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Chapter 28

The Risk of Improvised Music

An Ethnographic Approach

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An Ethnographic Approach

Tom Arthurs

1 Introduction

Whether jazz-fact or jazz-fiction, while planning this chapter, the story of a well-known London-based jazz and blues guitarist quickly sprang to mind – a musician who notoriously organized a field-trip of "free" improvisers to a motorcycle speedway race.[1]

While at first glance the connection between motorsport and Improvised Music may not be altogether obvious, the tenacious protagonist nonetheless used the occasion to underscore and relativize both parties' notions and conceptions of risk: contrasting the riders' breakneck flirtation with death to the improvisers' fear of potential humiliation in front of an audience, and the general perception of musical improvisation as an inherently risky activity.

As far as I know, no-one has lost their life directly in the pursuit of Improvised Music-making, but the story nonetheless suggests various important questions. What might the two activities have in common? What are the risks involved in musical improvisation, and Improvised Music, in particular? And, in a field of artistic activity that still often conjures up images of divine inspiration, ideas arriving "out of the blue," and the enduring misconception that performance takes place without reference to any prior preparation or experience (Blum 1998; Arthurs 2015) – is the activity of Improvised Music-making (and other connected art forms) really as risky as its popular perception might suggest?

Can we be more specific and scientific about this supposedly most mystical of activities? Can we create a precise definition of "risk" in the context of Improvised Music-making? What might it mean to "fail" or to "succeed," and what is at stake? Can we talk concretely about how musicians might negotiate the perils of such a field?

Fortunately, a range of key texts in improvisation studies and connected disciplines have already long put paid to the idea that musical improvisation is any such aleatoric, random, or magical act (in this way at least), and it is now generally accepted among academics and musicians that most (if not all) improvised activities rely on more-or-less complex networks of prior experiences; cultural conventions, assumptions and agreements; musical materials and structures that have been developed and practiced in advance; and agreements constructed by particular working groups and long-term musical relationships (Nettl 1974; Marr and Bailey 1992; Arthurs 2015; Berkowitz 2010; Blum 1998; Chan 1998; Manuel 1998; Nettl and Russell 1998; Slawek 1998; Small 1998; Pressing 2000; Kinderman 2009; Levin 2009; Rasmussen 2009; Solis and Nettl 2009; Berkowitz 2010; Arthurs 2015 Manuel 1998; Marr and Bailey 1992; Nettl 1974; Nettl and Russell 1998; Pressing 2000; Rasmussen 2009; Slawek 1998; Small 1998; Solis and Nettl 2009).

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On a more macro-level, the sociologists Becker and Bourdieu propose that each music scene (artworld or field of artistic production) is constructed around a set of shared conventions (values, experiences, knowledge), and that these agreements serve to connect its members and create what might then be recognised by those participants as Art (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Becker 2008).

From this point of view, the Improvised Music scene is certainly no different to any other field of artistic activity, even if its conventions are not always clearly evident to a lay audience (or, as Becker might put it, to the otherwise well-socialised member of society). To use the terms of Bourdieu then, the field of Improvised Music-making requires a specific cultural competence for its interpretation and appreciation; therefore, why should it not also require a specific definition and understanding of risk?

From this starting point, my ethnographic research on the Improvised Music community of Berlin during 2012 and 2013 uses grounded theory (interviews with thirty-four musicians and experts selected by social network analysis) and participant observation (around seventy concerts) to examine the aesthetics, ideologies and practicalities of one sub-world of contemporary European Improvised Music-making.[2]

This chapter unites some of these findings to explore the idea of genre-specific risk in Improvised Music-making – evaluating it on its own terms, exploring the variables on which it depends, and examining the strategies by which it is mediated.

2 Defining Risk: Two Axes of Appreciation in Improvised Music-making

2.1 Musical/Sounding Outcomes

One key finding of my research in Berlin was the proposition that any analysis of Improvised Music-making (at least in the terms of its audience and participants) should distinguish between two levels of appreciation: the "musical," "sounding," "aesthetic" outcome of a performance, and the interaction and process that generated it.

"Good" musical outcomes were often discussed in terms of sounding and aesthetic outcomes so clear, well-structured and united that "every note fits – it could have been written out," where "everyone actually finds their absolute place in the thing," or, as drummer Yorgos Dimitriadis put it:

> You have your place, your space, what you're supposed to do [and] so does everybody else… It's like rock… [when] everything clicks together, and when it all clicks, it rolls. [This] happens also with our music. […] It stays in a groove… this music makes me dance, [and] with this glue, and this locking together, the whole thing *happens*.

