

# **IMPROVISATION AND THE POLITICS OF ERROR**

by

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between error and choice in jazz improvisation. In the first of four complementary chapters, key terms (e.g. error, jazz, improvisation) are defined within the context of this dissertation. Next, a series of original interchangeable exercises for musical improvisation are annotated. These exercises are discussed within a jazz-specific framework, however they are easily adaptable to a wide range of improvisational settings. Chapter Three details the effectiveness of these exercises in several case studies. Issues surrounding listening, interaction, error, and choice are examined. Finally, avenues for future study are considered, in particular a reframing of error within the process of jazz improvisation.

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## Chapter One: Typology of Error

### 1.1 Paralysis by Analysis?

Recall a time when you improvised with a group of musicians. You had a clear idea of what you wanted to play in your mind's ear. Yet upon execution, something occurred that affected your original intent. In the time between thought and action, the musical texture may have shifted, making your gesture a less than ideal fit for the musical moment. One, some or all of the following occurs: someone unexpectedly stops playing; you make a wrong fingering or your stick slipped from your hand; there is feedback; you have a squeaky reed; or there may be some type of audience or environmental interference. Whatever the case, you are faced with the task of mediating the immediate. Out of the panoply of possible next steps, one is selected. Do you continue with your original idea, or adapt to the newly minted situation? Your next decision was, quite precisely, a *decision*: a determination arrived at after consideration. In every performance situation, this process cycles into the next musical moment, and so forth. Jazz musicians make thousands of decisions in the course of performance.

The above sequence of events can be re-contextualized as a conversation. Conversation is one of the most significant metaphors for improvisation. Imagine you are at a party listening to two friends discuss a pending vacation. Again, you have a clear idea of what you want to contribute to their conversation. Perhaps you know a hotel where they are going and you would like to recommend it. Yet upon uttering your phrase, something affects your original intent. By the time you get a word in, in that ephemeral space between thought and action, one, some, or all of the following occurs: the conversational topic may shift; someone else joins the group; the

doorbell rings; someone spills a glass of wine. Whatever the case, something occurs that makes your conversational gesture a less than ideal fit for the moment. Do you follow through or hold back? Can you be comfortable in the silence of holding back? If you don't hold back, can you assert yourself in such a way that the gesture *can* make sense? Riding the wave of conversation, deciding what to say or not say next, is very similar to riding the wave of improvisation in music-making.<sup>1</sup>

If improvisation exists at the intersection of intent and circumstance, between what one meant to do and what actually occurred, how then are errors perceived and negotiated in improvised, collaborative situations? Or, taken another way, what does one do when something goes wrong? It is necessary to consider what, if anything, constitutes 'right' and 'wrong' in jazz improvisation. In my role as a university instructor since 2004, I have observed an inconsistency between what is taught in the classroom and what is practiced on the bandstand, and this experience has informed both my teaching and research. I have encountered many students who are equally overwhelmed by both the sheer number of musical choices available to them and perceived difficulty in being comfortable within the limits of style. These experiences are the catalyst for this research. I constantly field questions from students that stem from preoccupations of sounding 'right' – “What is *the right way* to swing eighth notes? Which scale *will work* over a particular chord? What is *wrong* with my time feel? Can you write down what I am *supposed* to play?” These questions are in opposition to my observations as a performer and

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Kendon's (1990) approach to communication studies and conversation is particularly relevant to the study of musical improvisation. Kendon's approach is context-driven in that no individual action has meaning unless it is placed within a social context. It is not *selves* that interact, but interaction that *produces* selves. His assertion that no communicative act is more or less important than another is germane to a discussion on error and improvised conduct.

those of Berliner (1994) that show that student and professional musicians alike most often make meaningful, original, and creative musical statements by choosing to abandon the need to sound right all the time.

To begin, the word “jazz” must be clarified within the context in this paper, specifically how it relates to improvisation. Instead of focusing on mastering the elements of jazz as a style or a genre, it is possible and perhaps preferable to master the elements of music first, and subsequently experience *jazz as a process*. This excerpt from an interview with Bill Evans (1966) gets to the heart of the matter:

Jazz, as we tend to look at it is a style. But I feel that jazz is not so much a style but a process of making music. It's the process of making one minute of music in one minute of time, whereas when you compose, you can make one minute of music and take three months. And that's the only basic difference. It so happens that because of historical circumstances, where jazz was born or whatever, you know it came up through the Mississippi and is a part of American music and American culture and all we think of jazz as a stylistic medium now, which in a way it is. But I think we must remember that in an absolute sense, jazz is more a certain creative process of spontaneity than a style. Therefore you might say that Chopin or Bach or Mozart or whoever improvised music, that is, was able to make music of the moment, was in a sense playing jazz. We can leave style out of it. That's how I feel about it in an absolute sense.

In jazz improvisation, the immediacy of the present moment generates situations in which a response can be viewed as either right-or-wrong, or better-or-best. The former serves evaluation within the classroom. For example, if a student is learning a scalar pattern (e.g. 1-2-3-5), a teacher has a straightforward means of assessment. The teacher can give the student two chances at playing the pattern at the prescribed tempo. They either perform it correctly or they do not. The latter viewpoint most effectively serves jazz performance on the bandstand. In performance, jazz improvisation requires constant negotiation between players at many levels; moment-to-moment and performance-to-performance. Through accumulated experience and

exposure to new musical and social interactions, the cumulative value of improvising emerges over time (i.e. performance-to-performance), and does not lie in the outcome of a single performance. The present investigation is concerned with moment-to-moment considerations such as: What is the other person doing? How does that relate to my performance? Am I leading, following or accompanying the action? How is this similar/different to what happened a moment ago? What is the most interesting part of the music right now? Can I make it more interesting by adding something or by holding back?

In the first of four complementary chapters, I explore the relationship between choice and error within jazz improvisation. In addition, I will articulate a model of improvisation that theorizes an optimistic view of error. In Chapter Two, a series of original interchangeable exercises for musical improvisation based on this model will be annotated and described. These exercises are discussed within a jazz-specific framework, however they are easily adaptable to a wide range of improvisational settings. Chapter Three details the effectiveness of these exercises in workshop settings, including student responses. Finally, the results will be summarized and avenues for future study will be considered in Chapter Four. For the present investigation, I am equally concerned with both the *idea* and *experience* of improvisation and the *idea* and *experience* of error and choice as they relate to improvised music.

## 1.2 Error As Surprise: Collisions and Absences

If you commit an error – whether a minor one, such as realizing halfway through an argument that you are mistaken, or a major one, such as realizing halfway through a lifetime that you were wrong about your faith, your politics, yourself, your loved love, or your life’s work – you will not find any obvious ready-to-hand resources to help you deal with it (Schulz 2010, 7).



Error and expectation are closely related. Things are perceived as wrong when an expectation has not been met (Huron 2006, 15). This varies by degree. For example, calling a new co-worker by the wrong name (e.g. Brian instead of Ryan) can be viewed as “less of” an error than a surgeon drinking alcohol before operating. The latter is a lapse in judgment with the added potential for dire consequences, whereas the former is a lapse of memory, a syntax error that exists unto itself and in this case based on the information at hand, is minor. Yet both are related in that each instance relates to a set of expectations that have not been met, generating dissonance. We expect acquaintances, even new ones, to recall our names, and generally speaking we care about forgetting as much as we care about being forgotten. When expectations are not met, a new field of expectation manifests (i.e. one expectation not being met opens up a range of new expectations based on that event). Unmet expectations can be viewed as an opportunity to engage uncertainty (e.g. create a mnemonic device to remember names better; overhaul of hiring practices for surgeons) rather than dwell in the wrongness. There are numerous safeguards created by governments and medical boards to create an expectation of safety and decrease uncertainty. Engaging uncertainty is a hallmark of jazz performance.

David Huron has written extensively on expectation-related responses in music, including jazz improvisation (2006). Huron calls surprise a classic response to expectational failure. He contends that while it is possible to have surprises that induce pleasure, “the surprise itself always indictates a biological failure to anticipate the future” (2006, 362). He states:

Surprises activate a fast neural pathway that initiates one of thee conservative responses: flight, fright, or freeze. These responses can be subsequently suspended, inhibited, or amplified by another reaction response or by a slower appraisal process. In the case of music, appraisal responses typically conclude that the situation is safe, and so the fast responses are rapidly extinguished (2006, 362).

Huron's research points towards a biological predilection that the "fast-track brain always interprets surprise as bad. The uncertainty attending surprise is sufficient cause to be fearful at least until the more thorough appraisal process can properly evaluate the situation" (2006, 36). Jazz improvisation has colloquially been referred to as "the sound of surprise" (Balliett 1959). Responses from all players in a professional small group playing jazz music, (e.g. Bill Evans trio) are fast but generally do *not* create situations that are safe or easy to predict. There are collisions of expectation from each player which generate and regenerate moments of perceived newness.

Some of the 'fast action responses' can be heard as ones internalized vocabulary, and as such some *safe* responses are also repetitive. There is an aesthetic in jazz performance, however, that things ought not to be safe and repetitive. In Huron's model, improvisors used learned *schema*, mental preconceptions of the habitual course of events (2006, 362). Players would be wise to "learn to recognize new circumstances where a reaction response should be evoked. One of these circumstances is when worldly events fail to conform to expectations" (362). Taken another way, when moments of newness are created, choosing to go *with* them as opposed to opting for the surer path.

Sheena Iyengar is an international renowned expert on choice and decision-making. She states that "when we speak of choice, what we mean is the ability to exercise control over ourselves and our environment. In order to choose, we must first perceive that control is possible" (2010, 6-7). A boxer learns preset combinations in order to defend himself in the ring, and then uses that knowledge based on the context of the match. Similarly, improvising musicians ought to equip themselves with a meaningful, internalized musical vocabulary (i.e. schema) to handle changing musical terrain. These schema include traditional

soloist/accompanist roles while at the same time emphatically asserting the dynamic, moment-to-moment changes in the field of play. In boxing, no two fights will ever be the same and no amount of training will prepare a fighter for every contingency. So it goes for improvised music, where no two performances will be the same. There will always be ‘wrong’ notes. Musical relationships will be created and subsequently decisions will be made that re-create ‘better’ rather than ‘best’ scenarios among players. As Schultz explains, “we may not know exactly how we are going to err, but we know that the error is coming, and we say yes to the experience anyway (Schultz 2009, 66). The question I address through the exercises below are not “how can I stop playing wrong notes?” or “what do I do now that I’ve played a ‘wrong’ note?” but instead “how can I cultivate a mindset that allows me to never *feel* like I’ve played a wrong note?” This approach is supported by my own experience, the experiences of my students, and numerous historical accounts from master improvisors, it is evident that successful improvisational experiences occur when one is not consciously thinking about what one is playing in performance (Berliner 1994, 221-42). Musicians speak of ‘learning the rules’ in order to ‘forget them’ when playing. Indeed, it is the prescribed diligence ‘remembering’ of rules that sets up the politics between right and wrong.

