

# The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts

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## Chapter 27

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### Repeatability versus Unrepeatability in Free Improvisation

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# REPEATABILITY VERSUS UNREPEATABILITY IN FREE IMPROVISATION

*Thomas Gartmann*

HK: I imagine that for me personally there will be evenings where musically I'll have the feeling: Shit, I'm repeating myself, it cheeses me off. I can't always present new material, but I can present it, musically, in different ways [and contexts]. There will be evenings where I'll have the feeling: I want to do this performance like yesterday's. But usually that doesn't work. There will be such evenings. That can be frustrating, but a musician has to live with that. [The free jazz bass player] Peter Kowald once said, if you do *one* good concert a year, that's great. Whatever that means [9:00–9:39].<sup>1</sup>

The ban on repetition is one of the most important dogmas of free improvisation. This taboo can be explained with the paradox that improvisation means inventing something in the moment, and you can invent something only once. So it presents a constant challenge – especially if you are successful in an improvisation, and would like to repeat your success and the joyfulness of the experience that comes from the flow of it. One could also take Peter Kowald's statement to extremes and say that it's not just "good concerts" that are rare; even those concentrated moments when everything "clicks" are rare too. This is especially true for longstanding bands whose members have been playing with each other for years, and who know how each other reacts in any circumstances. There is yet another pitfall here, which one might classify as both a dogma and a taboo: intention. Free improvisation is not "intentional" music.

Given this state of affairs, the musicians in question do not aim to repeat either a "good concert" or a joyful moment. Instead, they try to create the ideal circumstances that can make such concerts and such moments possible in the first place. Koch-Schütz-Studer had been Switzerland's leading improvisational trio for decades when they tried an experiment in September 2005 that one might justifiably describe as crazy: playing concerts of free improvisation as a trio for thirty evenings, one after the other, featuring two sets of forty minutes each on every night, in a venue designed specifically for them. The abovementioned bans on repetition and on intention seem here to run counter to their very intention to *avoid* repetition every evening for a whole month.

This venture was experimental in several ways – in fact, it was almost scientific in its requirements:

- 1 It had an experimental design under controlled conditions.
- 2 It had a fixed setting, in the same venue with the same duration. These unities were almost Aristotelian, though the third was absent here – that of a unified plot. On the contrary, producing something different every evening proved one of their biggest challenges.

- “Repetition” was provided by having the same setting every evening, but it was explicitly forbidden in the content (see dogma no. 1 above).
- 3 What did change each night were the listeners – and this is of crucial importance because improvised music also entails interacting with the audience. Here, however, we also have to relativize things. Some fans came regularly to the concerts, and several journalists were also present on several evenings, precisely in order to experience and enjoy their diversity.
  - 4 Self-reflection: the investigators and the investigated parties were identical here – i.e., the Trio, who were their own producers. This experiment made self-reflection almost a prerequisite – as a statement towards journalists, and as an exchange of ideas with the public (with whom they sat together and drank together more than was already customary), and with those making a film of the event.
  - 5 The most important element here was the fact that the experiment was documented – twice over in act, as audio recordings and on video, though while sound recordings were made of all the concerts, only selected evenings were filmed. The CD<sup>2</sup> and the film that resulted were not purely documentary in nature, however, but (as we shall see) themselves an act of “composition” *sui generis*, as they were edited to form a kind of montage.<sup>3</sup> The CD and film are 61’09” and 72’ long respectively, and are, thus, roughly the same length as a dual set on one of the nights in question.
  - 6 Part of the experiment was also the participatory observer – in this case, the author of the present essay, who attended the performance on 20 September 2005. What remains in the memory are the striking moments of surprise as well as the pronounced feeling of large-scale arcs of suspense (two aspects that seem contradictory, but aren’t), then the degree of concentration, the incredible focus, the quiet and the electric energy; then there was the venue with its low stage. It is rare for musicians to be so close to their audience, which led to a sense of unity between them – not least because so many musician colleagues sat in the audience. For example, Irène Schweizer and Phil Minton were visible among the public, both of them exponents of free jazz – as were other colleagues of the Trio who had performed with them on occasion.

My reminiscences of this exceptional musical event, however, are qualified by the considerable chronological distance between now and then; I must also take into account the fact that I listened to the CD and watched the DVD two years after the event. So my memories of it are, by necessity, somewhat skewed. At a distance, the memory improvises too.