Such positive musical/sounding outcomes were generally defined by the convergence of homogenous aesthetic tastes and aims or convergences of timing,[3] and this occurred on the micro-level (choice of materials, density of ideas, speed of events) and the macro (architecture, global pacing, evolution of global structure, density).

Accordingly, musical/sounding outcomes that were considered "good" were expressed in terms of genre-specific conventions of the music "happening," "working," "locking-in" or "grooving," and the precise criteria for these terms were generally known and passed on only intuitively and wordlessly (learning by doing) between the scene's expert listeners and musicians.

2.2 Process and Interaction

Aside from the musical/sounding level of appreciation already discussed, Improvised Music performances were also often assessed by expert listeners and musicians in terms of the underlying processes and interaction of the participants.

Most practitioners and listeners agreed that it was relatively rare that the musical/sounding level would "work" consistently over the course of an entire performance and, accordingly, most Improvised Music concerts included various degrees of "searching" – where the musical result was far from "happening," "grooving" or "locking-in," and the aesthetic outcome was far from homogenous. In such cases, differing intentions clashed, opposing voices competed to show the way forward and, sometimes, nobody would take the lead at all.

As vibraphone player Els Vandeweyer put it, "sometimes there's these really searching periods in the music where there's nothing much happening," and in the words of saxophonist Anna Kaluza:

> Maybe there are amazing things happening at some point, but then there will be very strange moments too – it can't be avoided, and it shouldn't be.

Compared to other more conventional music styles, appreciation of the role of searching periods appears quite unique to Improvised Music performance practice, and, in the opinion of many participants in my fieldwork, this was still one of the most difficult elements for non-expert listeners to grasp – the axis of musical/sounding appreciation lending itself somewhat more willingly to the traditional tools of music analysis.

From this point of view, the performance of (pre-)composed music is obviously much less "risky" – searching playing almost no role in the final recording or concert, and any traces of doubt and insecurity caused by such experimentation having been long erased from the final product. Indeed, much experiment and trial-and-error in this sense (dare we call this improvisation?) has usually already taken place in the process leading up to performance (whether during composition or rehearsal), and by the time an audience encounters such "finished" works (whether it be Mozart or M.I.A.), these processes are usually no longer evident in the concert, score, mp3 or video, which, in turn, becomes the central text for discourse and analysis (Cage 1969: 35).

As an inevitability of the creation of Improvised Music however, which is undertaken by multiple authors in real-time and where much of the collective process unfolds before the eyes and ears of the audience,[4] such searching moments were deemed inevitable, and, for many Improvised Music practitioners, these moments in themselves became a focal point for a particular kind of discussion and enjoyment.

This, in turn, inspired a range of differing tastes and practices for musicians, who situated themselves between the following two poles:

- Musicians who avoided searching, quickly seeking homogenous musical/sounding outcomes in order not to risk that the music is not "happening," "grooving," or "locking-in" (or that a mutually enjoyable aesthetic experience was not attained).
- Musicians who provoked, encouraged and embraced long periods of searching: in the hope that this would be rewarded by the emergence of moments of particular novelty or beauty. Such "special moments" were generally considered impossible without such risk-taking or by reverting to short-term solutions.

The first position outlined here is probably fairly self-explanatory, and is one that is easy to recognise for any music-lover searching for aesthetic perfection in the sense of more conventional composed music.

To the lay audience, however, the second school of thought – where searching was embraced, encouraged and actively explored – might require somewhat more explanation. Simply put, why should an audience pay to watch and listen to a band searching for, and not necessarily reaching, a "good"-sounding conclusion?

By means of explanation, bassist Antonio Borghini (very much a fan of such processes) told the following story, recalling a first-meeting of cellist Tristan Honsinger and vocalist Phil Minton:

> [They'd] been wandering around into nothingness for 25 minutes or something… [and] even myself, I was saying, "What the fuck is going on, come on, I mean you both have all the tools to get out of that… Come on! Do something!" […]
>
> And surely enough, the flower blossomed after 30 minutes, and probably [was] something that wouldn't have happened if they started doing their own tricks and were safe. […] That was really enlightening.

