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## HIDDEN PRINCIPLES OF IMPROVISATION

### Introduction

Improvisation is a practice. As such, it is a cultural question: semiotic, historical and, of course, practical. The practice of improvisation covers a large variety of arts. Here, we will focus on music, taking spoken language as a theoretical horizon. Let us thus start by a basic disposition of language use.

### **Improvised music and the language principle of non-premeditation of speech.**

The spoken chain, or the improvised line, however long it may be, has a beginning and an end. This apparently banal observation is in reality non-trivial, because a remarkable property is associated with each of the boundaries, the initial and the final respectively. The initial boundary, on which we will concentrate here<sup>1</sup>, is associated with the fact that, in common speech or improvised music, the chain of words or sounds is not premeditated by the speaker or the player. It arrives without his knowledge, without

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<sup>1</sup> The Second property applies to the end of any act of speech. It is associated with the fact that the chain of signs is not conserved in memory by the participants of the dialogue. Indeed, just a few exchanges suffice for the participants to have totally forgotten the precise terms of the preceding chain and its form. Thus in a dialogue, the chain of words appears in order to eventually disappear. A simple experiment will make this clear: the fact that I have followed a conversation closely does not presuppose that I have learned it by heart. Not that I could not memorized it, but in every day practice memorization is not useful. The same holds true when one is listening to an improvised music piece for the first time. This property of non-conservation of sentences or musical lines shows that the memory principle of language and improvised music does not operate based on conservation.

warning. Thus, in the act of speaking, the chain is not mentally constructed before it is uttered; the same holds true for improvised music.

The non-premeditation of common speech is a basic principle in human semiotic behaviour and constitutes as such an unconscious foundation for all acts of improvisation. In other words, improvisation is rooted, beyond the realm of will, in an anthropological disposition. We may thus ask whether, in a common dialogue, the speaker chooses his words and then utters them. Does he control the elements of the spoken chain and their relationships? Does he compose the chain before saying it out loud? Clearly, the answer is no: the chain is neither premeditated nor preassembled by the person who is speaking. Put differently, we have to admit the simple fact that speech is not a deliberate construction, but escapes our control. If we pay close attention, we observe that sentences emerge spontaneously, in an impromptu fashion, without any voluntary or reasoned preliminary combinatorial work: sentences turn out to be assembled without having been consciously assembled. The elements of the uttered chain are not announced. They come without our awareness. In other words, the act of speaking is not a construction, but is surging forth.

The principle of non-premeditation is a basic concept of language use. It poses a powerful challenge to the common-sense conception of a subject who thinks first and then expresses his ideas through well-chosen words. Thus, the act of speaking, which is the sign of an individual's freedom, power and knowledge, is oddly placed outside the conscious control of that very individual. This may sound paradoxical. Let us look at a few cases.

Singing a song, or reciting a poem, presupposes that words have been learned by heart in advance. In contrast, telling a story does not presuppose neither texts nor words in advance. Consequently, I can't recite a poem or sing a song if I don't know the words or the lyrics. But this limitation does not apply to telling a story. No one can say – *Sorry, I can't tell this story because I don't know the words* -. In everyday narratives of this sort, words are not premeditated. Consequently, the following request is a contradiction *in adjecto*: *Please tell me the story but don't leave out a single word*. A story to be told is not attached to any particular words nor chains of words. Because of this lexical and syntactic unpreparedness of speech, the speaker is de facto a creator. When characterizing common speech, Herder (XVIII<sup>o</sup> century) wrote the famous and obscure sentence "to speak is to make poetry." This everyday poetry is not an art but a basic and compulsory disposition of language use. In the social protocol of common dialogue the premeditation of speech is forbidden: to recite is not accepted as a form of talk. Thus, trivially, common speech has to be creative and new as a basic feature. This also holds for improvised music.

Let us take witticism as an example of language creativity. Insults burst out, and have their intended effect only if they are novel. Admittedly, it is possible to have a catalogue of ready-made insults in reserve, but at the opportune moment the difficulty of selecting the right one might ruin the manoeuvre. In order to insult someone with a witticism, we must be in good form; we must be eloquent. Eloquence is an artistic state, which confirms, if confirmation is needed, that one can redefine the lack of premeditation, but

that one cannot be exempt from it. Like any good improvisation, a witticism worthy of its name must be spontaneous, original and timely, for preparing a witticism ahead of time in order to bring it out at the right moment contradicts the principle of witticism itself.