## **1 Location**

The venue of the experiment was the former Nenniger locksmith’s workshop on the Pfingstweidstrasse in what was at the time a new cultural biotope in the western part of the city of Zurich, close to Christoph Marthaler’s Schiffbau Theatre, the Maag Event Hall and the jazz club “Moods.” Organizing such an event in this part of the city, which was notable for its dynamic cultural and party scene, was in itself a real statement of intent. The workshop, where previously heavy machinery, piping and metal parts had been produced, signified materiality itself, iron and labor, and had an impressive, cathedral-like acoustic. The artist’s duo “Buffet für Gestaltung” had completely revamped the venue, however, staging it as a mixture of black box, bar and factory club. The club that was reinvented here seemed to harken back to the myth of the clubs in the USA with their long-term resident artists and their clouds of smoke (this was also before the no-smoking law). But the aesthetic of the venue was that of an art space, and it was stringent in form: there was a semi-circle that meant the audience could get right up close to the stage, and everything was in black. Even the audience was dressed in an existential black, allowing for no distractions – though it was all well-lit,

with a high degree of concentration and focus as a result. The exclusivity of the event – indeed, its near “cult”-like quality – came from the fact that the club was constructed solely for this one month experiment, specifically for this Trio. Afterwards, it was revamped as an art space and was later dismantled altogether. “The idea for this,” says Hans Koch, “was something that came to us during a US tour. We wanted to open something along the lines of a club in which only we would play. And then it would close again afterwards” (Amstutz 2005).

But the space in question was not just a club and a workshop: it was also an arena in which the musicians were completely exposed, rather like gladiators, for the audience to experience all their wheezing and their sweat.

The resultant documentation is something unique that enables us to analyze the phenomenon of free improvisation both as myth and as dogma. It would be incorrect to assume, however, that these recordings could enable us to experience the paradox of the repeatability of what is unique and unrepeatable – a documentation of improvisation, in other words – because both the CD and the film are not mere reproductions or a documentation of what happened, but structured reflections of it. They are new versions of the events, created by means of selection and montage and that follow their own dramaturgy – that of CD or of film. Unlike Walter Benjamin’s dictum that technological reproduction deprives the artwork of its aura (Benjamin 1936), these audio and video recordings – which, for their part, are “repeatable” at will – acquire their own cultic character (inasmuch as we accord them the status of “works”), not least thanks to their manner of presentation, for the video sequences have been expanded by adding interviews, thus offering self-reflection and self-projection too. Even if these interviews show the musicians as very taciturn, they come across as all the more authentic for it.

## 2 Fitting People

FS: I’ve played in plenty of good bands, but I think this is the best one. Usually with bands it’s like this: the music is right but the people aren’t. This might sound superficial. Or it’s the other way round, the people are right but the music isn’t. And in this case both are right and that’s a rarity [2:00–2:24].

Fitting people: besides the venue and the setting, getting the right “fit” of people is another prerequisite for success. The better people know each other, the freer they can play; mutual experience creates trust. But how should the group of “test subjects” be constituted? In the case of Koch-Schütz-Studer, the three men are as different as one could imagine in terms of their artistic and biographical backgrounds. They mix academic training with the autodidactic, and free music with jazz, rock and theatre music.

Hans Koch was born in 1948 in Biel, and trained first as a classical clarinetist. He only brought his conventional career in an orchestra to a close in the 1990s. His background includes new music, free music and an intense interest in non-European cultures. He often plays solo, but also plays in chamber ensembles. His range of instruments is correspondingly broad, encompassing bass and contrabass clarinets, the soprano and tenor saxophones, electronics and sampling – though he needs his glasses for the last of these activities. The cellist Martin Schütz (\*1954) also comes from Biel and also has experience of the free music scene. He has played live theatre music for the directors Luc Bondy and Christoph Marthaler and has composed film music, including for Peter Liechti (*Grimsel* 1990; *Marthas Garten* 1997), the director of the video of the event under discussion here. His instruments are an acoustic cello and an electric 5-string cello, electronics and sampling. While these two men are rather introverted, their percussionist Fredy Studer has a completely different personality. Like Koch, he too was born in 1948. He only joined up with his two colleagues in 1990. He knows the director Liechti through the films *Hans im Glück* (2003)

and *Namibia Crossing* (2004). Studer is self-taught as a drummer and grew up in jazz and rock; he also co-founded the jazz/rock group OM. He plays drums and other percussion instruments. However different the backgrounds may be of these three men, they have a common interest in improvisation and in experimentation. They have also all played in duos for decades; they have another point of contact in their work with computers and electronics. What's more, they are all true performing types, with a love of theatre. And they also complement each other well in human terms. The Trio is bound together not just by music, but by a deep sense of friendship.