For such connoisseurs, searching was often just as enjoyable as the result, and bassist, archivist, historian and "expert listener" Klaus Kürvers made a direct comparison to literature ("the crime novel is only about searching"), while trumpeter Axel Dörner described how

> In the moment it feels very uncomfortable… where there's different levels of timing, or somebody's somewhere else in the musical structure. But then it's very interesting suddenly, the way it turns. […]
>
> That's part of it. Sometimes, if it doesn't work, it doesn't mean it's uninteresting music. It's maybe more interesting when you listen back to it. […] I had this experience a couple of times where I'd play a concert, and the more uncomfortable part seems to be more interesting, [and] seems to have been more interesting for the audience.

Genre-specific perceptions of "honesty" and authenticity played a considerable part in this appreciation and, in many cases, these qualities and the interactional/processual axis of musical appreciation were deemed more important than the realisation of a "beautiful," "working" or coherent aesthetic outcome – the perceived integrity of the process, and the equality of the participants, having a higher value than the musical/sounding result.

Drummer Christian Lillinger, for example, praised one of his closest colleagues and collaborators:

> [This musician], he's incredible. He's always doing something different – he's searching, like a child. He searches, and for me it's totally fine if a concert is shit, because [he always takes] the risk to do something new. And sometimes, OK, it didn't work – but so what? He tried something. And that's really [this guy]. And it's great. And when it goes well, then it goes really well. That's what it's about.

Electronic musician Valerio Tricoli described one concert where "a recording of that gig is not even music I think! It's not even fucking music," and one expert listener explained how, in such cases:

> It's like a character movie they show. It's not only the music. The music is only the surface. [There are] lots of things showing underneath.

Another participant added that:

> For me it's an issue of if I have to reconstruct [a performance] in terms of the music… or just in terms of the performance. If I just have to say, "OK, it was just a performance with some music put into it. But the important thing was the performance." Or… if I have to say… "It was… musical improvisation with a strong performative element, in which the musical part failed."

Based on findings from my interviews then, such distinctions appear somewhat pertinent when considering ideas of risk in Improvised Music-making – on one hand, the risk that the music and musicians would not "lock together," "find their place" or "groove" within a homogenous musical/sounding result, but also the risk that long periods of searching would (or would not) result in the unique and amazing moments that otherwise legitimised the pursuit.

Already, then, two quite differing perceptions of risk-management in Improvised Music practice become apparent:

- Where the aim was the fast and efficient realisation of a homogenous, harmonious, concrete musical/sounding result – the risk being that this wouldn't happen;
- Where the aim was to create novel and "amazing" moments following searching and experimentation, and where the risk was that the uncertainty and vagueness of that searching would not be legitimised in an "amazing" and novel "working" outcome – despite the preservation of "honesty," integrity and the novelty of interaction.

3 Mediating Risk: Tastes and Strategies

Within this framework of musical/sounding vs. interactional/processual appreciation, four main approaches emerged in response to the questions, challenges and risks already discussed.

These were referred to by participants as:

1 "Real Improvising"
2 "Tricks" and Conscious Interventions
3 Pre-Planned Rules and Concepts
4 Composition

These distinctions served to create social allegiances within Berlin's Improvised Music scene, and performers often expressed clear tastes in their membership of one or more of these groups. Some musicians remained loyal to one approach or ideology, whereas others were more flexible, or selected different approaches depending on the context.

3.1 "Real Improvising"

For so-called "real improvisers," the main aim was to reach and maintain a state of flow, distinguishing their "real" or "pure" approach to improvisation from more "cerebral," or "conceptual" practices.

In terms of quickly reaching musical/sounding outcomes, "real improvising" was the riskiest tactic, and prioritised the attainment of the flow state, the process of interaction and the integrity of the performers' intentions, interactions, authenticity and "honesty," over the fast realisation of a homogenous aesthetic result.

As a result, searching was welcomed and encouraged, and for purists and defenders of this way of playing, such as Antonio Borghini, the use of any pre-planned concepts or conscious strategies directly opposed his/her perceived freedom of expression:

> ["Real improvisation"] touches the very core of the process for me, which is… the freedom to [make] your own associations with things. […] For me [it] would be very hard to know that I *can't* do things when I improvise.
>
> I think it's very dangerous to push a player into a line… [and] that's the risk of conceptual improvising. [Sometimes people say] "OK, let's play just pianissimo," and for me this is shit.

