers and the emergent work *draws out*, as it were, particular responses from the players.

I

Recent scholarship on improvisation places a great deal of emphasis on the intent of the subject (Bertinetto, “Paganini Does Not Repeat”; Cobussen and Nielsen, “Interaction”; Lewis, *Intents and Purposes*). This is not necessarily problematic, insofar as the activity of improvisation is understood as providing insight into certain social or psychological issues: for instance, improvisation as form of social practice (Fischlin, et al.) or improvising as a form of music therapy (Sutton). But intent and purposiveness can only take us so far with respect to the actions of the players and the outcomes of the event. For instance, Benson offers the following account of how film director Andrew Stanton arrived at a particular creative insight: “It was at a baseball game, when someone handed him a pair of binoculars, that Andrew Stanton . . . suddenly got the idea for what the character WALL-E should look like” (“In the Beginning” 158). No one denies that Stanton intended to create a particular character for his film—Benson asserts that Stanton had been thinking about the idea of a lone robot left to clean up Earth for years prior to the baseball game. No doubt the years thinking about the character had primed Stanton for that particular encounter at the baseball game, but we can hardly say that Stanton intended, in that encounter, to come up with how the robot WALL-E would look. It would be more accurate to say the idea arrived and took him by surprise, beyond his intending it.

Of course, as Bertinetto states, “improvisers *do* ideate some aspects of their performance *while* performing” (107); thus, it would be a mistake to undermine the intentionality of players. But insofar as intention is concerned, perhaps its real significance for improvising musicians is that which occurs before or between performances. Peters, from an explicitly Kantian perspective, argues that it is precisely the cultivation of “taste” that occurs across the “*life of the artist*” (“Certainty, Contingency, and Improvisation” 1) that structures the actions of the player in the event, suggesting that the possible outcomes of the performance may be significantly narrower than improvising musicians often care to admit. The result of intentionally cultivating their particular aesthetic *between* performances—it is outside of the

performance event itself that Peters suggests the *real* improvising occurs—assures a degree of certainty in performance: “nothing could be more certain: there *will* be a work, and on this occasion it’s going to be like *this* (usually pretty much as expected)” (*The Philosophy of Improvisation* 2). A result of such thinking—that the performance outcomes of improvisation are more or less pre-determined by the prior decisions of the performer(s)—is that it undermines (which Peters suggests is a good thing) the commonly held understanding of improvised musical performance as dialogical or conversational (Berliner; Monson; Sawyer). That is, it undermines the idea that performers are open to the alterity of the world and the broader situation in which they find themselves.

Peters quotes Kant’s example of the “youthful poet” to highlight his non-dialogical perspective:

[I]t is that a youthful poet refuses to allow himself to be dissuaded from the conviction that his poem is beautiful, either by the judgement of the public or of his friends. And even if he lends them an ear, he does so, not because he has now come to a different judgement, but because, though the whole public, at least so far as his work is concerned, should have false taste . . . It is only later, when his judgement has been sharpened by exercise, that of his own free will and accord he deserts his former judgements. (*Critique of Judgement* 112)

Peters suggests that there is far less input from others during improvised musical performance than is commonly suggested. I agree with the basic premise of Peters’ argument, insofar as the refinement of one’s approach largely structures their improvising. However, what about those instances where, as noted above with respect to Stanton, certain encounters draw something out of us that was not entirely cultivated by one’s reason?

McMullen seemingly meets Peters halfway. Like Peters, McMullen suggests “contemporary cultural theory is too beholden . . . to the Other” (115). However, “the Other” that is McMullen’s focus is not necessarily the ensemble of which the players are a part, but the judgemental other, which may refer to players and/or the audience. Arguing against Butler’s idea of “the performative,” where the subject is defined by their desire for recognition by the other, McMullen presents the idea of “the improvisative.” The key difference between the performative and the improvisative, McMullen contends, is that the former is concerned with “recognition,” whereas the latter is concerned with “generosity”:

When we change our relationship to the other from looking for its recognition to giving, the lean is actually in the other direction: toward the emptiness of the self that can nonetheless *give*, rather than toward the emptiness of the other that we imagine can nonetheless take (by not recognising us). (120)

One similarity between Peters and McMullen, then, is their assertion that the individual *already* has something to offer. Their performance is not beholden to the Other, either in the sense of dialogue or recognition. However, whereas Peters suggests a lack of engagement with the other because players are largely uninterested in what the other may think of their aesthetic taste, McMullen notes that “ideas about self and other are too slow to be able to take place while responding to the singular moment” (122). Such a statement calls into question not only the relationship between player and audience, but, equally, inter-player relationships within the ensemble. Just as thoughts about self and the judgemental other are too slow in performance, surely the dialogical, intersubjective nature of improvisation as Peters describes it is also too slow, especially with respect to large ensembles.