In the light of statistical observations, we may conclude that spoken language is astonishingly repetitive and habit-driven, that it is strongly ritualized, containing a fair amount of formulaic expressions, in short, that creativity in language is so rare that it cannot readily be posited as a linguistic principle. In the same vein one can ask whether there is, among all the clichés, such a thing as an improvised piece of music? Yet, these quantitative observations leave the principle of non-premeditation intact, as can easily be shown. For instance, we know why it is so difficult to speak in public without preparation, so hard to say what needs to be said using the right words. In this familiar exercise, the speaker notices that language is not a docile instrument, but a strangely unpredictable and reluctant reality.

Unquestionably, before we begin to talk, it is good to know what we are talking about; but the exact arrangement of the words is beyond our control. In other words, the property of non-premeditation precludes associating the speaker with a prior, constructive and conscious lexical, syntactic or stylistic intention. The words in a sentence or the notes in an improvised melody are not chosen one after another by the subject. In fact, no conscious agency controls the advent of the spoken or musical chain in the form it finally takes.

### **Synchronicity in hearing**

The participants of a dialogue hear the chain that is being produced at the same time, including the speaker, since he or she has no prior knowledge of the sentence he or she is producing. The participants catch the chain's advent simultaneously and not one after another. This is the reason why the following dialogical situations are awkward: *She heard Paul after he spoke, Paul said it before she heard it, She heard what Paul said before Alfred did.* The speech imposes itself to everyone present simultaneously. Thus from the simplest utterance to the subtlest witticism, the act of speech brings the participants together in a single moment of perception called a synchronous point.

In a dialogue, none of the participants has a prior awareness of the linguistic elements or speech events coming up. Here again, the spoken chain, like the improvised melodic line, only comes into existence when put into act: before its advent, it has no ontological status.

This synchronicity of hearing shared by everybody present is incompatible with a division of time between a sender and a receiver of a message, such as suggested metaphorically by the classical schema of communication. This received spatial representation of communication induces on the basis of a spatial difference an illusory laps of time between the emission and the reception of an utterance. The factual status of the synchronous point deconstructs this widely spread imaginary representation.

In like fashion, in improvised music, the player hears and discovers the sounds he is playing at the same time as any listener (he is one of them and

not in front of them). Unless he plays clichés, he does not have a head start on neither the forms nor the notes he plays; he is, as everybody around him, a listener. The synchronous point constitutes a primary feature of socialization, as it brings together all the participants in a single "intuition of the instant", as Bachelard wrote.

The analogy between improvisation and linguistic theory is not purely formal since language use is a constitutive feature of the art; put differently, improvisation is based on a characteristic property of natural language use.

### **The art of improvisation**

The art of improvising is rooted in a characteristic property of natural language use. Although necessary, non-premeditation is not a sufficient criterion for defining improvisation. Let us take a couple of examples to highlight the difference of scope between non-premeditation and improvisation: *Please, tell us a story* - as opposed to - *Please improvise (invent on the spot) a story*. Indeed, improvising a story takes more than the unpremeditated flow of words that characterises storytelling; it is an art. In fact, anybody can recite a poem or sing a song, but to improvise a poem or a song presupposes a substantial practice. The following examples correspond to these two different requests: *Recite a poem* - as opposed to - *improvise a poem*; *Sing a song* - as opposed to - *improvise a song*. For improvisation, art is required.

In music, there is a significant difference between an improvisation and a performance. First, in the act of improvisation, there is in principle nothing to

be performed (prewritten, preconceived and repeatedly rehearsed forms); in improvisation, the player is somehow overrun by his own playing.

Performance, on the contrary, implies full control of the forms, either through reading or memorisation. Second, improvising obviously cannot be reduced to the display of instrumental virtuosity and agility. We should also keep in mind that expressionism would be a misleading question in improvisation because it supposes what Wittgenstein called "the myth of interiority"; i.e., a deep-inside-in-my-heart expressed to an outside world.

As a professional practice, improvisation is obviously a premeditated act but, curiously enough, its form and content are not. Thus we will say that it is a premeditated act of non-premeditation, or in other words, an ago-antagonistic disposition.

### **Improvisation and systems of musical values**

It is impossible to generalize any further on improvisation. The concept of improvisation varies with the intonation table specific to a particular culture. Moreover, modal, tonal, atonal or free forms of improvisation are distinct practices. Improvising melody lines or songs is to be distinguished from improvising on the basis of harmonic changes, which is all together different from improvising recitative forms where the player takes the posture of the storyteller, and so forth, all the way to the improvisation for the sake of timbres, such as some forms contemporary improvised music.