> I mean, OK, but I would rather have you playing that strong that you'll *make* me play pianissimo… As far as Improvised Music is concerned, that's my point.

As Borghini intimated, for many musicians concerned with "real improvising," all the instructions for music-making existed in performance itself (with no need for prior discussion or arrangement), and these instructions took the form of a series of mutually understood cues and signs. These signs were used by performers in real-time and as part of the flow process, and each musician listened for and responded to these, in order to construct a collectively composed piece.

Biliana Voutchkova explained how, in the moment:

> The way that I always play, I allow things to appear. I don't make necessarily decisions [sic]… and the decisions are more like "matter-of-fact." You come to this point when, "This is the thing to do," and it's not really coming of "OK, now I will do this," but it's coming of, "This is where we're going now, and this is where we are, and there is only that that I can do."
>
> There is not so much freedom in the sense that, "Ah, I can do anything." No, no. It's like a very particular thing. And this comes from this sensitivity that you build… and the people around you. Things appear somehow, and they go a certain direction and then you learn to follow this, so it's somewhat again dealing with the unknown, but at the same time you recognize certain directions.

She continued:

> I'm not thinking… [and] it's the wrong term for this work. There is no thinking happening. Or maybe we call it intuitive thinking or something. […] It's somehow connected to the body, and is connected to the experience and… to responding to some things that are already happening. So it's more a responsive thinking, if you want to call it [that]. Or intuitive responsive thinking, then, rather than – "The composition has to go this direction because…" […] It's not coming this way.

Many musicians described "real improvising" as "instinctive" or "subconscious," and – returning to our motorcycle racers – improvisers' descriptions correspond well to Csikszentmihalyi's portrayal of flow states attained by experts in a wide range of "risky" fields (Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

Taking the analogy further, one expert listener went so far to compare Improvised Music practice with the mastery of martial arts, describing how:

> I think that's one of the principles of the whole thing… you learn, you learn, you learn the technique, but to master the technique you have to forget what you learn. And I think at least for my perception, it's [about] the people who forgot… what they learned, and simply do – like you drive a car – you don't think about driving a car. […] The technique is no question, the thing is no question… it grows out of itself.

Remembering Pressing's work on the psychology of improvisation (Pressing 1984, 2000), it is quite conceivable that expert improvisers have trained themselves to make lightning-quick "subconscious" evaluations of their surroundings and act accordingly – this decision-making relying on the execution of a learnt repertoire of cognitive assemblies that run on a level too fast to perceive consciously. Such assemblies use feedback and feedforward to predict outcomes, and make use of previously learnt and practiced materials (motor memory), experiences with the same musicians (and others), short- and long-term memory during a given performance and other accumulated conventions, cultural knowledge, concepts and ideologies.[5] Of course a full study of

these connections is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but hopefully these questions might be addressed elsewhere, with time.

3.2 "Tricks" and Conscious Interventions

Although many musicians described some (or all) of their musical practices as "real" or "pure" improvisation, others consciously exited the flow state, deciding to send strong signals to their colleagues, in order to change the direction of the music from what would have "automatically" happened had they not intervened.

Guitarist Olaf Rupp compared this to building and maintaining a camp fire:

> When I play [it's] a thermic process that creates its own energy by burning itself. [But] sometimes, like on the fire, you have to arrange it… you put some wood, you put it in. […] I influence it. […] I enjoy this game between the freedom and my influence on it.

Talking quite concretely about the need to reach clearer musical/sounding outcomes more quickly than with "real improvising" (and therefore deliberately curtailing searching moments), saxophonist and clarinet player Tobias Delius described how:

> I try to come there thinking of it a bit like a blank page – "OK, let's see what happens." But I don't think it's only about that. It's also about making conscious decisions about starting and stopping or trying something else or not. […] It's important also to… think, and to make strategies as you're playing.
>
> [Sometimes] I feel or hear that the music needs just… for a completely new voice to be added, which may, or may not, have anything to do with what's going on already. Like another layer, which then, by default somehow, will become part of the whole afterwards.
>
> Let's say we're all… making a nice muddy rumble in the lower register, and that's going on, and we're all happy, we're enjoying it, or we're assuming we're enjoying it! [laughs] And then, suddenly, let's see what happens if I do something completely different. […] "Ok – let's see what happens if I whistle a melody through my instrument now." Those kind of things, as if you might be reading a book and somebody just, [whoosh], flips a few pages – that can of course happen naturally, without any kind of pre-meditation, but sometimes it's also just like "OK." [Or] of course, also just stopping – just to stop playing, or just in a very quiet piece, saying, "Look, why don't I just play a very loud event now suddenly," or something like that.