MS: Whenever we play together, I realize that it's a great constellation, even though we have known each other for such a long time. Hans and I, we have known each other even longer, for over 20 years. Nevertheless, it always seems fresh. And at the same time there is a natural blind trust that you can just slip into the flow and know that you can be sure that whatever anyone contributes will be respected and will be taken seriously. That you can risk putting yourself out on a limb, far out – and not be left behind. I believe that this trio's music always works out best when we take a step back, so to speak, and just let the music flow [34:04–35:01].

Knowing each other, and having common experiences, trust and mutual respect – all these are a basis for successful improvisation. A band that works together regularly, thus, has an advantage over any “improvised,” ad-hoc ensemble. Ultimately, there is the fourth man too – the man at the mixing desk. Depending on availability, this is either Jean-Claude Pache or Daniel Schneider, who also runs the nearby jazz club “Moods.”

The participants saw their whole project as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a “total work of art,” in which everyone made his own contribution. This is evident not least from the designations of the tracks, which don't have titles but the concert date and the names of those involved – whether a dedication to the two sound technicians (Daniel resp. Jean-Claude for the track 9/10), or to the manager, the owner of the Schlosserei, the video man, the team behind the bar and so on – laying open a whole network of relationships.

The ritual of their rigidly fixed, repeatable experiment under controlled conditions – inasmuch as these conditions could be controlled at all – aims to turn a performance into an artwork. These expectations are intensified by the abovementioned, almost “cultic” *mise-en-scène* that was further exaggerated by the fact that it was announced publicly during the performances that they were being documented on CD and film, thereby confirming the artistic ambition of the venture.

We should not confuse the experimental set-up with any sense of the musicians simply “experimenting” here; what's more, any such public experimentation would have been utterly contrary to the expectations of the audience, as Martin Schütz has confirmed:

MS: I think it's far too much to expect from the audience that the musicians just come to practice. The word “experimental” is off the mark. On stage you don't experiment, on stage you play [22:06–22:18].

The Trio's improvisation was, thus, the exact opposite of practicing or rehearsing, which would in any case to a certain extent be counterproductive to the idea of improvisation, which seeks precisely what is unexpected and unintended. In this sense, if an “experiment” signifies merely “experimenting,” then improvisation is no experiment. Fredy Studer sums this up aptly by contrasting the rehearsal with the performance, while at the same time contradicting the widespread myth that improvising takes place without any rehearsals:

FS: You could put it another way: It is not about trying something out in public. No, never! There's no point in that. If I can't think of the rest either “Trying out” is something we do,

e.g., during a practice week [...] where absolutely nobody gets to listen. It's sometimes a very painful experience when you listen to what you've recorded. Then you think: That's only as far as we've got [22:29–23:00].

On the other hand, it is clear that automatisms and flexibility in spontaneous decision-making can only be founded on years of experience and intensive rehearsal, for this provides a basis on which you can fall back in the moment, as Alessandro Bertinetto remarked: "Decisional routines are often procedurally embodied thanks to repeated training and become automatic" (Bertinetto 2012: 122, n. 2).

### 3 Emptiness

Another prerequisite for being able to realize the idea of a spontaneous improvisation is "emptiness." The starting point of every free improvisation is the paradox of an intentionally unintentional emptiness, as Martin Schütz has explained:

MS: It starts to be hard when I have to do something with intent. It is very important to me in improvisation that what is not intentional, that things just happen. I get myself into a certain state of mind and in this condition it flows – the ideas flow, also the decisions flow, you don't have to make a decision, the decision just happens to you. I need to feel empty. When I go on stage, there must be emptiness. I can't go straight from the shopping centre to the stage. That's impossible, isn't it? [6:28–7:14]

It is difficult to achieve this lack of intention, and there are different dimensions to it – psychological, philosophical and almost dogmatic, or even religious.

Later in Liechti's film, Studer and Koch also speak about how you shouldn't think while improvising, because you're not free when you're thinking, and if you rein in the music, it can't flow properly. "In *30xTRIO* we were concerned with just this music that is generated out of nothingness; by registering nothing but time, it enables the audience to forget about time itself," as the journalist Irene Genhart put it (Genhart 2006: 48).