But equally, contra Peters, there *is* a certain responsiveness at issue in improvised musical performance. The classic example comes from Monson’s conversation with jazz drummer

Ralph Peterson, where they discuss a particular section of a performance where Peterson “trades ideas” with pianist Geri Allen. Whilst listening to a recording of the performance with Peterson, Monson remarked “‘Salt Peanuts!’ since Geri Allen’s piano figure . . . reminded me of Gillespie’s famous riff” (77). Peterson responds:

Yeah! “Salt Peanuts” and “Looney Tunes”—kind of a combination of the two. Art Blakey has a thing he plays. It’s like: [he sings . . . musical example]. And Geri played: [he sings . . . musical example]. So I played the second half of the Art Blakey phrase. (77)

Examples such as this that highlight the interactive nature of improvising are commonly employed to suggest that improvisation is inherently dialogical and intersubjective. The spanner in the works, however, which would side more with Peters, are those musicians who explicitly state they make every effort *not* to interact with other ensemble members, whilst still creating interesting and coherent music. For example, Cobussen describes guitarist Keith Rowe’s approach as follows:

Non-listening as an alternative prerequisite for music-making; deliberately not paying attention to the performance of your fellow musician in order to arrive at an aesthetically satisfying result; consciously obstructing the possibility of letting yourself be influenced by the other’s input and/or by (certain) memories: Rowe’s playing seems permeated by an attitude of *de*-listening, an endeavour *not* to listen since the other might affect his actions negatively, an intentional secluding oneself from the other in order to pay more attention to certain elements in one’s own playing. (60–1)

McMullen provides a hint as to how we might reconcile the differences between Peterson and Allen on the one hand, and Rowe on the other, when she offers an example of a performer embodying her idea of the improvisative: describing a live performance at Girls’ Jazz and Blues Camp in Berkeley, California, McMullen observed a vibraphone player’s mallet grazed “the microphone stand enough that it was clear she wasn’t going to get to the next note of the melody” (122). McMullen continues:

I saw her face register the “mistake” . . . But in the next fraction of that second, she regained her composure and instead of hitting the “proper” note of the melody she repeated the note she had just played. [. . .] Rather than placing the experience of the mallet hitting the stand in terms of a failure, an obeisance to rules that characterises that phenomenon as a mistake, the young student approached that “mistake” as an event that necessitated a response. [. . .] She turned back to the music, to the event, and offered a response to that event. That is, she generously turned her full attention back to the music. (122)

That is, there *is* responsiveness at issue in improvised musical performances, but perhaps not so much an intersubjective responsiveness as a responsiveness between player and event, between player and emergent work. Players attend to certain aspects of the broader event—Peterson could attend to Allen’s contributions, and Rowe could attend to his own, for they are each a part of the broader event. Thus, players can attend to the singular unity of the event, broadly construed, without succumbing to the “slowness” alluded to by McMullen that would come about from a large ensemble attempting to intersubjectively “converse” with a collection of individuals.

It is important here to begin qualifying what is meant by the unity of the event, particularly with respect to ensemble interaction. For when we interrogate the dominant theories of ensemble interaction, we quickly come up against the influence of what is often considered a Cartesian problem.¹ That is, appealing to the Cartesian self—where the consciousness of

the player is hermetically sealed and therefore only indirectly related to any external thing (other players, for example)—often results in understandings of ensemble performance and interaction in terms of a social contract model. Such a model is implicit when practitioners and scholars discuss ways in which individual players selectively choose to interact with certain aspects of the performance and not others. This presents a picture of autonomous selfhood where the individual is just that: one individual amongst other individuals. The ensemble, then, represents a certain structure where individuals opt for a slight reduction in personal freedom in favour of the benefits that arise from collaborating with others.