James Reason, a pioneer in the field of error studies, defines error as “deficiencies or failures in the judgmental and/or inferential processes involved in the selection of an objective or in the specification of the means to achieve it, irrespective of whether or not the actions directed by this decision-scheme run according to plan” (1990, 25). The etymology of the word improvisation leads to *improvisus* meaning “unexpected” or “that which is unforeseen” (Nettl 2002). On one hand, both definitions imply that what is created through the act of improvising is surprising, and on the other there is the implication that the processes implemented to generate and sustain the unexpected are “not premeditated” (Campbell 2009, 122). It is easy to marvel at

those who continue to perform flawlessly amidst unforeseen circumstances (e.g. instrument malfunctions, sheet music blowing away etc). However, in terms of the music itself and contrary to a widely held view that improvisation comes from “out of thin air”, most improvising traditions involve detailed, methodical preparation relating to the genre in advance of the actual performance. Like the above naming example, there are varying degrees of error in each musical field.

Implicit in the notion of making error is the idea that one would want to avoid error at all costs. Indeed, in numerous areas of day-to-day living, errors are at best undesirable and at worst monumental. A syntactical error such as an E natural over C minor chord, no matter how jarring, is negligible when compared to the errors made by pilots, surgeons, nuclear technicians, or bomb squads. In each of these latter disciplines, error ought to be viewed pessimistically. However, Schulz states:

the pessimistic [viewpoint of error] is radically incomplete...it obscures the fact that whatever damage can arise from erring pales in comparison to the damage that arises from our fear, dislike, and denial of erring. This fear acts as a kind of omni-purpose coagulant, hardening heart and mind, chilling our relationships with other people, and cooling our curiosity about the world (Schulz 2010, 27).

Based on my experience as a jazz educator and performer, I have noticed this pessimistic viewpoint taking hold of many students. Such a viewpoint does not explain *why* an E natural sounds jarring over C minor nor does it explain why Thelonious Monk or Michael Brecker consistently made it work. Fear of sounding bad and the humiliation of not knowing what to play are the main concerns of the students I have worked with through the years. The alternative and much needed optimistic outlook of error views “the experience of being wrong” as not being “limited to humiliation and defeat” (Schulz 2010, 27). In fact, there is a strange liberation that

occurs when adopting this point of view that is entirely relevant to the arts and improvised music in particular. Schulz states that:

surprise, bafflement, fascination, excitement, hilarity, delight: all these and more are a part of the optimistic understanding of error. This model is harder to recognize around us, since it is forever being crowded out by the noisier notion that error is dangerous, demoralizing, and shameful. But it exists nonetheless, and it exerts a subtle yet important pull both on our ideas about error and our ideas about ourselves (2010, 27).

This integral latter notion, that making errors in performance has a direct correlation with one's own self-worth, will be addressed in Chapter Four.

In this dissertation, I investigate and articulate an alternative pedagogical rationale that involves reframing errors in performance as collisions of surprise and absences of no best next move that will make sense as events unfold. If students engage in the endless diversity of error, then errors could instead be observed as experiments that will lead to new points of resolution. Indeed, errors may become accepted as an “inevitable property” of improvisation, if students can reframe its aesthetic qualities and reduce some of the stigma that goes along with making them (Weick 2002). Only then will it be possible to encourage people to fail boldly, and mean it, and incur their own trust.

A revision of educational practice regarding improvisation could create a culture of confidence in which students can:

- a) engage complex organizational problems with versatility and poise
- b) consider alternative responses during moments of tension
- c) assuage fear of unknown variables
- d) cultivate and sustain a sympathetic practice in collaborative situations

Poulter alludes to these four points that outline the value of improvisation when he states:

Successful improvisation experiences prepare students for a world of increasing ambiguity by enabling them to confront and transcend uncertainty. Perhaps most importantly, students who improvise are constantly aware of the pre-eminent goal of music – to perform in a way that elicits aesthetic feeling from performer to audience (2008, 71).

### 1.3 Showing Students How To Sound Like Themselves?

Jazz also reminds you that you can work things out with other people. It's hard, but it can be done. When a group of people try to invent something together, there's bound to be a lot of conflict. Jazz urges you to accept the decisions of others. Sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow – but you can't give up, no matter what. It is the art of negotiating change with style. The aim of every performance is to make something out of whatever happens – to make something together and be together (Marsalis 2008, 25).

Evaluating jazz improvisation in the university environment is challenging. Consider that in the process of improvising music, participants are collectively generating new approaches to the musical situation at hand, regardless of style or genre. In jazz improvisation, one can learn to find even footing to collaborate, forge trust, and work things out, as articulated above by Marsalis. The uncertainty inherent in improvised conduct is manifest in the attempt to mutually participate in the musical act. If a goal of jazz improvisation is to project an identifiable, original voice that exists alongside, and away from, the obligations of style, how does a teacher evaluate/grade an aspiring improviser? How do teachers teach students to sound *like themselves*?

Theodor Adorno pointed directly at a paradox regarding improvisation in jazz education long before the concept of institutionalized jazz education even existed:

Even though jazz musicians still improvise in practice, their improvisations have become so “normalized” as to enable a whole terminology to be developed to express the standard devices of individualization... This pseudo-individualization is prescribed by the standardization of the framework. The latter is so rigid that the freedom it allows for any sort of improvisation is severely limited. Improvisations... are confined within the walls of the harmonic and metric scheme. In a great many cases, such as the ‘break’ of pre-swing jazz, the musical function of the improvised details is determined completely by the

scheme: the break can be nothing other than a disguised cadenza. Hence, very few possibilities for actual improvisation remain (Adorno 1941).<sup>2</sup>

Being ‘confined within the walls’ is as empowering as it is constraining. The exercises in the next chapter will shed light on the pervasive power of limits. It is interesting that Adorno’s tatement was made around the same time John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie and Charlie “Yardbird” Parker were unknowingly codifying the language of bebop in New York City, elements which remain the foundation of jazz education to this day (Nicholson 2005, Gioia 1997). In straight-ahead (e.g. bebop) jazz contexts, certain functions can be explained and objectively appraised. For instance, bebop interpreters learn to play at steady tempi with the eighth-note as the "fastest pulse" (Koetting 1970, 117).<sup>3</sup> Beboppers share a penchant for mean intonation, relatively standard instrumental techniques, harmonic progressions, and song form (Giddins and DeVeaux 2009). One can immediately distinguish those who play with good time, remain in-tune, nailing the changes and playing together from those who do not<sup>4</sup>: criteria which creates fertile ground for a state of mind preoccupied with sounding right, therefore rightfully making bebop the perfect context for evaluation in university jazz programs.

Instruction on the basis of learning how to “play inside” (using correct scales with given harmony) before “playing outside” (extending harmony further) is a common feature in jazz

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<sup>2</sup> In an instructional DVD, pianist Kenny Werner (2005) makes an amusing revelation that sometimes the very last chord in a tune is often the first moment of what he calls “real” improvisation: “Finally free from the shackles of time, everyone is playing extemporaneously trying to get the last word in edgewise.”

<sup>3</sup> Dave Liebman (2003) describes the eighth note as being the “currency” of jazz music in the same way the penny is to the dollar.

<sup>4</sup> To ‘nail the changes’ means to execute melodic lines, in tempo, in a manner that clearly relates to the harmonic rhythm of a predetermined chord progression.

pedagogy. Through assimilation and training of the ear, jazz students equip themselves with useful phrases in a similar manner of memorizing lexicon and grammar in language. Indeed, a common term is the *jazz language*, in which one learns the material of the jazz vocabulary. This grammar consists of indicative phrases transcribed from recordings, or commonly today from various books. As a standalone practice, this is close to teaching “travel jazz” in much the same way one uses Berlitz booklets to prepare phrases for a vacation to a foreign land. When uncertainty manifests on vacation, the introductory phrases unto themselves may not be enough. The exercises in the next chapter utilize the smallest number of rules in a way that engages the widest possible range of musical uncertainty. Learning how to listen to the constituent elements in a musical moment takes time. Pianist Bill Evans discusses the benefits of piecemeal learning in an insightful interview. He states “it is true of any subject that the person that succeeds in anything has the realistic viewpoint at the beginning – knowing that the problem is large and that you have to take it one step at a time and enjoy the step by step learning procedure” (Evans 1966).

This “eternal dichotomy” between cultivating skills within a style-specific medium like bebop and the genuine need to foster individual creative expression is a challenge facing jazz education today (Nicholson 2005). Saxophonist Dave Liebman, a Miles Davis alumnus currently affiliated with the Manhattan School of Music, describes bebop as the “calisthenics” of improvisation in that it constitutes a cogent basis to discovery, but he laments that it has become a “style unto itself” and thereby creates more walls than it breaks down (Liebman 1988). On one hand, the insitutionalization of jazz has created a litany of extremely competent improvisors who are essentially custodians to an earlier style of music much like students of Western art music. On the other hand, it is important to note that it has taken quite some time for experimental music, new music, electronic music, and indeed music by living composers to become a



mainstay in progressive university music programs. Many great composers, in particular pianist composers Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, were esteemed for their skills as improvisors. Yet a significant number of current students of their music resist improvisation (Hatten 2009). We have moved from a place where improvisation was commonplace to a position where there is a marked polarity between composer and interpreter.

The influence of university jazz studies in relation to jazz performance cannot be overestimated. Most contemporary jazz musicians under the age of forty have been exposed to some form of jazz education (Nicholson 2005, 99). The closing of jazz clubs, the passing of the great masters of the genre, and easier access to alternate forms of entertainment has forced the transfer of jazz knowledge to shift from apprenticeship to the classroom. A professor of mine, Chase Sanborn has affirmed “nowadays, less people are interested in hearing jazz, but more people are interested in learning it” (Sanborn 2009). Jazz educator John Marshall says:

The standard of playing among so many young musicians today is remarkably high. You raise the bar –the standard technical ability of everybody – through teaching bebop and big band, which are the easiest to teach in the sense there are rules – you teach them the rules and they negotiate the obstacle course, as it were – but the results, to me, seem a little bit passionless. What happens is idiosyncracies get ironed out, or not valued, or get lost in a mish-mash of bland, but well played, stuff (Nicholson 2005, 183).

Considering that each improvisational experience affects the next, it is important to have a little something to go on whether it is a fragment of an idea, a notion, or an impulse. David Baker, whose books notate thousands of stock licks and phrases, agrees. Baker asserts “the jazz musician without a repository of patterns, licks, etc. is in a position quite similar to a boxer who must think about every punch he throws, instead of automatically reacting to a given situation with firmly implanted combinations based on empirical data” (Baker 1989). The practice of rote memorization and mastery of musical materials alone is incapable of creating quality creative

jazz artists. As Johnson and Laird (2002, 422) point out, “the bottleneck in improvisation – as in cognition in general, is the limited processing capacity of working memory.” One can memorize a host of licks and patterns but without semantic meaning it is difficult for the younger improviser to see his/her place within the context of the music. Sawyer (1999, 197) asserts that “because improvisation is so fundamentally a group activity, it may be difficult to evaluate its value in terms of ‘improvement of’ solo performance abilities.”

Using the exercises in the next chapter I will show that there is value in a) extremely limiting student’s choices; b) guiding them towards a more complete awareness of the parameters of music; and c) grading them based on how they work within those limits. Most, if not all, moments of improvisational opportunity necessitate a decision being made. Exciting things happen once they *decide* to be themselves and figure out which musical tensions mean the most to them. Often this is as straightforward as letting the student know, through experience and example, the range of possibilities that can be implemented. But there is a diminishing return to this range of possibilities, as outlined by psychologist Barry Schwartz:

As the number of available choices increases...the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having a multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might be even be said to tyrannize (Schwartz 2004, 33).