There are several things here that are noteworthy. First, you can't switch directly from your everyday life to performing on stage. Indirectly, this means that you need some kind of caesura, a framework in which to perform. Secondly, you need a *conscious emptiness* that you actively have to create. You have to "empty" yourself in order to play. Thinking is "forbidden"; you have to "cancel out" yourself. In this, the musicians are strict with themselves, pursuing this ascetic of emptiness with an iron will: "You have to empty yourself mentally and forget about the previous concert, because otherwise you start to censor yourself. We insist on it being new every time" (Bosshard 2005).

So where can we situate our observations in historical, theoretical terms? In Western Europe, and especially in Switzerland, with its highly active improvisation scene, there still existed unshakeable ideological positions some twenty or thirty years ago that in recent years have been almost impossible to maintain. This paradigm shift was subjected to extraordinarily fierce debate and reflection after the publication of an article by Thomas Meyer with the polemical title – "Is free improvisation at an end? On the past and the present of a fleeting art form" (a title invented by the editor of the journal, not by Meyer). His carefully formulated hypothesis prompted others to disagree with him: "Perhaps the accents have actually shifted," he wrote,

and the act of liberation that was central in the 70s and 80s has receded so much into the background that some musicians, like Jacques Demierre, prefer to place the concept of "freedom"

after that of “responsabilité,” to signify a desire to take responsibility for everything. Freedom solidifies into a lack of it, if it only gazes at its own navel.

(Meyer 2010: 8)

In free improvisation, there are indeed numerous taboos, though most of them are only implicit. “What are the taboos and totems of improvised music?” – this is the challenge issued by the saxophonist Bertrand Denzler. However, several improvisers point out that most of their dogmas are things of the past, and are now obsolete: “The dogmas of free, improvised music belong to the last millennium; it’s become much freer since then,” claims the tuba player Marc Unternährer, for example. “We don’t want to reach a point where we have to *liberate* ourselves from the dogmas of free improvisation as you seem to understand them, like the free jazz musicians had to at the end of the 1960s,” adds the percussionist Lucas Niggli. The visual artist Miriam Sturzenegger, however, situates the problem in historical terms:

Free improvisation was an ideology back then, one for which you gave everything. This is the urgency that the article wrote about – the revolution that is over. [...] Free improvisation as an ideology, as it was lived out back then, is over today.

And the cellist Alfred Zimmerlin sums it up as follows: “We are happy that we can concentrate completely on the music today, without any ideological ballast and without having to be revolutionaries” (discussion in *Dissonance* online, 2010).

In theoretical terms, the abovementioned commandment of emptiness is founded in a concept of *nothingness*. The British guitarist Derek Bailey has an apt metaphor for this act of creating out of nothing, as well as for the vanity of ever hoping to “capture” an improvisation: “[I]t really is like sand, you have to make it stick, naturally it doesn’t stick, you can just form it and then it’s gone and I think that’s a great attraction. I think to make it stick is actually a kind of heresy” (Scott 1988).

Many improvisers see this in more dogmatic terms, however. For example, Richard Scott insists that

improvisation has to escape its own idiomatic history and identity as surely as it needs to escape from other genres. If it is to be “free,” then free improvisation needs somehow also to be free from itself. It thereby contains an innate negation and a certain pull towards a kind of nothingness or no-thingness.

(Scott 2014: 5)

We should also see this emphatic nothingness as a political stance typical of the post-1968 era of negation. At the same time, however, we have to bear in mind Deleuze’s dictum of the “Empty Man in a Full Space”: “An empty space, without characters (or in which the characters themselves show the void) has a fullness in which there is nothing missing” (Deleuze 1989: 245).

Already on the empty stage, the improviser stands within the context of his own previous concerts:

He doesn’t necessarily need to *invent* anything or to impose anything on the blankness of the stage, because there is no blank empty space patiently awaiting his actions to give it meaning in the first place. Even an empty stage is already a play of forces. The space he walks onto is already full, pregnant with its own plurality of directions and gravities, which are quite apart from, and yet inseparable from, those that may be encapsulated within the body of the performer.