For Rupp, conscious interventions also served to create aesthetic stability in the group or sculpted macro-level architectural decisions, in the sense that

> In some situations, it's really important to really consciously lock yourself to avoid making contact with the others. I think there are situations where this is important, because you thought to establish some roots where the tree can grow.
>
> Very often I'm thinking about developments, and [I] try to anticipate dead spots – so I don't follow him to this, because I know it's better if I have something else going on when he meets his dead spot, or changes. And this is all guessing… it's all a game – because then [maybe] he doesn't go to that spot… [maybe] there is no dead spot when he plays!

Such conscious interventions were often referred to by participants as "tricks," and in addition to changes in musical material, these also included the use of physical movement (changing position

on stage), spoken text (mainly also improvised) or visual imagery (one musician told me how he would decide to imagine himself suddenly in a dentist's waiting room).

A change of interactional strategy was another "trick" used by such musicians, and inside-piano and electronics player Andrea Neumann would sometimes pause her flow mid-performance to ask:

> Do you react fast, do you never react, do you try to ignore the other one, or do you want to sound parallel, or do you want to sound completely together?

Bass clarinettist Rudi Mahall took into consideration that:

> I hear the notes that they play, and I can say which notes they are, and then I can decide "Ah, he's playing an A now, what am I going to play over this A? Or should I also play the melody that he's playing?" […] [Or maybe] I just repeat what I did five minutes ago… or maybe I'll play what one of the others was playing one minute ago, and simply play that. [Alternatively] if the others are playing loud then I might just start playing so quietly that nobody can hear me anymore.

In addition to purely musical concerns, for some musicians tricks and conscious interjections were part of a professionalism aimed at quickly attaining "good" musical/sounding outcomes in high-pressure concert situations, and one bassist described how

> If I don't like how something's going, then I feel pressure – it's a difference between a festival gig and a normal bar gig. […] You can go "This has got to get good," and "Fuck, this isn't happening!" and so "I've got to make this happen."

This, however, was not an opinion shared by all – and many "real" improvisers considered this attitude to be against the ethics of "pure" improvisation in general, and too great a compromise in terms of the authenticity, "honesty" and artistic freedom that they sought to represent.

3.3 Pre-planned Rules and Concepts

Limiting the risk of non-working aesthetic outcomes, and reducing the potential for searching even further, were musicians who used pre-planned rules and concepts as a basis for improvisation – agreeing on common aims, processes and strategies before performance, and not deviating from them during its course.

Such decisions greatly increased the chance for immediate homogenous musical/sounding outcomes, and encouraged the emergence of specific musical textures, sound choices, harmonic fields, densities and counterpoints, which participants felt could not be achieved through "real improvising" alone.

Many felt that using pre-planned rules and concepts helped them further avoid the kind of "subconscious" habits, "licks" and clichés that often surfaced whilst "real improvising," and strategies ranged from the simple use of stopwatches or egg-timers to limit the length of certain sections of improvisation (and therefore force change), to the use of simple-yet-clear verbal instructions. Clarinetist Michael Thieke described how, in the group *The Pitch*:

> What we fix is the [tonal] material, so we have these pitch sets, which are usually four notes, and… we go from this pitch set to the other and there might be overlapping periods between the two, but it's the idea to keep them really separate. […]

> These pitch sets are actually transposed structures. So one of them, transposition zero would be C, C#, E, and F#… then this structure, [is transposed by a] minor 2nd, or minor 3rd… transposed [through] every 12 notes, and then there's the inversion, and that's the only material we use. […]
>
> Going back from transposition zero to inversion 10 [for example]… that's the piece. […] So that these fields seem to move slowly from one set to another. […] You can [improvise] within these changes… stay on one note, or… go [with] the changing colors.
>
> Or the other thing that we fix, usually, is the way we use [the pitch sets], so we… name them like "frozen"… or "liquid," to have a certain type of movement or space. "Frozen" is… very, very slowed down. Almost like drone music but not with the idea to do a drone, but at least a very slowed down melody, that is basically long tones. And this "liquid" would be more like [the composer Morton] Feldman… not the way he repeats, but more these little phrases that have like a melodic phrase character.