Perceptual agency is the idea that what we hear in a particular performance depends in part on where we focus our attention (Monson 2008, 37). Focusing listening on different part of the ensemble, in other words, yields different experience of the music. This practice of shifting one’s focus of attention is something that not only enriches the listening experience for audiences, but is an integral aural skill for improvising musicians, who must be able to locate

themselves temporally and spatially and with respect to rhythm, harmony, melody, and the calls and responses of the other members of the band. The better one knows the tune, the less conscious attention needs to be focused on its structural basics, and the more attention can be freed up for taking improvisational risks and aurally scanning other parts of the band for moments of improvisational opportunity. Perceptual agency as embodied practice is an aural skill central to improvisors in many genres, especially jazz.

Freeing the mind from a pessimistic view of error becomes very important, for if one is concentrating on the right or wrong gesture, one is not concentrating on the musical moment. This is in essence, the politics of error. In temporally based artforms like jazz, the time and concentration spent of evaluating the rightness or wrongness of a gesture could be best spent staying attuned to the musical action. For instance, Ty Cobb holds the record for the highest career batting average in baseball at .366. As impressive as this is, bear in mind that approximately seven out of ten of Cobb's at-bats were ostensibly failures, a fact that few dwell on. Like improvisation, the value of a strong hitter in baseball emerges over time and is based on accumulated experience rather than a single performance. This is an optimistic view of error, a viewpoint I inculcate with improvisation students in laboratory settings/workshops, using the exercises in Chapter Two.

## 1.4 Preparing For The Immediate

It may be that opponents and supporters of improvisation are defined by their attitude towards the fact that improvisation embraces, even celebrates, music's essentially ephemeral nature. For many of the people involved in it, one of the enduring attractions of improvisation is its momentary existence: the absence of a residual document. (Bailey 1992, 35).

This paper examines improvisation in small-group jazz music (i.e. three to four horns plus rhythm section) that is fundamentally improvised with all players improvising at the same time. This music uses predominantly uses predetermined forms (i.e. standards and song forms) and variable harmonies. The pervasive, yet ephemeral, nature of improvisation poses some difficulty in attempting to define what it is, or even if it can be an “it.” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (1981) equally describes a “hastily improvised supper, a Canadian government report about of a team of surveyors being housed in improvised and obviously uncomfortable quarters, and a fisherman who had forgotten his equipment improvising a hook and line.” Sorrell states that “the word ‘improvisation’ itself poses all kinds of problems, not only because of its extensive and vague applications to music, but also because of its usage in everyday speech, conveying something that is insufficiently prepared and of no lasting value” (Sorrell 1992). American architect Richard Meier takes even more umbrage with the term: “Improvisation, I wish never to hear that word again. When you build a building, you determine the parameters, you work out the values, you get them right, and then, when things change, you pull the building down, and you start again (Wolhiem 2003).

I agree with Bruno Nettle (2009) and his bold assertion that, due to its pervasiveness, “we probably never should have started calling it ‘improvisation’.” Any attempt to define improvisation is equally an attempt to draw a line in the sand between composition and interpretation. If, as in so much Western art music, the musical parameters are defined prior to performance (i.e. written on a score) and then subsequent performance(s) deviate from those predefined instructions, that performance still “exists” at the aforementioned intersection between intent and circumstance. To that end, defining improvisation inevitably leads to considerations of where does improvisation begin and where does improvisation end; or critically when I ‘improvise’, on what basis is my playing merely an iteration of the learned

patterns indicative of the particular musical style and on what basis am I generating spontaneous utterances? (Boyle 2002). For instance, two successive performances of the same Chopin nocturne by the same pianist would feature subtle differences in dynamics, tempo, articulation, and other parameters of music, unless performed by a robot. Even consecutive performances by a robot pianist would likely elicit a different response in the listener, making it appear different. Humans are generally not skilled at doing things exactly the same way twice, which is likely why we are so intrigued by those who go against this norm (e.g. perfect games in baseball and bowling, high batting averages, winning streaks, savants etc.). The next time you use a crosswalk in a large city, consider the spontaneous bob-and-weave choreography of everyone coming towards you. The private, exacting, and unconscious micro-managing of each step is indelibly connected to the decisions and actions of those around you, just as your steps influence the range of choices available everyone else. No crosswalk experience will ever be the same, despite the feeling of relative normalcy. This sensation pervades many everyday occurrences and is duly shared during improvised musical experiences in several genres.

Improvisors working within a style-specific idiom learn to ground themselves in the relevant syntax and lexicographic conventions of the tradition. In Karnatak music, improvising musicians are part of the *gurukala* (master-pupil) system of apprenticeship. Through extensive training in close quarters with their teachers, students rigorously practice *ragas* and *talas* within and outside of compositional contexts. They learn the associated *gamakas* (ornaments) and other devices indicative of the *raga*, to articulate the given *bhava* (feeling), as they arise in specific improvisational forms like *alapana* and *svara kalpana* (Nettl 2002).

In playing over harmonic changes in a bebop context, a professional jazz player often acknowledges or is at least aware of the major developments that have occurred in the past

century of jazz writ large. There is a template of patterns, phrases and motifs players can integrate into their own playing. Perhaps it is more accurately described as a “meta-template” in that it originally existed aurally and transmitted through a less formalized apprenticeship system than the *gurukula*. Most importantly, use of this template should serve the musical moment and not exist as an end unto itself. Brownell states that “what distinguishes a master improviser from a merely competent one, is the ability to sound spontaneous, even when “change-running”” (Brownell 1994). In other words, the above professional jazz player can easily distinguish someone who is playing in the moment and one who is just “working their stuff out” (Berliner 1994).

If we correlate bebop with the Persian *radif*, there are several intriguing similarities. Like the early masters of bebop, the masters of *radif* were not always forthcoming with educational inspiration (Nettl 1974). The individuality of the artist was paramount, and transmitting that information to a student in both genres (in earlier times) was suspect. Students were expected to persevere in disarray in order to succeed. Musically, we can equate a complete *radif* and its respective *dastgahs* with the fake book or Charlie Parker Omnibook and the expected conventions that accompany their respective performance.<sup>5</sup> A student of the *radif* will learn the individual *gushes* (flexible melodies) and, remaining cognizant of its peculiarities, articulate these nuances as deemed acceptable by the master. Imprinting ones own personality can only occur after a deep understanding of the music. Reordering of clichéd phrases is imperative to achieve mastery (Nettl 1978). This is an aspect similar to the ‘paying of dues’ in bebop, in that

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<sup>5</sup> A fake book is a compendium of standard jazz melodies with chord progressions. The Omnibook is a compendium of important compositions by Charlie Parker, along with detailed solo transcriptions.

students familiarize themselves with the repertoire and vocabulary of clichés to the point where that they are able to develop their own interpretations.

Students of the *radif* are taught to remain stylistically idiomatic while simultaneously offering personal musical inflections during performance. In addition, the melodies of Persian art music are rhythmically dependent and related to the meter of poetry. Most master bebop musicians will similarly acknowledge the integral nature of a lyric, often speaking of singing the words of songs “through the instrument” or playing as if singing (Berliner 1994). The latter is also true considering jazz music without text (e.g. scat singing, or casual use of non-semantically meaning vocables to articulate a melodic or rhythmic line). Whether or not it is a prescribed rule of the bebop genre, players often talk of being able to vocalize through the instrument (ibid.).

All three of these examples are representative forms of *idiomatic improvisation* in that the rules are well-defined, whether or not they are written down, and that within the rules the “requirements and limits of improvisation are generally accepted and understood by virtually all performers and listeners in that idiom” (Cahn 2005). These limits and conventions will change over time, nevertheless “any improvisation that is not within generally prescribed boundaries will be recognized immediately as such by listeners familiar with that idiom” (Cahn 2005). This definition creates some tension with the concept of interpretation, for if one performs either from a score or within the relative confines of idiomatic improvisation as stated above, the notions of freedom, individuality, and conviction remain paramount. The consistency with which an improviser can simultaneously route attention alongside and away from the obligations of style is an aesthetic that transcends the norms of many improvised performing arts including the aforementioned examples. In my experience, one of the main obstacles students of improvised music face, regardless of genre, is in the liminal space that is created from the supposed

overwhelming amount of information that must be processed prior to contributing a meaningful interpretation. Students exist uncomfortably at a threshold that is neither inside nor outside the tradition, a state that is ironically shared with those master improvisors who learn the rules only to purposely forget them.

Percussionist Bill Cahn has succeeded in creating a pedagogy that specifically deals with the cultivation of individuality through interactivity in *non-idiomatic improvisation*. In one of the very few books that could be considered a cogent and practical manual for free form improvisation, Cahn presents the following definition of *non-idiomatic improvisation* in *Creative Music Making* (2005):

In non-idiomatic improvisation there are no limits or parameters for the musical material that can be included. By definition, there are no general rules or constraints of style. Each individual performer is completely free to play music using whatever rules he or she wants to use, with the understanding that such rules apply only to that individual and not to any of the other players. Free-form improvisation is the most widely open accessible type of improvisation for musicians. In this kind of music virtually all of the musical elements are subject to the performer's real-time selection. The only structural limitations (in length, motifs, etc.) are those self-imposed by each performer. In its purest form the performers are complete free to play whatever they wish, with virtually no external restrictions imposed. The performers are only limited by their own abilities to produce sounds on their instruments, and by their abilities to draw with imagination upon the musical ideas that they have internalized through past listening and performance experiences, regardless of the type of music.

Portions of this description are very challenging. For instance, can any type of improvising be truly deemed non-idiomatic? Even in non-idiomatic (or free form) improvisation, improvisors still sound like *themselves* and use gestures that are personalized. Boundary pushing performers such as Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Anthony Braxton, and John Zorn still utilize a “cookbook” of licks and formulaic patterns – the “pseudo-individualized” template implied by Adorno (1941) that sustains identifiable and personal approaches in improvised settings.



Cahn asserts that non-idiomatic improvisation “emphasizes the process of musical communication among the performers, while musical form and structure – critical elements in idiomatic improvisation and music composition – diminish in importance” (2005). This runs contrary to the opinion of John Cage who asserts “you can’t improvise structure, but only form, material and method” (Cage 1981). Indeed, the signifying material in non-idiomatic improvisation can be difficult to discern, particularly for beginners. How does one know what to listen for? Students often lack the confidence to improvise in any style, particularly a style that is supposedly non-idiomatic, one in which creative choice may be exercised in any musical parameter and where freely expressive gesture may sound disorientating and foreign. Literally, the amount of freedom available is the most constraining attribute.

Baker (2003) comes much closer to what I consider to be an ideal means of educating improvisors when he discusses the use of *fixed parameters* (form, meter, and harmonic structure) and *flexible parameters* (articulation, dynamics, vibrato and rhythm), which is similar to *centonization*, or the composition by the synthesis of pre-existing elements (Chew 1980). This aesthetic is evident in the improvisatory lyrical repertoire in blues singers or people who memorize epic poetry when he states “instead of a mere substitution system, a blues singer possesses a generating system, a variety of formulaic and non-formulaic word groups which carry a variety of rhythmic combinations that may be accommodated to a given tune” (Titon 1977). Along similar lines, and contrary to the opinion of many outsiders, jazz musicians rarely if ever completely invent brand new utterances, rather they generate performances based on “collective memory composition” (Berliner 1994). In order to accomplish that, one creates a body of memory for oneself. Jazz educators, by and large and for better and worse, are able fill the memories of their students with memories of the bebop language.