(Scott 2014: 9)

It is precisely in order to avoid this heavy burden of tradition and social expectations that a new space was created for this project (and only for this). This helped to “radicalize” the improvisations inasmuch as the space itself was also developed *ex nihilo*. It thereby provided the ideal conditions for improvisation according to Michele Biasutti’s definition, which itself referred back to the “real-time music” of the Berlin scene of the mid-1990s onwards: “Music improvisation could be defined as the real-time creative performance of novel music and consists of inventing music extemporaneously” (Biasutti 2017: 1).

But what exactly does this mean? Marcello Ruta states that the notion of free improvisation is in conflict with the idea of implementing a pre-defined normative sound structure; so the use of prefabricated materials contradicts the principle of improvisation, not least on etymological grounds: “The [...] meaning of *improvviso* (not foreseen – done in the moment) seems in fact to exclude the use of pre-established sound-structures, or performing instructions, as a *rule to be followed*” (Ruta 2017: 518). In our case, we could add that the samples are prefabricated, but were recorded in the moment and are being applied to a new context, and are, thus, also improvised.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4 Start

The initial question as to who is going to start a new piece is one that implicitly requires a decision, though it is always taken in the moment and may never be prepared in advance.

MS: How shall we start today? That’s the most difficult part of the evening, how to start.

FS: That’s exactly it. We could say: He’ll start with a solo or we’ll start loudly together. Whatever. So far we never had the feeling we’ve got to plan it, and I think that’s a great quality. After 22 nights we still don’t feel we have to talk about how we’ll start. 3 or 4 years ago it always went like this: You start on your own. Or: Martin starts on his own. ”Some sounds!!” Yes, that’s what we used to do. Then suddenly we stopped doing it [44:02–44:45].

Given this absence of intention, how to begin a new piece is one of their biggest challenges. The keyword, “Some sounds!!” by Martin Schütz is to be understood literally: their music simply emerges out of some sounds or other.

The transitions in all this are fluid. Sometimes the sounds come from the distortion box, sometimes from a sizzling hi-hat and sometimes the latter is imitated by the voice. It becomes truly unintentional when a sound action begins outside the scope of the Trio and their sphere of influence. It might be a member of the audience lighting a cigarette, someone filling a water glass, the laughing of the bartender or the noise of a fan – any of these can trigger something new:

MS: Music begins right here with a ventilator like this one. There’s loads of music in that thing.

At first it got on my nerves, I wanted it to be absolutely quiet in here. Then I said to myself: It really is very hot in here [11:20–11:50].

While such “natural” sounds expand the sound spectrum beyond the scope of the instrumental, the computer also has a comparable role to play, precisely because not every manipulation enables the resulting sounds and noises to be predicted or plannable. The aesthetic, formal processes and sounds thus reflect the world of electronic music, to such an extent that the Trio was able to integrate sounds from the then-current New York DJ scene into their live electronics. In this regard, Hans Koch said:

HK: The whole set up with computers and instruments is very important of course. I try to make sounds on the instruments like I do on the computer. It interests me to see how far I can go.

I'm starting to like the computer as much as an instrument. I keep trying to get right into the sounds [5:25–5:54].

## 5 Decisions

Ending a piece or a development is similarly difficult to beginning it, precisely because it means making a decision again – as we can see in the following dialogue between Martin Schütz and Fredy Studer:

MS: Today, with that groove, somehow you let that go on far too long. I know... I nearly went mad. That's because Studer wants to hear it. Yes, alright. I thought whenever is he going to stop? It crossed my mind afterwards as well. A bit late, but it doesn't matter. No. I felt fine doing it. I asked myself, is he so in love with that thing that he can't stop? I was miles away, I didn't hear it. [...] FS: But you know, talking about hesitating or a clear decision, I once said in an interview or such like: With Hendrix, I simply don't hear any hesitating, they are clear decisions. I know what you mean... MS: when you criticize hesitation. FS: That happens to me, too, I know what it's like. When you improvise, that can happen. And if that happens a lot, and during a concert, then it will be horrifying. Then I wish for a rock band on stage that knows: We'll play *this* song! Of course, you were right to say what you did about Hendrix because, he was simply a *musician*. I don't think hesitating was ever an option for him, then of course you must consider: We are all over 50 now. At the time you're talking about he was... 26! [38:08–40:12]