Hagberg is critical of the social contract model of ensemble interaction:

[I]n the ensemble variant of the social contract model, the individual, *as individual* (in political and ontological terms), is present and intact from start to finish. If the collective authority, or Hobbes's Leviathan, turns and starts working against the individual's interests, the individual—always present as one atom in a collective organisation—counters that turn by resisting, rebelling, or removing. And on this model, the entire content of the collective is simply the sum of the individuals combined. And there—exactly there—lies the rub. (481)

The “rub” comes down to the idea of intent. Intention, from a Cartesian perspective, is “mentally private to the intender. There could be no such thing as an intention that transcended, or was external to, any given single individual” (Hagberg 482). Consequently, according to the social contract model, improvised musical performance is merely additive in nature.

Hagberg counters the social contract model by appealing to performances by the likes of Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman. Indeed, commenting on one of Coltrane's performances he writes that

. . . the churning, thrashing, intense, seemingly gravity-defying and time-bending character of an ensemble like this—collective jazz improvisation at its best—lives and breathes in a place beyond what [the social contract model] can accommodate. [. . .] The self beneath all this has become a relationally intertwined entity, the referent of the “me” is not in this context autonomous, and Coltrane knew it. (488)

Rather than speak of an ensemble as a collection of individuals, Hagberg asserts that we should think in terms of a unity, reinforcing McMullen's claim that players direct their attention not so much to the other as individuals, but to the event itself: to the music.

II

Highlighting the importance of attending to the work, Borgo makes the claim that improvisation should be less about what the individual can do and more about what the music wants: “I encourage them [Borgo's students] to hear themselves not only *in* the ensemble, but literally *as* the ensemble” (“What the Music Wants” 33). Such a conception of improvisation calls into question the intentionality of the individual subjects who improvise. For Borgo's assertion is that “the music somehow emerges on its own” (34), and he is quick to add that this is not mere “fanciful talk” or “poetic language.”

Borgo explores ideas of “adaptation, contingency, and inevitability,” where the idea of “inevitability” is perhaps the most controversial: “few would subscribe to the pejorative notion that *anything goes* in improvisation, but many hold dear to the notion that *anything can happen*” (39). To ascribe a certain inevitability to improvisation is not so far removed from the “certainty” mentioned above with respect to Peters. But Borgo is clearly not siding with

Peters' "solitary genius" perspective, writing that we should "temper the hyper-individualist discourse on free improvisation with a little socio-cultural-technological reality" (40). For Borgo, performances are directed not only by the individual players, but also by the broader structures of "the art system," as well as "the program that the performance develops for itself" (45). That is, as the work progresses and establishes itself as a work, it begins to narrow the possibilities available to the performer(s). The work itself generates certain limitations and parameters that structure the actions of the players, such that there is an inevitability to the performance.

Borgo's account is instructive. It highlights a certain relationship between player and event that draws us closer to Heidegger and Gadamer's account mentioned at the beginning of this paper. However, Borgo's neocybernetic approach ("Openness from Closure"), while insightful in the way in which it situates the subject within a broad social context, maintains a view of improvised music that both Heidegger and Gadamer would likely suggest is still too subjective.

III

Like Peters, I contend there is a fair amount of certainty in most performances of improvised music. Players such as the ones mentioned in this paper have generally spent a considerable amount of time honing their approach. Indeed, it is precisely this preparation that results in Borgo's claim, mentioned above, that "anything can happen" in improvised music is misguided. There is a certain predictability in most performances of improvised music, insofar as players have typically honed a particular approach or "musical voice" before the event that will structure their playing; but this should not necessarily be viewed negatively. Indeed, it is precisely because spectators often have certain anticipations of what a performance will be that is the impetus for them to part with their hard-earned cash in exchange for attending the performance event. Unlike Peters, however, rather than conceive of this refinement or preparation in Kantian terms, I evoke the Gadamerian notion of "prejudice."