The exercises in the next chapter have a disjazz focus, however, as I will show, they can be used in a variety of musical settings. Most importantly, these exercises represent the *jazz process* articulated by Evans – the idea of creating a somewhat spontaneous, living music in the course of performance with others who live by the same code. They are purposefully designed to be malleable and call upon the students' relationship to the parameters of music (the same parameters used in most Western art music) at the expense of detailed, style specific knowledge or experience. I will also show in the following chapters that group interactivity could be integrated into the current jazz curriculum without derailing current common practices.

Traditional notions of soloists (leader) and accompanists (support) do not accurately reflect jazz in practice. The intrepid pioneers of the second great Miles Davis quintet completely changed and reinvigorated the integral relationship between soloist and accompanist to the extreme. As fresh as that music sounds today, it must be acknowledged that it was made over forty years ago. The main point that is often lost in teaching improvisation is this: when improvisation is occurring, everyone is doing it. In music, as in the crosswalk example, individual decisions reciprocally influence all participants. In this excerpt, Christopher Small points toward this participatory dynamic that gets to the heart of my own model of improvisation:

When we perform, we bring into existence, for the duration of the performance, a set of relationships, between the sounds and between the participants, that model ideal relationships as we imagine them to be and allow us to learn about them by experiencing them. The modeling is reciprocal...in exploring we learn, from the sounds and from one another, the nature of the relationships; in affirming we teach one another about the relationships; and in celebrating we bring together the teaching and the learning in an act of social solidarity (Small 1998).

The model for improvisation created in my current investigation embodies the principals of democracy in that it promotes the values of collaboration, compromise, and acceptance (Borgo 2005). In democracies, one cannot achieve everything one desires all of the time (i.e. at no time is any participant in complete control of the proceedings). Things are always in flux. The standard operating procedure in some post-secondary jazz curricula, including the aforementioned evaluation based on the canon of learning scales, chords, patterns, and genre-specific repertoire, obviates what I believe to be the single most critical, albeit paradoxical, component of the music: to provoke and promote individuality within a co-operative framework.

Extending from Cahn's conception of non-idiomatic improvisation, the model I employ similarly devalues notions of right and wrong and outwardly promotes decision-making. When using this model, students cultivate a personal relationship with musical tensions that mean the most to them. These tensions are derived from the large-scale parameters of sound outlined by Jan LaRue (1992). Students could become intrinsically aware of the importance of creative decisions in improvisation, and critically engage what they already know, by removing the need to play within the jazz genre, and instead create limits using the fundamental parameters of music. According to Larue, when musicians engage a work, or when anyone at all is listening to music with a critical ear, there are five elements of style that are worth considering. They are SOUND, HARMONY, MELODY, RHYTHM, and GROWTH, abbreviated as S.H.M.R.G.<sup>6</sup> In my experience, music succeeds or fails on the strength of its ability to engage, that is, to provide new opportunities to think about, through, and into sound. Young professionals thrive in situations where they can cultivate both an awareness of the array of artistic choices available to them, and in turn, affect a unique and direct relationship within the content of the music and

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<sup>6</sup> Form is a critical concept as well. I feel it falls under the banner of Growth (i.e. how a piece takes/sustains shape).

between their music and the human condition. As a facilitator in improvisation workshops, I believe my role is to create and sustain such environments while educating a student's latent musical and extra-musical abilities.

The philosophy behind this method of teaching is deeply informed by the method of phenomenology, which proposes that a student's social identity is not static, rather it is constantly formed and re-formed through relationships with other people, their chosen discipline, and the wider world. This social identity is not given: it represents an accumulation of choices. I believe the same can be said of one's musical identity, in that people hear music *in time* as well as *across time* (Monson 2008). People listen and perform in relation to all the music they have heard before, recognizing the similarities, differences, stylistic elements, allusions, and surprises that contextualize their hearing/performing in the moment. When one hears non-idiomatic improvisation, especially for the first time, the disconnection from these standard, quantifiable parameters can create tension and confusion (Cahn 2005). It is perhaps the single greatest contributing factor to the mystery surrounding this discipline. Often it is difficult, for both performer and audience, to immediately ascertain what is right or not. The perceived and misunderstood absence of quantifiable musical elements necessitates an altogether different approach to listening.

## Chapter 2: Exploring the Exercises

### 2.1 Distinguishing Practice and Performance

There is a distinction between improvisation in *practice* and improvisation in *performance*. Fundamentally, the practice of improvisation is a process in which one takes an inventory of what one can hear and execute effortlessly on an instrument for use in improvised performance. Consider the fact that you are reading this sentence without concentrating on each individual letter. If one wished to engage a more technical or florid style of reading (or writing) then some preparation (i.e. practice) may be necessary. These musical exercises are germane to this spirit of practice. They prepare students to navigate potentially uncharted musical terrain away from the bandstand. John Wyre states “we learn to improvise by doing” (Wyre 2002). The exercises are closed systems in which distinct musical relationships can be created, acknowledged, and altered in performance. For instance, it does not particularly matter if a player in Shared Quarters misses the occasional pause (see below for description, Exercise 2.3). What is more important is the cultivation of *perceptual agency*, the ability to hear in and across time, so that the journey to the next pause note is filled with heightened awareness (Monson 2008, 37). As the student becomes familiar with the manipulation of musical parameters in the exercises, weaving the material into their personal musical lexicon, these exercises can serve and perhaps even inspire aspects of performance in the moment. Until then they are for practice, or what Werner calls “the preparation of presence” (Werner 2005). They are analogous to “corners” a player can “paint themselves into” in order to work their way out. David Sudnow (1993) lovingly describes his discovery that music appeared to happen automatically once he focused

away from the minute technical details of piano playing as well as the stylistic and aesthetic conventions. This is *performance*.

As stated in Chapter One, these exercises relate to the practice of jazz improvisation. But what does that mean? Jazz is a malleable music that historically fused many genres (Berliner 1996). For the most part, these exercises relate improvising in time, using changes and ultimately their byproduct when united, time and changes, as defined by Hal Crook (1991, 24). Time and changes are used in a variety of settings that still can be clearly identified as jazz music.

TIME - Improvising (i.e. soloing or comping) in time means playing at a specific tempo *and* in a specific meter (time signature). When playing in the context of form, typically the tempo and the meter (time) of the music are pre-determined and fixed (i.e. not changeable by the players).

CHANGES - Improvising on changes mean playing melodies (or chord voicings) that identify or agree with a progression of changing chords (i.e. changes), usually played in time, where each chord has a specific placement and duration called the *harmonic rhythm*. However, improvising on changes can also mean playing for a long or indefinite duration on a *single* chord. When playing in the context of form, typically the chords and the harmonic rhythm (the changes) of the music are pre-determined and fixed (i.e. not fundamentally changeable by the players). Since time and changes style improvising involves shaping correct notes and rhythms into appealing melody lines *but without including extreme contrast within the melodic line* – it is considered to be the more basic approach to improvising and therefore the primary style learned by all players.

TIME AND CHANGES - The phrase time and changes has two different but related meanings.

They are:

1. A musical context in which the tempo and the meter and the chords of the music (i.e. the time and the changes) are predetermined and fixed, as in song form; and also
2. A style of improvising in which the rhythms fit the tempo and the meter (time), and the melodies and chord voicings for the chords (changes), but there is no extended *imitation* (motive development) or extended *contrast* (through-composed material). Brief imitation and moderate contrast, however, may occur in *time and changes* style improvising.

The following exercises are designed to increase focus, awareness and empathy among improvising musicians.

## 2.2 One Minute

### **Description**

All participants close their eyes and keep them closed for as long as they think it takes for a minute to pass. A class leader/facilitator acts as official timekeeper and does not participate. When a participant thinks a full minute has passed, s/he opens their eyes and observes the varied interpretations of a minute from fellow students. It is critical these observations are done quietly so as to not disturb the other participants.

### **Objectives**

First, his exercise also allows for relaxation at the beginning of a workshop session. Resting for approximately one minute clears the mind before going through a rather rigorous workout of attention shifting. This is the launching pad for the rest of the exercises, which are attached to an approximate, pre-determined amount of time.

Second, this exercise generates awareness of the amount of space and time available to participants. In terms of filling space with music, a minute is an exceedingly long time. It works well at the beginning of a workshop. By saying “let’s play for one minute” or “let’s keep this around thirty seconds” the class entrains into a solid pace. It allows for time for discussion after each exercise and ensures that students aren’t overtaxing themselves. The results are often very similar in each class this exercise is attempted. About 40% of people open their eyes after about thirty to forty seconds, and 40% open their eyes between fifty to seventy seconds. But the last 20% of most participants are very often those who are concentrating well into the two-minute range and beyond.

Third, this exercise sets the stage for a reframing of error. There is no right or wrong here, nor is there even a better or best. Through observation of their own use of time and those around them, a student becomes aware of *approximately* how long a minute is.

Fourth and finally, there really is no silence. In the same vein as John Cage’s 4’33”, there will be innumerable sounds in the room during this exercise. In using this exercise with the same people in subsequent classes, students can be directed to be aware of the sounds in the room while simultaneously quantifying a minute of time.

### **Variation 1: Notes-Per-Breath**

Begin by playing a single pitch for one whole breath. Then play two different pitches for the second breath, then three for the third etc. Continue playing until you forget the precise number of pitches to be played, or the number breaths you’ve taken. This exercise, like the minute exercise, is designed to show the student just how much information can be contained in one breath.



### **Variation 2: Clock with second hand**

In a room with a large clock with a second hand, improvise openly by switching musical attitudes from fast to slow every ten seconds, with a predetermined total duration, and switching attitudes from silence to sound every few seconds. Eventually, this exercise should be repeated without using the clock but with a general pre-conception of how long to sustain a particular attitude. A further variation involves selecting a form (e.g. rhythm changes) and switch attitudes according to the clock, but strictly adhere to the form. This is a good way to drastically upset tendencies to play four and eight bar phrases.

## **2.3 Shared Quarters**

### **Description**

Two players predetermine a scale (e.g. F# pentatonic) and a desired interval (e.g. major seconds). Playing together in time without using a metronome, they improvise strict quarter notes and pause for one beat whenever they happen to land on the desired interval.

### **Objectives**

This exercise cultivates aural awareness (harmonic, melodic and rhythmic). Starting small (i.e. maximum five pitches in play) and slow is critical. If all twelve pitches are in play, or if the tempo is too fast, this exercise can be very involved. A good deal of time can pass before the goal interval is reached, and too quick a tempo can make finding “the shared quarter” difficult. The most effective way to begin this exercise is with a fixed pitch set and two like-sounding instruments (i.e. all black keys on two pianos). If too many shared quarters are missed, the facilitator could interject during the exercise to reinforce the objective or recalibrate the

tempo. As players get more familiar and fluent, they could agree to pause every time they land on thirds but NOT sixths, or unisons but NOT octaves etc.

### **Variation 1: Shared Quarters ‘After Hours’**

This exercise is useful to do in the dark or with eyes closed to avoid eye contact or other gestural recognition of being on the same note.