The three men each ensure that the very opposite of anything “comfy” or “fun” occurs. Radicalism is what drives them, ensuring that longer moments of beauty are immediately stifled, islands of comfort are disturbed, and chains of suspense are rent asunder. All these taboo things are allowed to occur – but not for too long, especially when their free improvisation advertises itself as non-idiomatic and non-referential as a matter of principle (Demierre 2010). In this, however, the Trio reveals itself to be pretty undogmatic, far removed even from the “nothingness” postulated by Scott above (2014: 5). Here, in an ideal postmodern manner, we repeatedly find all manner of stylistic borrowings. According to one's listening experiences, one sometimes seems to hear snippets of rock, or an overtone-rich, esoteric-sounding mood, while at other times the music sounds like klezmer or one perceives an electronic bustling or jazzy sounds, through-composed grooves, and even the hardest of metal riffs. This free improvisation is by no means completely unidiomatic; it's more a kind of polystylism. Even bits and pieces of classical music can be heard, like a rolling “basso continuo” or a repeated ostinato. Other listeners are reminded of the Jamaican reggae sound engineer King Tubby, who played a major role in the development of dub. Sometimes it's the obsessiveness with which they work at their material – in both a musical and a physical sense – while at other times it's their sheer joy in virtuosity that is put on show here. And at other times, they succeed in sounding more like some kind of intermezzo, though we naturally don't know if all this really sounded like that in the concert, or whether it is the result of montage.

“The first few days ran like on autopilot, and now we start to ask ourselves things like ‘have I already played that?’”, Schütz remarked (Bosshard 2005), and Koch told to the present author after a concert: “The first five concerts were exciting. Only the first Sunday proved difficult, because we had to play in Willisau [at the jazz festival] on the afternoon.” The additional matinée performance at a festival intensified the problem of not repeating themselves, because they were playing twice on the same day and had to try and keep a clear head, even though they were tired. This was all the more important because the commandment to innovate is an unwritten law of improvising: “There's an urge always to play the newest material – the material that hasn't yet

been composed” (Amstutz 2005); we shall hereafter delve further into the relationship between improvisation and composition.

An improviser is faced with the same dilemma as the boy in Heinrich Kleist’s novella *Das Marionettentheater*, who elegantly pulls a thorn out of his foot: his movement in the mirror looks so graceful to him that he would like to repeat it, but this in itself means he loses his spontaneity, and, thus, also the innocence and naturalness of the act. What Kleist requires in this metaphor of the puppet master is also true of improvising. One’s consciousness has to be switched off, because it acts immediately as a kind of censor. In such moments, a feeling can emerge that is not actually recognized, but is felt as something fluid, as “flow”:

FS: The moment it happens, what counts is: If you have 3 grooves one after the other – fuck it, then that’s it, then you simply have to work your arse off! Yes, I mean it. I do agree with you. At moments like these I can say so [28:28–28:50].

## 6 Flow

In an earlier study by the present author, “flow” is repeatedly mentioned in interviews as a by-product of a good working atmosphere. For example, a cellist has described such moments as a subjective experience that is perceived as a mutual interaction with the audience:

So there are these flow situations, where you have the feeling that something is flowing through you and it reaches the people who are there. I’d describe that as an optimum concert. You don’t really even feel yourself anymore, because you just dissolve in the thing. [...] For me, it’s these flow moments. I think these moments where you feel that something or other is emerging that you couldn’t completely prepare – both through playing together and through the audience that hears something and thereby also intervenes in the whole performance.

(Gartmann et al. 2019: 352 f.)

The prerequisites for “flow” experiences can be summed up as individual excellence, a successful attentiveness in a team that manifests itself as mutual trust, active support of processes that unfold and anticipating subsequent actions. Flow experiences can point to a high level of performance, or can support such a performance through the way in which they provide individual recompense. Mutual flow experiences are regarded as a “gateway to increased creativity” (Marotto et al. 2007: 388). Flow and the act of its production have a circular impact; in fact, they stimulate each other in a mutual fashion, like a spiral. “Flow can enhance improvisation inducing a sense of spontaneity and a natural flow of musical ideas” (Biasutti 2017; cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

But this spontaneity can only develop like this when it is not forced. Awareness and thinking are further taboos of improvisation because they deprive one of the absolute freedom of the moment to act out of the moment, as it was claimed by the musicians for ideological reasons.