The term "prejudice," as Gadamer employs it, should be understood positively; that is, Gadamer invokes an older understanding of prejudice, an understanding that predates the Enlightenment. Conceived in such a way, one's prejudices do not distort or blind them from the truth so much as they "constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience" (*Philosophical Hermeneutics* 9). That is, it is because of one's prejudice that they become curious about some topics and not others—that they, as musicians, selectively develop certain skillsets. Thus, it is one's prejudice that largely structures their approach to performance. By swapping out Kant for Gadamer, if I can put it so crudely, we do not merely swap the terminology we use to describe the preparedness of the player, rather we encounter a significantly different relationship between the player and the event.

If we recall, by following Kant's conception genius where the player cultivates their aesthetics of taste before or between performances and presents their aesthetic decisions to the other with a degree of disinterestedness as to what the other thinks of their aesthetic, Peters is led to argue against the responsiveness inherent in much improvised music. A Gadamerian perspective however, with his conception of "play" or "game" and his emphasis on "conversation" (each discussed below), offers certain advantages. Firstly, via the notion of prejudice, we can maintain that the individual's approach to performance is largely pre-structured. Secondly, by appealing to Gadamer's notion of "play," we gain insight into the transcendental unity at issue in performance, a unity not evident in the social contract model of ensemble performance. Finally, Gadamer's account of "conversation" highlights a certain back and forth or to-and-fro that is evident in much improvised music, whether it be the jazz of Peterson and Allen or the art music of Rowe, which points to the responsiveness of improvised musical performance.

IV

Gadamer employs the concept of “play” (*Spiel*) to describe aesthetic experience (*Truth and Method* 106–34). While he does not predominately employ the concept with respect to creating art, his thinking on this topic is nonetheless instructive. It is important to note that the German word *Spiel*, employed by Gadamer, can be translated as either “play” or “game,” and in many ways they should be thought together. What is important for Gadamer is the way in which, for those who play, as in playing a game, play contains “its own, even sacred, seriousness” (107). Even something that from the outside may seem inconsequential, such as children playing with a ball or musicians improvising, bears within it this seriousness. Indeed, while the players may know that what they are engaging in is “only a game,” it is precisely the inherent seriousness of playing that draws them into play, as Gadamer notes, “someone who doesn’t take the game seriously is a spoilsport” (107).

But Gadamer’s concern is less the players and more the concept of “play” itself. Considering the behaviour of the player leads us to the subjectivity of their behaviour, whereas the concept of “play” as a mode of being implicates the player while also indicating the way in which play goes beyond the purposiveness and subjectivities of the player. What is important for our thinking on improvisation is Gadamer’s assertion that “the mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object” (107). A great deal of scholarship on improvised musical performance, particularly that which separates players from the work, presents improvisation as an activity where performers engage with objects. That is, performers engage with “x” idea here and “y” idea there, as if the performance itself is a collection of divisible events. Gadamer suggests that we have become so accustomed to understanding activities such as playing from the perspective of subjectivity that we “remain closed” to the idea that “the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the play itself” (108). It is from this perspective I contend we should approach improvised music; not from the subjectivities of the performers, but from the nature of improvisation itself.

The nature of “play” or “game” in Gadamer’s work, as already mentioned, relates to one’s experience of artworks. Thus, for Gadamer, contra Kant and Schiller, aesthetic experience is not subjective. Instead, just like the player who is drawn into the game and “played by” the game just as much as they play the game—that is, they are caught up in the to-and-fro of the movement of the game such that their subjectivities are suspended—so too is the person experiencing an artwork swept up, or “played by,” the artwork; aesthetic experience is not a subject regarding an object but a transformative event. Davey observes, “the game analogy implies that the act of spectatorship contributes to bringing what is at play within the artwork into fuller being” (*Unfinished Worlds* 48). From the perspective of improvisation, this could be conceived as a radicalisation of Borgo’s idea of “what the music wants,” mentioned above. The Gadamerian position suggests that the role of the player is to draw out, or illuminate, what is *already there* in the performance event itself. On such an account, the “outcome” of improvised musical performance is not the subjective self-expression of the players in response to “what the music wants,” but the presentation of a musical event, an event where the emergent work and the players comprise a single unity.