### **Variation 2: Shared Quarters ‘Plus One’**

To increase the degree of difficulty, a third player can improvise over two players engaging in Shared Quarters. This third player may or may not use the same pitch set as the other two.

## **2.4 Endings**

### **Description**

Two players improvise and stop at the first potential ending. The intent is to “jump out” of the first window of opportunity created.

### **Objectives**

Learning how to hear and create endings is as important as any other part of improvising because something has to end in order for something else to begin. This is true for every part of music, whether it is a sound, a phrase, a part of an improvisation, or an entire performance.

Everyday life is replete with beginnings and endings to the point that they are hard to discern. In

this exercise, players experience sustained willingness to commit to the end at any time players have to by being aware of potential endings as soon as they occur. Within one 30 second improvisation, there could be twenty or more individual pieces. One is consistently negotiating the decisions of the other to find a mutual acceptance of conclusion. This activity cultivates empathy. Gradually, the instructor can encourage players to extend the improvisations further and aim for a cogent, mutual conclusion without it being the first available ending.

After an improvisation is over, the group discusses what happened. Players and listeners identify prominent relationships and discuss choices that were made during the course of the improvisation. The most important thing is to identify and name a relationship that occurred, even if the players themselves were unsure or unclear about them. If there is awkward silence upon asking ‘what musical relationships just occurred?’ as is sometimes the case with younger participants, consider the following questions to stimulate discussion.

- Did it feel like you were playing with or against each other?
- When did it feel like things were working/not working?
- What was the most interesting/least interesting section?
- Did the ending feel like it was the first possible ending? If no, why not?
- Who was leading, following or accompanying the action? (See 2.6)

Any of the relationships that are discussed can be the subject of a further duet improvisation. This is an excellent early exercise in that it gets students to think critically about their choices using a clear set of parameters. As with most of these early exercises, one can add another layer to this by incorporating a rule about pitch and a rule about rhythm (i.e. the same exercise but this time using only notes of a D major scale or only playing staccato).

## 2.5 Find-A-Note

### **Description**

Two players improvise freely until they share an awareness they are on the same note and then hold it and release together. The “goal-note” is not pre-determined.

### **Objectives**

As with Windows exercise, specifying content is straightforward, thus attention is easily directed and focused. For beginners, and even intermediate players, a limited pitch set or specified range is helpful (e.g pentatonic, Lydian etc) however this exercise works with or without fixed parameters. This exercise can be played over a familiar form at tempo (e.g. blues, rhythm changes) or freely.

The purpose of this exercise is to enhance aural skills and empathy. It is easy to concentrate on establishing a close relationship between players. Practicing these exercises in duets is important. It is easier to relate to one person than with a larger group and easier to hear and follow the threads of the musical conversation. Those facts alone help stimulate class discussion afterward. The duet is a microcosm of the entire improvisatory experience, where the simplicity of two voices can be used to hear and understand many concepts most easily.

### **Variation 1: Multi-Movement**

When players land on the same note and then release, this can act as the end of one movement and the beginning of a new one.

## 2.6 Lead, Follow & Accompany (L.F.A.)

### Description

Two or more players improvise while taking on a role of either leading, following, or accompanying the musical action. Roles can be switched freely at anytime during performance without any gestural cues from the players.

### Objectives

This exercise simultaneously encourages awareness of and responsibility for musical actions. It focuses on the ability to act easily and fluidly according to the musical demands of the moment while deemphasizing musical specifics. Predetermined parameters can be implemented (i.e. pitch set, form) over which the *mindset* of L.F.A. is laid. After the exercise students discuss when/if each player felt part of one of the roles.

The primary interest in this exercise is how versatile it is. It can be applied to any form. A duet could play multiple choruses of a blues in F using L.F.A. This exercise bears particular interest to rhythm sections. A bassist and drummer who are playing in time over changes can engage in L.F.A. to create interesting layers of sound. Rhythm sections who practice this type of playing also isolate participatory discrepancies (Keil and Feld 2005).

In the course of performance, it doesn't matter if Player 1 thinks s/he is accompanying when Player 2 thinks s/he is following. Rather, it is a way of orienting oneself, creating a space for cogent musical decision making. Many students know *what* to play but struggle with *how* to play it. When students ask me 'what am I thinking about when I improvise?' my answers often relate

to leadership. Sometimes I lead from behind (i.e. accompany or follow the leader as a means of supporting the overall framework of the moment) and sometimes I assert my leadership more directly. In the next chapter, there will be extended discussion of this integral exercise.

## 2.7 Group Ostinato

### **Description**

Ed Sarath defines an ostinato as “an idea that is repeated exactly several times (many ostinati are repeated extensively). Ostinato bass lines are perhaps the most common form of ostinato, although any line in any gesture played by any instrument can be an ostinato” (Sarath 2010: 7). One player begins by playing an ostinato that is easily repeatable and sustainable (i.e. something not so complicated or physically taxing so it might be comfortably ‘under the fingers’). A second player listens carefully to the first player, and then layers another ostinato against the first. Subtle changes will probably occur at this point as the phrases “lock in” with each other. Then third and/or subsequent players add ostinati until all players are playing a groove together.

### **Objectives**

In the context of a workshop or course, this is an appropriate exercise to move towards a larger group dynamic and away from duets. Once everyone is playing, the first person drops out, listens, then comes in with a different ostinato part. Do this in sequence until all have changed and a different ostinato groove is happening. This can be repeated *ad infinitum*. It's fascinating how the subtraction or addition of one part changes the groove. Playing an ostinato, especially

for monophonic and/or non-rhythm section players is an excellent way to cultivate a relationship to time in an ensemble. Too often, single line players rely too much on the rhythm section to imply the time.

### **Variation 1: In time**

The exercise can be repeated with everyone starting at the same time playing to an agreed upon tempo or pre-existing song form. Once the groove is locked in, designated by the instructor, any player can alter their ostinato. Practice this until you can lock into a groove immediately, and change grooves spontaneously.

### **Variation 2: Split group**

The group can be divided in half. The first group spontaneously creates a groove that has to be remembered. Once the groove is established, the instructor cuts off the group. Then the second group creates a different groove. These are the “base” grooves for the exercise. On cue, the groups go back and forth between the two grooves. Restrict the students to certain of: articulation, dynamics, harmonic references (play on a scale/scales, chord/chords, in a key/keys, over a simple harmonic pattern, form (ABA, AABA, ABAC, cued codas). Ideally, both groups would be able to recall and perform each others groove. This may entail some drastic instrumental techniques depending on the varied instrumentation (i.e. basslines on flute, percussive sounds on trombone).

### **Variation 3: Dominoes**

Dominoes is an exercise in listening to one other person in the ensemble. Moving clockwise or counterclockwise around the circle, each player improvises one short phrase gesture

in sequence, one after another. The idea is to duplicate every aspect of the sound as closely as possible, regardless of the differences in the instrument, similar to Variation 2.

## 2.8 Time, No Changes

### Description

A rhythm section plays in a mutually agreed tempo, keeping time but disregarding any sort of discernable harmonic changes. Soloists take turns improvising over/with this texture.

### Objectives

Crook (1991: 27) identifies several of the most common textures jazz rhythm sections use when playing in time that help define the parameters for this exercise:

- Time in 4 (also called ‘walking bass’ or ‘walking’) – means to play one attack on each downbeat of each measure in 4/4 meter (i.e. to play consecutive downbeat quarter notes) thus giving the time a steady, energetic quality.
- Time in 2 (also called ‘half time’) – means to play one attack on the first downbeat and on attack on the third downbeat of each measure in 4/4 meter (i.e. to play consecutive downbeat half notes), thus giving the time a steady but relaxed quality.
- Broken time means to play rhythmic attacks that obscure the meter (time signature) of the music to varying degree while rhythmically fitting the tempo (i.e. to play random or inconsistent downbeat and/or upbeat attacks throughout), thus giving the time an unsteady or undefined quality.
- Double time means to play the tempo at twice its original speed (i.e. to mark the time by playing consecutive ‘even’ 8<sup>th</sup> notes, making 4/4 meter sound like 8/8, and ¾ sound like 6/8).



Cultivating a multifaceted approach to time, within and without the rhythm section, is critical in order to create significant tension and release. The above textures are extremely constitute common practice over forms with predetermined chord progressions. They can also be implemented in an open space free of harmonic restriction. Ornette Coleman's early quartets epitomize this type of playing. *Sightseeing* from Weather Report's 1977 album *8:30* is another example of time-no-changes. Such playing inspires the abandonment of stylistic clichés and habitual patterns *without* precluding them. For example, to improvise atonally is effectively impossible. Key centres are constantly being generated and rejected. Kenny Werner states that in time-no-changes, "if you fall into harmonic alignment for awhile, let it happen. When you fall out, let that happen. Don't inhibit yourself in any way. Just allow yourself to swing effortlessly throughout this piece" (Werner 2002:16). In time-no-changes, the player is invited to deal with time related practice at the expense of harmonic, and often in so doing, more interesting harmonic relationships are generated.

## 2.9 Benjamin Riffs

### **Description**

See attached score. There are two types of cues a player must be aware of. One is a written Page Cue indicating from which page the next cue will be coming from. In this simplified version, two pages are in use however more or less pages may be implemented. Once a Page Cue is given, a player uses an Intervallic Cue that corresponds to a written riff. Again, in this simplified version there is no distinction between major or minor seconds. Either interval

would indicate Riff #2, depending on which Page Cue. In between Riffs, players improvise freely.

## **Objectives**

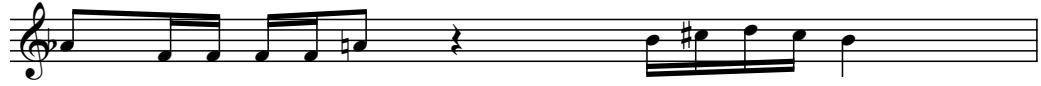
This is a very challenging exercise even for advanced players. It is inspired by the work of Los Angeles keyboardist Adam Benjamin who has ingeniously created a vocabulary of over 50 semantically meaningful musical phrases for his quartet *Kneebody*. For example, *Kneebody* can play short signals in the course of an improvisation from one player to another that mean “modulate down a perfect fifth.” While there is no similar quasi-semantic meaning evident in this particular exercise, there is a framework generated in which a clear direction can be articulated, acknowledged and acted upon. In this version, players use simple Intervallic Cues to indicate which Riff is to be played in tandem (i.e. P4 or P5 = Riff #4). This is admittedly quite limiting, but based on experience it is challenging enough to stimulate even the most advanced improviser. Obviously, both the cues and the phrases can be made as simple or as complex as possible. Nothing was predetermined. Getting students to actually compose a piece like this is effective in that they can create a framework of musical elements that mean something to them. Notation does have a place in improvised music, but only if it serves the ear. At the extreme end, this exercise could be memorized and played by as many as musicians as possible.