It might easily be said that such detailed instructions left relatively restricted scope for the individual freedom and searching valued by "real improvisers," however, for musicians active in this area, the specific, immediate and concrete musical/sounding outcomes that emerged were considered well worth the sacrifice.

For such musicians, it was mostly unimportant whether or not their work was still termed "improvisation" (bringing to mind Blum's suggestion that performance practice should be evaluated on a spectrum from *more* to *less* improvised), and, for many, such restrictions opened the doors to other more novel, unique and unexpected forms of music-making – encouraging them to question habits, seek freedom in less familiar places and move beyond the "automation" of the flow state.

As Australian bassist Clayton Thomas explained:

> It doesn't matter to me, necessarily whether I'm improvising or not… because actually [the group] *The Ames Room* doesn't improvise, we play a process. But the process frees us up from our own tricks, and so maybe I'm improvising *more* because I'm… less aware of what's going to happen. […]
>
> I'm going to put you on another planet and see how free you are [there], as opposed to, "You're free to do whatever you want," on the same planet all the time.

While some groups like *The Pitch* and *The Ames Room* performed processes in concert and recording situations, for others, rules and concepts were only for use in rehearsals or when working together for the first time – forging connections and developing group-specific "language" or conventions, which culminated in the individual aesthetic and interactional identity of each group.

Aside from small group situations, however, rules and concepts were often introduced to create aesthetic focus and clarity in groups of eight musicians or more, where the rapid arrival of homogenous and "good" musical/sounding outcomes through "real improvising" was deemed highly unlikely, mainly due to an unmanageable number of conflicting wishes and aesthetic aims.

In 2012–13, two main improvising orchestras played regularly in Berlin, and both the *Splitter Orchester* (members of the Echtzeit/[post-]reductionist community) and the *Berlin Improvisers Orchestra* (*Ber.I.O.*, musicians more connected with jazz and free jazz) had upwards of twenty members each.[6]

Despite their aesthetic differences, participants in both ensembles agreed that in larger groups:

> Bad things can happen then when it's completely free. […] People just play because they don't want not to play – they think they *have* to play.

And Anna Kaluza, one of the key organisers of *Ber.I.O.*, added that:

> I don't think it sounds so satisfying [when people improvise freely in a large group context] – it's just too messy. We just don't do it well enough I think, the really free improv. I think it can be learnt, but… people really *want* to play, and it's just almost like 20 people just practicing for themselves sometimes.

Splitter Orchester often attempted to resolve these challenges with pre-decided rules and concepts (even though in many concerts they would choose not to use them), and Biliana Voutchkova described how:

> We do a lot of exercises and a lot of work [in] pre-concert times, in order really to find each other. […] When you're in a smaller group… you don't really need so much preparation… but with Splitter it's needed because we all do this small work on a smaller scale, but when we all come together it's bringing all these other little worlds together and they really need to find each other. […] [Rules and concepts] just make it better, and to make it fresh and to have more possibilities again, that we don't get trapped into doing the same.

Andrea Neumann explained a rule from *Splitter*'s tubist Robin Hayward where "you have an idea to play something, but that you play it thirty seconds later," and also commented that such rules were not necessarily as restrictive as they might at first appear:

> When you have a good rule you can act very free in it. For example there is a rule… it sounds so simple, but it's so effective, when one person changes [material], then everybody has to change in the structure. But it doesn't mean how many people are involved – you don't have to play, [and] sometimes just two people can play. [A lot of different things can happen] inside this, with all the improvised skills.

Adopting a different approach, *Ber.I.O.* focused less on preparation and more on the moment of performance, developing an ever-evolving collection of hand signs that were known to all members of the orchestra. These signals could be used to define specific textures, dynamics, choices of musical material, rhythmic features and orchestration, and also cued various unison gestures, starts and stops.

Musicians received these "conductions" in real time from one or more conductors (who were also improvising with these signs)[7] and, showing how such decision-making could lead directly to concrete musical/sounding results, Anna Kaluza described how:

> [One musician] introduced a new sign, [whereby] his arm moved like a clock. And with his fingers he indicated how many either long or short notes we were allowed to play during the clock going round. So sometimes it was only one or two… [and] it was great because there was nothing happening – only "prrrp" [quietly]… [pauses, silence]… "prrrp" [quietly again]. And that's very rare. It would never ever happen without this [conduction].