HK: It’s risky when you start speaking about something like that. It may be good, but on the other hand it’s shit because the next time you play, your mind [Bewusstsein] is aware and remembers. Then you start thinking, and then you start to censor. And you take huge steps backwards. Thinking is your worst enemy in a situation like this. I don’t think that much. You must do, you wouldn’t be so articulate otherwise. It’s all about wanting to make progress. No, you don’t make the progress like that. With dogmas you don’t make progress. FS: That’s not what I mean. It’s actually a way of saying: I don’t like it when you do that. That’s not what I’m saying. The next time that situation comes up. And you realize you would like to open the window, but you remember: Shit, no, he doesn’t like it, he feels the draught on his neck

that's complete shit because that's where the problems start then there's simply no freedom anymore [28:50–30:09].

### 7 “Recordings of Improvisations Repeat the Unrepeatable” (Bertinetto 2012: 121)

“Musical performance is an ephemeral and unrepeatable event,” confirms Bertinetto. On the one hand, “the improvisational process *per se* is singular, unrepeatable and incorrigible” (Bertinetto 2012: 106), but on the other, repetitions of individual turns of phrase or sounds are also implicitly forbidden. Marcello Ruta describes the unrepeatability of an event as one of the primary characteristics of improvisation:

If we refer, however, to musical improvisation as *performed action*, rather than as performed sonic structure, it seems that unrepeatability turns out to be an appropriate property to characterise it. [...] *Free improvisations, as musical events, are per definition unrepeatable.*<sup>5</sup>

These statements are as insightful as they are unambiguous. Our experimental project is so special because the whole *process* is repeated within it – thirty times differently, but all under the same “laboratory conditions.” And thanks to the video, the different instances of this process can even be compared – at least in part. The notion of differentiating in improvisation between process and product is helpful, and comes from Alessandro Bertinetto: Action is not the result (Bertinetto 2012: 113). Here, however, we have to differentiate things, as he also admitted later, and rightly so: “Post-production manipulations of the recorded material are the rule” (Bertinetto 2012: 120).

This is true in our case study to an even greater degree, because the production process did not just comprise improving the sound quality of the recording, but also involved editing and assembling the recordings anew, with the individual excerpts being chosen in a far more selective manner than is the case with “normal” recording sessions and recording situations. When Bertinetto remarks that “Only the result of an improvisation can be frozen, defrosted and tasted repeatedly” (Bertinetto 2012: 121), by “result” he means the product – the acoustic result. In our case, it is interesting that the reverse is true. The product is a montage that is far from being any sonic image of what was played; instead, the product here is the *process* that was captured in excerpts, and thereby made repeatable.

The paradox that we can use recordings to make the unrepeatable repeatable is a problem that is solved by Bertinetto inasmuch as he denies it the character of an improvisation: “The music that we are listening to in the recording is not the improvisation, but its sonic image that attests to its unrecoverable vanishing.” Instead, he promises a kind of transformation: “Radical ontological transformation (from live improvisation to recorded improvisation) converts the unrepeatable music played into an item (ideally) repeatable without loss of identity in multiple performances, which are (tendentially) all identical or aurally very similar” (Bertinetto 2012: 121). With “very similar,” he probably means that the recordings in question are available on different media – normally audio media. These different representations (in our case on CD or DVD) make possible the ontological transformation from music improvisation to musical work.

Thus, CD and video present us with two very different forms of the paradox inherent in composed improvisation. In his funding application for his film, the director Peter Liechti acknowledged that the special nature of his idea becomes manifest here: “[...] to listen to the TRIO is also to participate in a process.” In retrospect, he remarks that only the film can record and play back the live event:

The exciting directness and the sensuality of this music are essentially only conveyed if you are physically present for it – or through the specific medium of film, which in a best-case

scenario can intensify it. It is one of the privileges of film that it can be edited: we can shorten the circuitous, at times strenuous or perhaps even boring path of an improvised concert so as to reduce it to its highpoints – without leaving out the creative struggle to get there.<sup>6</sup>

What's more, such fixed improvisations can also serve as objects of study, rather like written transcriptions: “like recordings, transcriptions are not improvisations anymore, [...] they are] tools for studying past improvisations and for learning how to improvise” (Bertinetto 2012: 124, note 18). Here, however, engaging with these objects is so interesting because the process itself is reflected upon and documented, meaning we can study this process, too, to a certain extent.

Audio recordings of improvisations can also be regarded critically, precisely because of their ontological metamorphosis. David Grubbs has expressed skepticism about the transformation from improvisation to composition, as he has written in an expanded context:

[...] the practice of improvisation yields performances of improvised music; performances of improvised music become recordings; these recordings, through the process of being designated with a title and composer, become compositions; and improvisers, for better or worse, become recording artists.