C

# Benjamin Riffs

Patrick Boyle 2010

1st page signal



1. octave



2. seconds



3. thirds



4. fourths and fifths

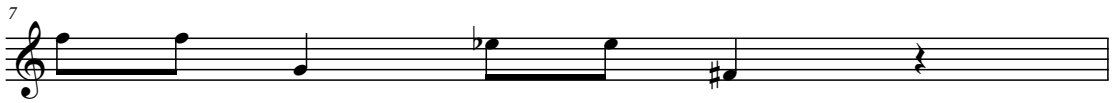


5. sixths and sevenths



## Benjamin Riffs p. 2 of 2

2nd page signal



6. octave



7. seconds



8. thirds



9. fourths and fifths



10. sixths and sevenths



## Chapter Three: Responding to Error in Practice and Performance

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings (Spolin 1963: 4).

Over the past two years, I have presented these musical exercises in numerous workshop settings. In total, twenty-six individual workshops, each approximately ninety minutes, were conducted in St. John's, NL, Toronto ON, and Victoria, B.C. during this two year period. I have worked with advanced students fluent in the *syntactic parameters* (harmony, melody, and rhythm) within the style of jazz music as well as novice and aspiring jazz improvisors. As well, I have worked in groups with classical musicians with self-professed limited improvising experience alongside accomplished contemporary improvisers who operate outside the jazz field. Groups were small in size (six to ten participants), however several workshops were conducted in large classes (twenty-five to thirty participants). These larger formations were broken down into smaller groups.

The key to understanding the rationale behind these exercises is that they deemphasize, but do not completely ignore, the syntactic parameters of music and instead emphasize the *non-syntactic parameters* which include dynamics (i.e. volume), density (i.e. amount of note activity – from highly sparse to highly dense – in a given passage), tessitura (i.e. high and low range) duration, timbre and silence (Sarath 2009, Meyer 1956).

In this chapter, I submit feedback from these workshops, pointing out what worked out well, what might be improved upon, and a sampling of insights from participants. There is no

way of isolating a select group of students who have never *entirely* considered non-syntactic parameters when improvising. Rather, it is an initial exploration into incorporating, in a most practical and straightforward manner, more convincing interplay and purposeful interaction into foundational improvisation studies. These musical exercises could be a salient contribution to a more inclusionary approach to teaching jazz improvisation.

The ‘real difficulty’ in improvising jazz music as outlined below is of primary concern to the present investigation:

Such rewarding interplay depends in the first place upon the improviser’s keen aural skills and ability to grasp instantly the other’s musical ideas. In a sense, these talents represent the culmination of years of rigorous training begun in students’ initial efforts to acquire a jazz vocabulary. In this effort, serious attention goes into copying recorded solos by diverse instrumentalists and practicing translating to their own instrument’s idiomatic language, patterns performed outside its range or obscured by alien timbres and techniques. Ultimately, students must learn to exercise these sensibilities proficiently in performance, as they concentrate simultaneously on their own parts. It requires, in effect, “dividing your senses.” That is the real difficulty (Berliner 1994: 362).

Dividing of the senses, directing and redirecting attention, situating oneself within the musical moment and anticipating the next – these are aspects of the improvised experience that manifest when considering these exercises. This type of musical *sympatico*, or “coordination under the duress of time” is not readily translatable into workbooks or easily synthesized into a pre-existing model of teaching improvisation (Marsalis 2005: xiv). It is significant that, in different situations and with great frequency, several players expressed surprise to me when confronted with the use of non-syntactic elements.

I have organized the responses into two categories of understanding they most often represent: listening and interaction, and freedom and error. Regarding the latter, many participant responses cited liberation, openness, freedom and a newfound acceptance of error as residual gains for having practiced these exercises. Regarding the former, listening and interaction go

hand-in-hand. Listening to one another, in musical or conversational action, generates the mutuality of improvised conduct.

### 3.1 Listening and Interaction

A pioneer in the field of improvisational theatre, Viola Spolin's (1906-94) original approach to training actors is colloquially known as 'theatre games'. Her work greatly influenced well-known professional theatrical improvising groups including The Groundlings (Los Angeles) and Second City (Chicago and Toronto). At the core of her philosophy is a set of exercises with straightforward directions that establish direct connections between actors within the spontaneously generated setting at hand. The interplay in small group jazz improvisation shares much with improvisational theatre and Spolin's teachings, and it is in this spirit that the musical exercises in the previous chapter were realized. For example, if two actors are spontaneously creating a scene about preparing a meal, then the meal, or kitchen, or restaurant, or whatever space the actors formulate is called the Point of Concentration or P.O.C. (Spolin 1963: 23). To Spolin, "just as the jazz musician creates a personal discipline by staying with the beat while playing with other musicians, so the control in the focus provides the theme and unblocks the student to act upon each crisis as it arrives. As the student need work only on his P.O.C., it permits him to direct his full sensory equipment on a single problem so he is not befuddled with more than one thing at a time while actually he is doing many (Spolin 1963:23).

Spolin's exercises, in particular the use of Point of Concentration, encourage awareness of the present moment and acceptance of the actions of others, In a similar manner, the preceding straightforward musical exercises are designed for jazz musicians to adapt to the immediate: to integrate 'what one plays' into the 'what others are playing' around a central idea and thus create

a true group relationship. To Spolin “a healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution. If one person dominates, the other members have little growth or pleasure in the activity; a true group relationship does not exist” (Spolin 1963: 9).

Spolin states that the “games emerged out of necessity...I didn't sit at home and dream them up. When I had a problem [directing], I made up a game. When another problem came up, I just made up a new game” (Spolin 1963). Like Spolin’s games, the exercises in the previous chapter were created to overcome musical problems when they arise, in particular the outstanding aforementioned issue: how does one improvise new musical material with other people without being pre-occupied with difficulty of sounding ‘right’? There is much jazz improvisation can learn from improvisational theatre, and Spolin in particular. David Borgo states

In the initial training of drama students, considerable emphasis is directed towards the development of self-confidence, the loss of inhibition, and the ability to role-play. This is achieved largely through group improvisation workshops where individuals work individually and collectively. Surprisingly, improvisation in jazz studies programmes is infrequently developed through a collective process, with a preference for the development of soloing facility through the absorption and imitation of pre-existing language, usage, and style. Whilst this is regarded as important for the development of a young jazz musician, matters of self-expression, individualism, and most importantly experimentation are often left to later stages, by which time exploration of free collective playing can appear unnecessary or even redundant (Borgo 2006: 185).

Find-A-Note (See 2.4) proved to be an excellent resource for avoiding style specifics that in turn helped neutralize inhibitions. To recap, in Find-a-Note, a duet of players improvise freely and stop when they land on the same undetermined note. The musical Point of Concentration was the search for the note itself. In duet settings between wind players or singers, on occasion one player would sustain a note that would then allow the other player to find and play the same note. Such situations were notable examples of there being no right-or-wrong just better-or-best. On



the one hand, having one player ‘light the way’ for the other could be interpreted as remedial and oversimplified. On the other, such focused interactions distillate the duet experience, make the relationship more overtly clear, and music can be created within and around the Point of Concentration. Several players commented on the difficulty of this exercise. “This challenges me to listen *and* respond to what is going on, which is different than just playing what I want to play (Boyle 2011). Monson’s research on listening practices of professional jazz musicians echo this sentiment of “listening in an active sense – being able to respond to musical opportunities or to correct mistakes” (Monson 1996: 84).

This brings up the dialectic between listening and personal musical agendas in performance. There is a general consensus within the jazz community, supported by Monson (1996) and Berliner (1994) that players do not enjoy improvising with others who bring “something practiced” into a musical situation (Monson 1996: 84). Monson quotes Don Byron at length:

I hate hearing bands where like...one cat’s playing some shit that he practiced. Another cat’s playing some shit that he practiced. Everybody’s playing some stuff that they practiced...On a certain level there’s like a feeling, “Well, I like playing with you,” but I mean, what does that mean?...You know, we didn’t play s\*\*\* together. We didn’t do nothing together. I played my stuff, you played your stuff, we didn’t screw up the time (Monson 1996: 84).

Jazz improvisation is inherently social. The use of conversation as a metaphor for jazz improvisation is likely because of the implicit social conventions in performance. This critical attribute of a professional jazz musician, to acknowledge others while contributing to the whole group using original personal utterances, is difficult to teach. Skilled players talk of learning ‘on the bandstand’ which in some cases takes years (Berliner 1996:36). With no intent to hasten this storied process, the exercises in Chapter Two appear to inculcate good listening habits vis-à-vis non-musical social behaviour in jazz improvisation. For example, on repeated attempts at Find-a-

Note, some players were routinely unsatisfied with their performance. One student I worked with stated “I keep playing the same kinds of things, things that fall under my fingers. Sometimes I feel like my fingers are playing the instrument and not my ears.”<sup>7</sup> Listening, then, simultaneously extends outward (i.e. to the fellow participants and the collective sound) and inward (i.e. receiving from fellow participants).

Byron’s quote also re-enforces the experiences in this investigation regarding empathy, especially the lack of empathy and being unacknowledged by other players on stage. In Shared Quarters (See 2.3) several players expressed being let down when, upon landing on the same goal interval, they paused and their duet partner did not. One or two missed pauses seemed excusable by fellow players, but consistent disregard made participants very uneasy. “If I’m trying hard to listen to someone, I feel rejected when they don’t listen to me. It’s like sometimes other people get too caught up in their own playing to consider the rest of the band. Understand that Shared Quarters and Find-A-Note have very clear Points of Concentration. Again, they represent the *practice* of improvisation. A *performance* of jazz improvisation may contain innumerable Points of Concentration that may be very ambiguous. The aforementioned “real difficulty” is omnipresent. These exercises allow players to become familiar with their sonic vocabulary within the parameters of music first, and are then able to input and interpret within the style of jazz second.

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<sup>7</sup> Personal communication.

## 3.2 The Kaleidophonic Essence

[Jazz] music should be completely interactive with the people we're playing with. I think a lot of people are guilty of forgetting this. It was reinforced for the 24,890,234<sup>th</sup> time this year that listening is the most important part of playing, even though each time I hear it seems like it's so obvious I feel like you have to work and constantly focus in on it.<sup>8</sup>

In another case study, consider one of several poignant observations made by an intermediate trombonist after continued exposure to Lead, Follow, Accompany (See 2.5 Lead, Follow, and Accompany). “L.F.A was an eye-opener for me in many ways. One, it allowed me to actually understand how cognizant some jazz masters must be when they are performing music.”<sup>9</sup> Previously, this student (whose comment reflects the opinion of many others) was less aware of the range of possibilities available in improvisation, possibilities beyond the primarily melodic and harmonic. It was a relief to this student that s/he was not always responsible for generating the action. Indeed, this is one of the main factors students (typically younger students) mention as being revelatory. Much of jazz pedagogy shows one what to ‘do’ without attending to ‘what to do when one isn’t doing anything.’ L.F.A. promotes a shift from a mindset of constant invention to one of constant discovery. This engages improvisers to behave as composers, which in my opinion, supported by Bruce Ellis Benson (2003: 161) and Derek Bailey (1993) is key to creating meaningful musical utterances. In this case, I am using meaningful to describe how closely the performer/composer comes to their original intent and not anything to do with semantic meaning. Rather than fit within a specific style, an improviser can select from precise musical parameters, and compose within the moment. Schoenberg (1951, 116) called

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<sup>8</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication.

composition “slowed down improvisation” and to an extent these exercises do the reverse. Armed with a toolkit of familiar of sounds, improvisors “speed up” composition by “reworking material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation” (Berliner 1996: 241).