To understand the unity at issue here, we might briefly consider Heidegger’s notion of “*belonging together*” (*Identity and Difference*), where the emphasis is explicitly placed on the “*belonging*” rather than the “together.” If the emphasis is reversed, i.e. *belonging together*, we encounter a form of ensemble interaction where the ensemble is said to belong simply because they are *represented* in a unity; they happen to be working in a particular relation to one another. In this sense, we may say that the distinct elements of the social contract model of ensemble interaction “belong *together*.” Putting the emphasis on the word “*belong*,”

however, suggests that things are “together” because they *belong*; things are *already* placed in relation to one another. Thus, the ensemble members and the outcome of their performance do not merely stand together as individual and autonomous parts. Instead, in the happening of the event, these different elements *are* the improvisation. Improvisation *is* essentially this *belonging* together of players and emergent work. Any attempt to represent the players as distinct individuals, or to separate the players from the outcome, is to lose sight of improvisation as such.

Of course, the unity at issue here is comprised of different elements and we can speak about them individually to a certain extent without undermining that unity. But any discussion of the different elements—player(s) and work—must not lose sight of the fact that neither the players or the work is reducible to the other or can be separated from one another. The question remains, however, how we discuss the responsiveness of improvised musical performances without disrupting the unity of the event, that is, without reducing that responsiveness to the players alone. The solution, I suggest, is to conceive of improvisation as a conversation. But not the sense of an intersubjective “dialogue” between players, but in a sense more akin to Gadamer’s conception of “conversation,” where to converse is to attend to the subject matter *between* interlocutors rather than attend to the other person directly.

V

The “conversation” at issue in improvised musical performance, I suggest, does not occur directly between players. For if we conceive of improvisation as a purely intersubjective dialogue, we struggle to account for both the speed and spontaneity that is so important for McMullen’s account of the improvisative as well as those instances where players are decidedly not interacting with the other. Further, we also struggle to account for solo improvisation. Rather than being intersubjective, I contend that the conversation occurs between the player(s) and the work.² This relationship always exists, whether it is a large ensemble or a solo performance. With only one “interlocutor”—the work—we can account for the speed and spontaneity often necessary for improvised musical performances and we can understand how performances can be responsive and indeterminate even when players are not necessarily listening to their ensemble partners. Further, such an understanding points to the essential unity between players and (emergent) work.

This idea of conversation is sometimes discussed in the hermeneutic literature with respect to the idea of the “in-between” (Davey; Gadamer; Malpas). That is, interlocutors direct their attention to the subject matter that exists between them as opposed to directly attending to one another. The work, in improvised musical performance, equally exists in this “in-between.” As Borgo recognises, the players must attend to what the *work* wants, and the work is not attributable to any single individual within the ensemble, rather it exists independently *between* them. The players, in their attending to the work, understand the work in the sense of call and response: the work calls for a certain ‘something,’ and the players respond. Perhaps what the work calls for is a reference to “Salt Peanuts,” as in the case of Peterson and Allen, or perhaps it calls for one to attend only to a specific aspect of the work and not another, in the case of Rowe. Of course, the player’s understanding of precisely what the work “calls for” will be mediated by their prejudice.

As suggested by Landgraf, the progression of the improvisation results in a “narrowing of possible choices” (192), and as Benson notes, “what was the play of experimentation starts to become more ‘stable’ as a structure,” for instance, “a piece of stone moves from being a square block to an increasingly defined shape” (“In the Beginning” 159). Thus, not only does the work itself call on the players for particular responses, therefore narrowing the possibilities available for the player(s) to respond to, but further, by virtue of their prejudice,

players are predisposed to notice and attend to *select* possibilities offered by the work as it becomes increasingly more structured.

The emergent work itself transcends the players—they can never experience it as a *whole*; instead, they attend to aspects of it. In this sense, we can better understand the above from Davey in the context of improvised musical performance, re-quoted here: “the game analogy implies that the act of spectatorship contributes to bringing what is at play within the artwork into fuller being” (*Unfinished Worlds* 48). There are countless possibilities inherent in the emergent work that call for a response from the player(s). It is the responsibility of the player(s) who “play” in an improvisational sense to illuminate a certain aspect of that emergent work. Those aspects of the work that they bring into “fuller being” are those that they respond to. Thus, the work itself cannot come forth without the players, but neither can the players “play” improvisation as such without attending to and responding to the emergent work itself.