Music is not an art of approximation, even regarding the most open forms of improvisation<sup>2</sup>. Technically speaking, improvisers deal with intervals (minimally: octave, fifth, fourth...) and entailments of intervals. They do not manipulate units (notes), but intervals which are differential values. Then in tonal or modal music, improvised sequences of intervals emerge from a domain of expected values. They are supposed to be original paths of intervals formed in a predefined and shared musical value structure.

Each social being has interiorized certain, basic autonomous systems which are constitutive of all cultures: music, language, natural integers, etc. We hear music through a pre-acquired system of harmonic and rhythmic values. In a similar fashion, we understand speech because we have interiorised a grammar.

Although language and improvised music share fundamental principles, they are nevertheless two autonomous systems. For example, as opposed to language, music is a value system without signs. We also need to consider that an act of speech, as opposed to music, is necessarily a solo act (usually, in a dialogue only one participant talks at a time). Music builds simultaneities of voices, but speech is always an act for a single person; unisons and choirs belong to ritual and to theatrical practices only.

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<sup>2</sup> Music in all its forms, even without wanting, always falls under the law of numbers



### **Improvisation as time value - *Musikalische Momente***

Instances of improvisation are both event and trace, or, as Schubert put it, *Musikalische Momente* (*musical moments*).<sup>3</sup> A moment of improvised music is a time value in our live. The understanding of improvisation as time value, as presence, rather than as a purely aesthetic form, puts our common-sense representation of time into question.

In Western cultures, the standard representation of time is linear. Time is conceived of as of a horizontally oriented vector, on which past and future are divided by an immaterial point, the present. This familiar linear image of a time line is a strong cultural standard and has resisted all sorts of criticisms, scientific or philosophical, recent or ancient. Under such a linear conception, the so-called fluidity or “viscosity” of time, as Bachelard called it, does not allow any room for the present, for it disappears in the very moment in which it appears. The present, having no measurable length on this represented line, should analogously not have any duration, either. Consequently, between the past and the future, there is no time left for the present time.

In order to question this commonplace linear conception, which is incompatible with the understanding of improvisation as time value, let us consider the observation that it is, indeed, now that I am thinking of yesterday, tomorrow, next year or of past centuries. Events are past or future only in the present in which the act of thought necessarily occurs. Seen from this perspective, the present is not anymore a furtive point on a time line but a

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<sup>3</sup> *Musikalische Momente*, 4 last piano sonata by Schubert 18

subjective experience during which the past and the future are maintained or transformed; this anamnesis supposes a duration. Then, contradicting common sense, we will say that past and future, as they suppose an act of thought, always happen in the present time.

The advent of the present coincides with the deconstruction of a preceding present. It is an event, "un événement rupture," according to Foucault, which triggers the advent of a new value disposition, a new situation.

Music and speech happen in this sort of time which proceeds by sequences of transformations; as such, it is a necessary feature of improvisation. But, as the act of speech, music does not appear through time; rather, music creates time. In other words, temporality is not a given framework for speech or for music: time has to happen, and speech and music make it happen.

### **Improvisation and the novelty of the present**

The present time of our casual experience always contains a part of radical novelty, probable *a-posteriori*, yet never predicted. Ineed, we can predict many things, we can repeat procedures, but in the advent of a given moment, the present will always show its uniqueness.

The mix of a predictable order with an intrinsic novelty characterizes the present as an unstable space. What is happening now contains a part that has never been previously declared in the future tense in any past discourse. In other words, this part was neither predicted nor declared. On the other

hand, it would be hard to conceive of a moment in social life that had been entirely described in a statement in the future tense before it happens. We might have to change our habit of thinking of time in linear terms, which implies the idea that the future comes after the present; surely, yesterday's future can be today's past.

### **Conclusion**

"*Musikalische Momente*", i. e., moments of improvised music, are thus based on two principles of uncertainty: the non-premeditation of speech and the new, non-premeditated part, of present time. It is within this structured instability that the subject thinks, speaks, and improvises music.

Improvisation falls clearly within the realm of the unconscious. The space of musical values is silent in memory, and the improvised line is non-premeditated. Clearly, one can learn choruses of Charlie Parker by heart and transcribe them on paper, as musicians do, and as I did, but when it comes to improvisation, this does not give you the slightest clue or hint; in improvisation, one has to invent an event, that is to say, create the advent of the present. This is what is meant by improvisation as time value .

An improviser is a musician who has opted for the field of non-premeditation of musical events. The more improvisation gets away from this characteristic, as in ritualized practices, the less it justifies its name.

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