(Grubbs 2014: 110)

It is for this reason – which is also ideological – that certain musicians such as the AMM Collective reject recordings out of hand, while Jacques Demierre once remarked both rightly and categorically that “improvised music dies in every concert” (Demierre 2010). Repeated listening does not lead to added value in the listening experience, believes Demierre, but on the contrary, it leads to atrophy (Badrutt 2021). In order to find our way out of this dilemma, which is widespread on the improvisation scene, the British guitarist Derek Bailey proposed incorporating the dimension of the listener, saying: “If you could only play a record *once*, imagine the intensity you'd have to bring into the listening” (Watson 2004: 424). Bailey's approach, thus, endeavors to reclaim for the listener of audio recordings that uniqueness that is inherent in improvisation, and thereby preserve it.

To have the imagination to be able to listen to an audio recording but a single time should be understood as a provocative means of contrasting the unique, unforgettable experience of being at a live concert with listening to music on a sound recording – an act that can be repeated to the point of reaching inattentiveness. Bailey understands this uniqueness as an apt manner of listening, because free improvised music is solely committed to the moment, and when it is preserved as an audio recording it is transferred into a different materiality. By “pinning it down” in an audio recording, its meaning and its impact are dissipated. This is especially the case when one listens to it repeatedly, which is why musicological analysis has been deemed an approach that is inappropriate for the material (Nanz 2011: 9 f.; Badrutt 2021).

## 8 Conclusion

In contrast to Bertinetto's postulated “normality” of things that are “all identical or aurally very similar” as stated above (Bertinetto 2012: 121), the two representations considered here (the CD and the video) are not identical at all. Thanks to the act of montage they are as different as they could be, in terms of both their music and their media. We are not dealing with a “frozen” version of the event, but an assemblage – a kind of “composed” improvisation. One could describe them as a composed, compromised form of improvisation, though of two very different types. The CD is a documented form of the sonic result – it presents improvisation as *sound* that by means of montage and post-production techniques has been transformed into an artwork *sui generis*, as an

abbreviated snapshot of 30 evenings – very different from the audio documentation of the iconic “Cologne Concert” of Keith Jarrett, whose ebb and flow were reproduced relatively faithfully. The CD here is, thus, an artifact with work status and an object worthy of aesthetic and critical reception (cf., e.g., Bertinetto 2012: 112). In the case of the video production, however, we are dealing with both a selection that reflects the sonic (and visual) result, and that also documents that result with far more radical editing (and in far shorter sequences than on the CD). But at the same time, the close-up, flexible hand camera also documents excerpts of the process of the improvisation, which is emphasized all the more by the additional statements made on the video by the participants. The director Liechti himself realized through his recordings that only the film could reflect the process and the product adequately, precisely because it tells its own story and because its use of editing and concentration means it can penetrate to the core of the improvisation:

Their sets are largely improvised, and it is part of the essence of improvised music that it sometimes “sags”; for longer periods it simply hangs there, looking for something, in order, ultimately, to find results that are all the richer for it. The cinematic montage lets us shorten the long, sometimes strenuous path taken by the improvising musicians to reach their flights of fancy, and – without excluding the creative struggle – it enables us to concentrate it all in a musical route that allows us up-close insights into the interior life of this music. Only the means of film allow us to convey the exciting vigor and sensuality of a LIVE concert to an audience that is itself unable to be there physically.

(Liechti 2006)

## Notes

- 1 P. Liechti, *Hardcore Chambermusic – A Club For 30 Days*, 2006 (Intakt DVD 131). The quotations are in Swiss-German dialect in the original. HK = Hans Koch, MS = Martin Schütz and FS = Fredy Studer. We quote here from the English subtitles, with occasional edits where necessary. Excerpts can be found on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qCbdczbqno> (accessed July 29, 2019). All the quotations in text, marked with a timeframe, refer to this work.
- 2 Koch-Schütz-Studer, *Tales From 30 Unintentional Nights*, 2006 (CD Intakt Records 117).
- 3 Audio: we find excerpts from evenings 10/11 and 21 edited together, then 25, edited down in increasingly concentrated form (on two tracks): 26 and 28 ff.
- 4 Other authors have also pointed out the not every element of a musical improvisation is created *ad hoc* or “ex nihilo”; cf. Alperson 1984: 21 f.; Brown 1996.
- 5 Ruta 2017: 516.
- 6 Liechti 2006.

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