VI

I have attempted to conceptualise improvised musical performance in a way that does justice to Heidegger and Gadamer’s convictions that artists and artworks *belong* together. This account results in what might be called a hermeneutic account of improvised musical performance, insofar as I took several cues from Gadamer’s hermeneutics. My account argues that improvisation is the unity between player(s) and emergent work, where the players, guided by their prejudice, respond to possibilities that arise from the emergent work itself. Thus, improvisation *is* dialogical, but in the sense that players converse with the work, following a structure of call and response. Consequently, improvised musical performance is not merely a subjective act of self-expression or intentionality, for one’s actions are always mediated by the emergent work. The work transcends the performers and “draws out” certain responses such that neither the players nor the work is reducible to the other.

Aside from arguably providing a more accurate account of improvisation with respect to its phenomenology, this view of improvisation is suggestive of a broader re-consideration of both the way in which we understand improvised art and its role/significance in broader society. Indeed, if we cannot understand the activity or process of improvisation as separate from its outcomes, neither can we understand the outcomes as separate to the process. Any ontology of improvised art, or art in general, must account for the performativity inherent in its coming into being. The essentially contingent nature of improvisation (Peters; DiPiero; Sawyer) in the context of the argument presented in this paper calls into question any metaphysical approach that seeks to identify a certain enduring character or essence of the work as distinct from its instantiation in the performance event. However, this is not the place to work through what such an ontology may look like; it is deserving of a paper unto itself.

With respect to the role or significance of improvisation, the account given above appears at least in part to affirm Benson’s call (echoing Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer) to reinstate art as essential to our lives. Benson summarises the dominant contemporary Christian view of art and artists in the form of the following question: “in a world in which there is hunger and suffering, isn’t it simply too frivolous to create art? Shouldn’t artists be doing something that is more valuable to society?” (*Liturgy as a Way of Life* 70). While Benson presents this within a Christian framework, I do not think it is particularly different to the dominant conception of art and artists in (post)modernity. That is, if art is merely the subjective self-expression of the artist, to what extent should it be valued by the rest of society? Indeed, as Benson writes, “If art is really only something one does for oneself, then it is rather solipsistic in nature—which is to say it is purely about oneself” (140–41). From a specifically improvisational perspective, such a view of art seems to have a direct correlation to accounts of improvisation that focus heavily on the intent and purposiveness (i.e. the subjectivities) of the performers.

With respect to why improvisation may be important, Borgo highlights both an “emancipatory” and an “anticipatory” quality of improvisation, where the former refers to improvisation as liberating and the latter refers to improvisation as a model that might be projected onto political or social problems yet to be solved (“Openness from Closure”). Certainly, the anticipatory quality of improvisation points to a consequence of improvisation that tentatively goes beyond the subjectivities of those who improvise. But Benson is more focussed on the significance of art itself. Improvisation undoubtedly figures in innumerable facets of people’s lives (DiPiero; Toop), artistic and otherwise, but what does improvisation in music, as it relates to the generation of *art*, offer society more broadly?

Heidegger and Gadamer certainly recognised not only art’s claim to truth, but equally the objectivity of one’s aesthetic experience. Indeed, it is precisely in his concepts of “play” and “conversation” that Gadamer locates the objectivity of interpretation (although “objective” and “subjective” are somewhat clumsy terms in a Gadamerian context). I suggest, then, we can equally locate a degree of objectivity in improvised musical performance, too. The objectivity of improvised musical performance lies in the conversation between player and work. The player, as described above, is not an autonomous agent contributing their subjective ideas upon the performance but is rather “called” to respond. In their attending to and responding to the work, the work draws out, as it were, certain responses from the players. Just as Stanton “received” a particular insight that he was not intending during the baseball game, as discussed in the opening paragraphs of this paper, players receive “calls” to contribute from the situation in which they find themselves. Thus, it would be inaccurate to label genuine improvisation as merely solipsistic in nature. Certainly, the prejudice of the players is integral to the performance, but these prejudices are mediated by the emergent work such that the work and the players are inseparable and mutually irreducible.