The last students’ revelation is in line with Berliner’s research regarding what happens in small group improvisation. When players exercise “their skills of immediate apprehension, [they] engage in effective musical discourse by interpreting the various preferences of other players for interaction and conveying their own preferences” (1994: 363). ‘Apprehension’ here means to come to an understanding of the situation and being cognizant of others in performance. Many other students’ eyes (or ears) were opened to this realization to “listening as a typically dynamic activity” where participants “continually adopt different perspectives on the surrounding patterns” (Berliner 1994: 362).

I tried to encapsulate that in the drawn figure in Chapter One (See 1.4: Preparing for the Immediate). The gesture I use to describe this mentality is by demarcating an imaginary circle around which members of a group are playing. For a time, I called this “the cauldron of jazz” because all members are responsible for stirring the music together. When, during an exercise such as L.F.A or Find A Note (See 2.4), players were reverting to obvious soloist and support roles, I would physically point out this imaginary space and say things such as “bring it back here” or “the music is happening *in here* not *out there*” or “can we stir it up a bit?” Berliner’s notion of ‘kaleidophonic essence’ was also helpful in instructing students along these lines:

Their constantly fluctuating powers of concentration, the extraordinary volume of detail requiring them to absorb material selectively, and developments in their own parts that

periodically demand full attention together create the kaleidophonic essence of each artist's perception of the collaborative performance (Berliner 1994: 362).

The aural field of play continuously shifts in performance, necessitating an ongoing redirection of attention. In other words, this kaleidophonic essence involves hearing as broad a range of musical elements in a collaborative improvised performance, choosing from within those hearable elements something to contribute, and finally apprehending the new sum total of those elements based on that decision. This cycle continues over and over in jazz music (Boyle 2002).

At the University of Toronto, I sat in on a second year jazz ear training class with double bassist Jim Vivian who shared some pertinent insights on hearable elements:

When you play, have a clear idea of the sound in your head. *Your* sound. What are all the things relating to timbre, melody, or harmony that comprise what you want to sound like. Then when you're playing with others, ask yourself "how close or far away am I from that sound?"<sup>10</sup>

Vivian then draws a square box in the air with fingers, indicating that the desired sound is all that which is (figuratively) within the box. A painter ought to be aware of the edges of a canvas, as well as what becomes the foreground and background of a work of art. By the same token, and building upon Vivian's comment, a jazz musician ought to be aware of the contingent structural elements in a musical action. Jazz musicians *choose* the material used in that action. To Marsalis jazz musicians "create new things, and we want to make up more, influenced by how you are affected by what we have just created. If you don't understand [what just happened within the musical action] we have a hard time" (2008: 75). That which is understood, or what becomes part of the mental conception of events is the listeners' schema (Huron 2006: 217). Schema are

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<sup>10</sup> Personal communication.

like stories in that they help make sense of a set of conditions. The information contained within schema is malleable and transferrable between musical genres (i.e. something one learns in one schema/story can be used in another). According to organizational theorist Barbara Czarniawska, “stories do not emerge out of thin air; a great deal of collective work of the kind that Wieck (1995) called *sensemaking* goes into their construction...When a new event occurs,...it is made meaningful by setting it in an existing frame, even if it may mean that the frame must be somewhat adjusted and changed” (Czarniawska 2008: 33-38, Wieck 1995). Over the course of these workshops, many student responses indicated either a hitherto unknown relationship to their own schema or a drastic increase in their ability to manipulate the musical action.

Indeed the action may involve silence, and that unto itself was an exciting challenge to students using these exercises that involved readjusting schema in some instances. For example, in Find-a-Note and Shared Quarters, conclusionary events and the creation of silence had specific contingencies attached. In Endings however (See 2.4), the Point of Concentration was also a point of finality, but this time with a more open approach. One player commented “I didn’t know how to wrap it up [the performance] so I just stopped and let my partner end it on her own.”

Similarly, many participants stated that they were previously unaware how short an improvisation could be and still be considered a piece. “How can a piece be only a second or two long?” was a common inquiry. This inquiry led to a spur-of-the-moment variation of this exercise that can easily be seen as one of the great failures of this investigation. During a session on Endings (See 2.4), some participants were, in my opinion, missing numerous opportunities to bring the improvisation to a close. The Point of Concentration involves finding, then *immediately* taking, the first possible ending. These players were not readily focused, allowing the musical

conversation to meander. Their musical contributions were laudable, however they were not performing within the spirit of the limitation. I then suggested an exercise in which they each took turns playing just one single sound for a very, very short duration (e.g. perhaps a second or two), but making it sound as though it is the ‘most important sound in the universe.’ I instructed them to not make a sound until they were sure that this was the most important sound they could possibly make. “Play it like it was the last sound you will ever make, or play it like it is the first sound someone who has never heard music before will hear”, I said. This resulted in tremendously overthought playing, peppered with nervous laughter. By forcing pressure on the players, they felt completely incapacitated. Indeed, I tried the exercise variation myself in front of the workshop group and felt incapable of playing anything close to the most important music ever made. Like them, I froze. It was a ridiculous proposition. While imposing limitations can help improvisors cultivate an individualized schema, clearly this can be taken too far. However, this was an excellent example with which to reframe error and failure, which we will uncover further in the next section. Huron states that “new schema arise in response to inductive failures. When our expectations prove wrong, the conditions are ripe for learning a new schema. Salient features in the environment (whether visual or auditory) become associated with the new inductive lessons” (Huron 2006: 217). In this case, by setting conditions that were impossible (i.e. playing the most important music ever played in the universe) then the results themselves would never ever be satisfying to the participant. Realizing this failure, I recalibrated the Endings exercise to include a very strict three-note pitch (e.g. D, D#, F) set from which the players could fashion myriad conclusionary statements.

Several times in workshops, I described jazz improvisation as existing beyond roles of soloist and accompanist using these exercises in standard tunes. In one case study, a horn player noted:

[In the workshop] we talked about really listening, and reacting to each other's musical ideas and motives. We were going through being an "accompanier", a "leader" or "reacting/following" the situation. Playing with no tune in mind, we tried experimenting with stating certain musical ideas, expanding on each other's motives, and doing exactly that, leading, accompanying, as well as reacting to what was going on. Then we tried it over "All The Things You Are" with a rhythm section, completely free of time, harmony, and thought. It was pretty challenging because you're always questioning whether you should lead, accompany, or follow what is happening. It brought an interesting approach to playing music, which I now think about when I'm playing.<sup>11</sup>

### 3.3 Error and Choice

The straightforward nature of these exercises made several players aware of the possibility that what they are contributing may, in fact, not be working. Continued careful listening under such directly controlled circumstances exposes many, many deviations from the Point of Concentration and subsequently, a call for the adjustment of the schema of particular situation. These constant realizations within the closed universe of the exercise train players to both recognize and (occasionally under duress) accept these moments of uncertainty when they occur. The player can these 'surf' these recurring waves of error with assurance.

This is not easy to accomplish, especially with an exercise like Benjamin Riffs (See 2.9). The demands of this exercise are great, even in this highly simplified version. It would actually be possible to play a version of this exercise with a cue for each interval (i.e. one for minor seconds, one for major seconds etc.) however in this simplified case, there are just cues for 'seconds' (minor *or* major) or 'thirds' (minor *or* major) and instead of using two pages worth of cues, often one page provided sufficient challenge.

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication.



To recap the Point of Concentration for Benjamin Riffs, two players freely improvise. At any moment, one player plays a Page Cue followed by an Intervallic Cue that corresponds to a written riff. They can take turns (i.e. one player cues, then the next player cues) or anyone can cue at anytime. Music is not a language in that it does not convey semantic meaning (Blacking 1973, Feld 1974, Mithen 2006, Seeger 1977). However, this exercise necessitates a type of exchange that comes very close to a language, albeit a very limited one existing within the closed universe of the exercise itself. In several case studies, players articulated a sense of loss and disappointment by not hearing or not understanding the cues of another. They felt as though they were letting one another down when cues were missed. To return to the conversation metaphor in jazz improvisation, turn-taking

Participants in conversation have the job of providing next moves to ongoing talk which demonstrate what sense they make of that talk. It therefore is possible to see how group members themselves interpret the interaction they are engaged in (Goodwin 1990: 6).

Benjamin Riffs is a classic example among these exercises where both participants and facilitator are able to hear immediately when things go off the rails. An obvious benefit of this is how it can develop the ear amidst an ever-changing field of play. However, this exercise also creates numerous absences of no fixed patterns, allowing for introspection, reevaluation, and practice of what to do when there are collisions of expectations.

Discussions after the exercise sounded more like a review of a conversation than of a musical performance. For example, one player was “concentrating so hard on what [you] were saying that I felt I never contributed anything at all.”<sup>12</sup> The anecdotal example of improvisation as conversation that began Chapter One is relevant here. The riff-based “grammar” of Benjamin

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<sup>12</sup> Personal communication.

Riffs allows players to jump from subject to subject via cues. While there is no right or wrong choice (i.e. any riff can be chosen at anytime), in order to maintain the thread of the musical conversation players ideally pay great attention to the interaction. They may wait for a cue/riff and acknowledge the other person, or present a cue/riff in hopes of being acknowledged.

Improvisation, in jazz and other styles, necessitates limits. In small ways void of style specifics, these exercises can extend the limits of what a player can apprehend. Regarding the pervasive nature of limitation, Nachmanovitch notes that even the very hands improvisers use act as a containing agent that can accumulate energy and intelligence. There is a delicate interplay in the varying relationships among the fingers and the different attributes they bring to a given task.

He states:

Our body-mind is a highly organized and structured affair, interconnected as only a natural organism can be that has evolved over hundreds of millions of years. An improviser does not operate from a formless vacuum, but from three billion years of organic evolution; all that we are is encoded somewhere in us (Nachmanovitch 1990:13).

In several case studies, players initially described improvisation as free from all limitations but then expressed surprise at the “newfound” freedom they attained through limitation.

Once we were restricted to playing only certain things, then those restrictions were removed, it really gave a more free feeling of playing, even though we were still playing within the chord structure.<sup>13</sup>

In another case study on Lead, Follow and Accompany, one horn player noted:

[In the workshop] we talked about really listening, and reacting to each other's musical ideas and motives. We were going through being an "accompanier", a "leader" or "reacting/follow" the situation. Playing with no tune in mind, we tried experimenting with stating certain musical ideas, expanding on each other's motives, and doing exactly that, leading, accompanying, as well as reacting to what was going on. Then we tried it over

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication.

“All The Things You Are” with a rhythm section, completely free of time, harmony, and thought. It was pretty challenging because you're always questioning whether you should lead, accompany, or follow what is happening. It brought an interesting approach to playing music, which I now think about when I'm playing.<sup>14</sup>

In this investigation, I learned that improvising jazz musicians both choose their limitations and choose how they feel about those limitations. There is a direct relationship between choice and the amount of control a performer has, and asserts, on a musical situation. The decision to choose is itself part of a performers' schema.