The way in which we each are the inheritors of tradition and culture, and the way in which this inheritance gives rise to our prejudice, means that our thinking and doing is necessarily social. We always operate within the cultural and historical structures of the day. By engaging with the emergent work, players *live* and *encounter* their prejudice. They elucidate themselves to themselves and to the audience. And so, improvisation is a way of unveiling a certain character of oneself and, given the historically situated nature of humankind, improvisation unveils truths about our broader historical situation. 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. Therefore, perhaps a hermeneutic account of improvisation offers a way forward, in solidarity with Benson, to (re)position improvised art forms as meaningful and significant to the broader society, for it shows us who and what we are.

Notes

¹ “Cartesianism” is often used as placeholder for a larger story in philosophy where one is preoccupied with the “self”; a story that arguably begins with Augustine and continues with Luther, Descartes, and Locke.

² There is a broader tension at issue here, which I cannot address in this paper, that has to do with the way in which the subject-object relationship—the conversation between subject and work—is actually essential to the subject-subject relationship that is so often discussed in the literature with respect to intersubjectivity. For it is the object itself that brings about the subject-subject relationship. Such an idea is central in Gadamer’s philosophy as well as in Davidson’s notion of “triangulation.”

Works Cited

- Benson, Bruce Ellis. *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship*. Baker Academic, 2013.
- . "In the Beginning, There Was Improvisation." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 2*, edited by Benjamin Piekut and George E. Lewis, Oxford UP, 2014, [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199892921.013.004](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199892921.013.004).
- Berliner, Paul F. *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*. The University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Bertinetto, Alessandro. "Paganini Does Not Repeat: Musical Improvisation and the Type/Token Ontology." *Teorema: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2012, pp. 105–26.
- Borgo, David. "What the Music Wants." *Soundweaving: Writings on Improvisation*, edited by Franziska Schroder and Mícheál Ó hAodha, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, pp. 33–52.
- . "Openness from Closure: The Puzzle of Interagency in Improvised Music and a Neocybernetic Solution." *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, edited by Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman, Duke UP, 2016, pp. 113–30.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2007.
- Cobussen, Marcel. "Interaction." *Music and Ethics*, by Marcel Cobussen and Nanette Nielsen, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2012, pp. 59–90.
- Davey, Nicholas. *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*. State University of New York Press, 2006.
- . *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*. Edinburgh UP, 2013.
- DiPiero, Dan. "Improvisation as Contingent Encounter, Or: The Song of My Toothbrush." *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2018, doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v12i2.4261.
- Fischlin, Daniel, et al. *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*. Duke UP, 2013.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Translated and edited by David E. Linge, University of California Press, 2008.
- . *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Bloomsbury Publishers, 2013.
- Hagberg, Garry. "Ensemble Improvisation, Collective Intention, and Group Attention." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, Oxford UP, 2014, [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.013.011](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.013.011).

- Heidegger, Martin. *Identity and Difference*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, Harper & Row Publishers, 1969.
- . "The Origin of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter, Harper Perennial, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith, Oxford UP, 2007.
- Landgraf, Edgar. "Improvisation: Form and Event—A Spencer-Brownian Calculation." *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Mark B. N. Hansen, Duke UP, 2009, pp. 179–204.
- Lewis, Eric. *Intents and Purposes: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Improvisation*. University of Michigan Press, 2019.
- Malpas, Jeff. "Placing Understanding/Understanding Place." *Sophia*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2017, pp. 379–91, link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s11841-016-0546-9.pdf.
- McMullen, Tracy. "The Improvisative." *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut, Oxford UP, 2014, [10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195370935-e-016](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195370935-e-016).
- Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. The University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Peters, Gary. *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- . "Certainty, Contingency, and Improvisation." *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2012, doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v8i2.2141.
- Sawyer, Keith. "Music and Conversation." *Musical Communication*, edited by Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves, Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 45–60.
- Sawyer, Keith. "Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration." *Psychology of Music*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2006, pp. 148–65.
- Sutton, Julie. "The Invisible Handshake: A Context for Improvisation in Music Therapy." *British Journal of Music Therapy*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2018, pp. 86–95.
- Toop, David. *Into the Maelstrom: Music, Improvisation and the Dream of Freedom Before 1970*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.