According to Iyengar, “while the power of choice lies in its ability to unearth the best option possible out of all those represented, sometimes the desire to choose is so strong that it can interfere with the pursuit of these very benefits” (Iyengar 2010: 9). For example, in *Time, No Changes* (See 2.8) one player commented:

It was difficult for me to get my head around the kind of listening involved in this exercise. Everything was happening so fast. The ‘tune’ if you can call it that, was counted off very, very fast, and I couldn't keep up, it ended up settling at about two-thirds of the count-in. This wasn't a huge deal, since the exercise was about listening, not about playing a perfect solo (actually, more about playing an imperfect solo), but the instructor had some sound advice for me. He said that if the piece is moving too fast for me to think about harmony, and if there is no harmony then I can make my own, while at the same time I can also turn my ears toward the drums and just play some dead-on rhythmic lines. This was pretty eye-opening, and I've since been working on my time a lot.<sup>15</sup>

This is an interesting example. On the one hand, *Time No Changes* implies a wealth of freedom. Indeed, the very fact that there are *no* changes can be seen as one less parameter to worry about. Yet that freedom, for this player, was too imposing. Only by choosing to act did s/he have any means to exercise some modicum of control. In small but palpable ways, these exercises show that when “you give people constraints, you find they are actually more creative...even though

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<sup>14</sup> Personal communication.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication.

the act of creation often means tearing down boundaries only to create new boundaries” (Iyengar 2010).

## Chapter Four: Concluding Remarks

### 4.1 Politics in Practice

According to Iyengar, ideas about choice, and subsequently error, are culturally specific (Iyengar 2010):

When you interview Chinese people and ask ‘what are the first words that come to mind when you hear the word choice?’ they come up with ‘burden’ responsibility, frustration, because they see it as a really burdensome, weighty thing. If I make this choice, there are consequences, I better make sure those consequences aren’t terrible. Americans by contrast think of words like pleasant, positive, freedom, and liberty and all the wonderful positive baggage associated with choice.

Through this research with jazz improvisors, I have come to understand several new ways in which one can reframe ideas about choice and error, in particular the ways in which we structure feedback when errors occur, that are relevant beyond music. It is possible to give feedback and acknowledge error without inculcating a culture of mediocrity or accepting non-professional behaviour.

For example, many music educators fall victim to what economist Tim Harford calls “the praise sandwich.” (Harford 2011: 57). This occurs when an acknowledgement of failure exists between two “slices” of encouragement. This is a common technique used by adjudicators at music festivals. During this investigation, I fell into this trap myself. After hearing participants play an exercise I would say things like “that was excellent, great job! It might be a good idea if you [insert specific feedback] but overall, great job.” Harford’s research indicates that structuring feedback in this way helps to “avoid alienating” colleagues but does not clearly focus on what

needs improvement (Harford 2011: 57). Instead, the colleague hears an overall positive review of the performance without enough detail on how it might be improved upon.

My switch to the word ‘colleague’ from ‘participants’ is an intentional attempt at reframing this paradigm. In workshop settings, I found it beneficial to play as much as possible and allow colleagues to witness my own difficulty with the exercises. This creates an atmosphere of camaraderie and mutual respect where we are all, as a group, attempting to engage the changing musical moment. This has obvious limits. It would not be prudent for a facilitator to consistently display difficulty with an exercise, however a modicum of humility is welcome. Similarly, repeated addressing of students as ‘colleague’ can be a major impediment if fundamental musical fluency is absent.

One of the most significant means to reframe error, or dealing with choices that usurp expectations, is to consider failures as successes. Again, there are limits to this mindset. However, as Harford (2010) suggests, “our capacity to reinterpret our past decisions as having worked out brilliantly is a very deep one.” The key, in jazz improvisation, is to acknowledge that for the music to exist, expectations will continually be reimagined within performance. Berliner notes that “jazz groups simply treat performance errors as compositional problems that require instant, collective solutions, in some cases the skillfull mending of one another’s performances” (1996: 382). Again, this may be the origin of the analogy, jazz as the *sound of surprise*. But how can this be encouraged and, in the context of a post-secondary institution, how can this be evaluated effectively?

## 4.2 Evaluating Improvisation

There is an interesting paradox in jazz improvisation that creates some difficulty for evaluation at the university level. In order to deal with usurped or disrupted expectations, there ought to be a framework for that expectation to exist for both players and listeners (i.e. in order to be surprised, one must have been expecting something, or a range of possible ‘somethings’ in the first place). This necessitates a pre-existing, shared knowledge: something jazz education is extremely effective in disseminating. This knowledge is not “one size fits all”, meaning it will be different in each person. Such knowledge includes, but is not limited to, a malleable canon of tunes and indicative phrases used to improvise over those tunes. The approach outlined in this dissertation deals with the disruptions in expectation while consciously prioritizing parameters of music over the stylistic specifics and conformities of jazz music in a similar manner to improvisational theatre:

Many students block their imagination because they’re afraid of being unoriginal... The improviser has to realize that the more obvious he is, the more original he appears. I constantly point out how much the audience likes someone who is direct, and how they always laugh with pleasure at a really ‘obvious’ idea. Ordinary people asked to improvise will search for some ‘original’ idea because they want to be *thought* clever. They’ll say and do all sorts of inappropriate things (Johnstone 1979, 87).

The desire to hear and play ‘inappropriate things’ necessitates a different approach to assessment and grading. As mentioned in Chapter One, one can immediately distinguish those who play with good time, remain in-tune, nail the changes and foster a sense of playing together from those who do not in a bebop context. For instance, let’s say a teacher assigns a particular

passage (e.g. a ii-V pattern or a challenging bebop head like “Quicksilver” or “Sub-Conscious Lee”). The teacher can say to the student “you have two attempts at playing this passage flawlessly. Either you play it correctly by the second attempt or you get a zero.” There is a great advantage in this right-or-wrong approach. Grading assignments is efficient. In addition, if there are numerous related patterns to learn and play, as is the case with ii-V patterns, it is easy to observe and record student progress, related to an understanding of the genre, over time.

To an extent, the exercises contained herein highlight a type of very obvious, observable gestures Johnstone points towards. With limited pitch sets and clear Points of Concentration, it is straightforward to generate successful experiences through error correction: by working out what has gone wrong and correcting it really quickly. In these safe and controlled situations, it was easy to encourage students to fail often and take risks. Accumulated experience, especially with regards to listening to non-syntactic parameters, makes players less risk-averse over time (i.e. the more one can hear, the more one can control). However, it is the experiential nature of these exercises that necessitate a more holistic approach to evaluation. How does a teacher effectively measure a grasp of concepts like ‘interaction’ or ‘empathy’?

Before such concepts can be assessed, there should be a strategy in place for students to be able to state their level of comprehension in words. Including discussions involves a reordering of class time. Music does not speak for itself, rather it is contextualized through dialogue after the performance. Confining these exercises to a minute or two helps maximize both discussion and performance. Cahn (2005, 53) uses the term ‘questioning’ in his work, and states that “the main challenge for participants is to know what questions to ask.” I will list a series of questions from Cahn (2005, 53-6) that stimulate discussion and create a framework for comprehension.



Questions to be asked immediately after improvising:

1. What were you thinking as you played?
2. How did you know what to play?
3. How did you relate to the other performer(s)?
4. Who was leading/following? Where/when?
5. Did you like what you played?
6. What else could you have done?
7. If you could go back, what would you have changed?
8. Did you try to play any musical ideas (melody, rhythm, pattern, etc.) that are based on music you have heard before?

In order to understand how the parameters of music can be used in real-world performance situation, Cahn (2005, 56) suggests the following questions to use immediately after listening to a recording of an improvisation:

1. What were you thinking as you listened?
2. Did the playback sound different or the same to you compared to when you were performing? In what way(s)?
3. How did this music relate to other music that you know?
4. Did you hear anything in the music that seemed familiar?
5. How did the performers relate to each other?
6. What challenges were faced by the performer(s)?
7. Who introduced new musical ideas, and what were the responses?
8. What in the performance did you like/dislike?
9. What would you say to an audience to help them to gain a greater appreciation of this music?

Finally, Cahn suggests the following questions to ask immediately after listening to a recording from a master artist in jazz or any genre:

1. What is important in this music?
2. What are the main musical ideas in this music?
3. What do you think the composer/performer of this music wants to communicate?
4. What makes this music distinctive – what is familiar/unfamiliar about it?
5. In what ways does this music compare to other music you've heard in this session?
6. What did you hear that was new to you?
7. Was there anything that you heard that you did not understand?
8. How can you come to a better understanding of this music?
9. How can a better understanding of this music help you in your playing?
10. Can your intuition be helpful in coming to an understanding of this music?
11. What was going on in your mind as you were listening? Did you listen in the same way you listen in other (musical or nonmusical) situations?
12. How can listening to this music help you to broaden the range of possibilities in your playing?

When it comes to actually grading comprehension and ability vis-à-vis the exercises in Chapter Two, I recommend the adoption of a point system (e.g. 1 through 10). For example, in Exercises like Shared Quarters (Exercise 2.3) or Find A Note (Exercise 2.5), a teacher can assign a grade after a few attempts at the exercise in addition to hearing a student responses during questioning. The main aspiration is to get the players to create serviceable, meaningful gestures that relate to the gestures of others. Recordings of in-class performances may also be posted online for the entire class to review more thoroughly. From this, a group blog could be maintained and moderated by the teacher where responses and careful considerations of the

players could be posted. To play with intent, a player must have an idea of what s/he can play (i.e. an internal map of their own limits). The observations of others, teacher and student alike, can inform the player of sounds they have been making that they did not even realize. Thus, it is possible to grade students on their observations on the playing of others in addition to their own. The blog is also a straightforward means to observe the collective progress, in music and words, of the entire class.

Limits constrain and enable creative action and, subsequently, freedom. Working within limits, and adjusting the mindset to consider the collective rather than just the individual needs of the moment, is paramount. As Iyengar (2010) points out:

We all want freedom, it's just that our beliefs about how it's best to implement that freedom, what's the best way to create the best life for me and the world around me is culturally specific. Individualism is one way of thinking about how to create the best me and the best life, and collectivism which is practiced in other cultures in the world is a way of saying, well look it's when we consider the collective welfare that we get the best for me and the life around me. What happens in individualism is that it's taken choice to a level that really hasn't happened before. We feel almost obliged to choice. Just because a choice is there doesn't mean that you have to put in the effort and energy to make that choice.

One interesting avenue for future research might be to examine how institutions instruct educators how to teach improvisation? Do cutbacks in high-school music programs affect the level of music fundamentals in young undergraduates? Are post-secondary institutions obliged to teach music education majors the mechanics of the jazz ensemble only, or are improvisatory concerns included? Other questions include what, if any, barriers are in place for instrumentalists on non-traditional jazz instruments to engage in jazz music in high school music programs? How can the exercises in Chapter Two be reframed to negate their obvious melodic/harmonic bias and therefore include drums and percussion more readily.

There is a poem by John O'Donohue (2001: 23) that encapsulates for me both the idea of improvisation and the experience of improvising through a straightforward metaphor.

I would love to live  
Like a river flows,  
Carried by the surprise  
Of its own unfolding.

Like a river, the course of improvised music is unpredictable. Two attributes are essential in order to navigate that improvisatory river: fluency with the parameters of music and an open mind. Musical fluency – so that what is played has intent and conviction and representative of the speed, flow, and direction of the action. Openness –so that the twists and turns of the action are met free of judgement and in so doing, allowing musical gestures full of intent and conviction to manifest.

for any relationship to unpredictability and uncertain to remain sustainable.

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