Like Neumann and Thomas, Kaluza was careful to add that her aim was not to restrict the freedom of the orchestra's members, and that, despite the election of a conductor or conductors, equality and a flat hierarchy should remain intact among the players:

> We all know that if we don't feel well with someone conducting us, or don't like a situation, then we can always rebel… [and] if you think, "Well no, the music seems to want this or

> that," then do it! It's OK. We're all still responsible for it. […] And then… usually afterwards, the conductors say, "Yeah, great, it was good when you just joined in without me."

Members of *Splitter Orchester* and Ber.I.O. generally agreed that after much common work on rules, concepts and conduction, good "real improvising" should be a possibility in large group scenarios, but only after several weeks of consecutive rehearsal and reflection, during which time the urge "just to play" should be sufficiently tamed, and mutual understanding and a set of conventions for interaction and the management of aesthetic aims should emerge.

3.4 Composition

Finally in this chapter, and even further reducing the risk of non-working musical/sounding outcomes not occurring, many improvising musicians employed composed or pre-planned materials or concepts in their performances.

Through the use of composed materials, pre-decided aesthetic outcomes or processual/interactional frameworks suggested or defined certain directions for improvisation before a single note was even played. While this substantially limited the options for in-the-moment improvisation, the specific musical/sounding outcomes produced were generally deemed worthy of this loss of "honesty," authenticity and freedom (in the sense of "real improvisation").

Just as with the pre-planned rules and concepts detailed in the previous section, musicians evaluated which elements benefitted from being fixed in advanced ("composed") or decided in the moment ("improvised"), however, here, compositional materials were more substantial and clearly defined, and the ratio of pre-planning to in-the-moment freedom was noticeably more skewed towards the former.

The use of compositional materials varied between jazz- and Echtzeitmusik-related improvising activities, and these differences will be explored below.

4 Jazz and (Post-) Free Jazz Related Composition

For many musicians with a background in jazz, compositions were now not just merely vehicles improvising "over" (like the swing feel or harmonic chord changes of traditional/modern jazz), but were used to look "for atmospheres and moods that make good starting points for improvisation," or for "arriving somewhere, or finding a quick consensus in the band."

Compositions were used to provide moments of focus and consensus in otherwise "manic" improvising, and pieces were generally not meant to be treated with the reverence assigned to "the work" in classical music. Short compositional "pillars" were often written with certain players in mind, and musicians were encouraged to interpret these pieces with their own sound and personality, as well as potentially being instructed to "destroy and slash-and-burn everything."

In many cases, compositions could be invoked during an otherwise improvised performance (without planning or a pre-decided set-list), and as drummer Steve Heather explained, when he played in the trio *Booklet*:

> We also have all of these songs that we've worked on, from all over the place, but the idea is just we go on stage and just play. […] If someone brings one in, you can join it, or you can counterpoint it. And in a way, aesthetically for us, the less slick it is the better, because we don't want to be clever. It's not about being clever, it's about being musical. […]
>
> It's exciting to hear… if [the others are] bringing in something… [and] you choose how you want to never-get-your-way-to-where-you-wanna-be in that song.

In this case, the compositions could be performed differently each time, and Heather's bandmate Tobias Delius added that:

> [With] the method we use… we don't know exactly when they're going to come in, or if they're going to come in. […] It's not like we say, "This tune, we're just going to play nice and sweet," we don't make that decision.

It was hoped by many that compositional elements might help bridge the gap between non-expert listeners and more abstract forms of improvisation (*Booklet*'s repertoire included songs by Duke Ellington and Jimi Hendrix, as well as original compositions), and others also saw this as an opportunity to get gigs and recognition in the wider international jazz scene.

5 Echtzeit Composition

Aside from improvising musicians working in more jazz-related areas, musicians of the Echtzeit-scene also used compositional or pre-planned elements in their work.

This was especially common in solo concerts, and bassist Mike Majkowski described how when he played solo:

> Every time I play a solo concert I always have some kind of a game plan, but the way I follow the plan always changes. Or how loose I am with the plan is different from concert to concert. Or [if] I'm able to leave open periods of… chaotic activity and then see where it goes.

In one performance:

> The whole piece only had three pitches. I knew that I would begin with pizzicato D, followed by high D harmonic with the bow, and a lower C# harmonic with the bow, and that was the first cell that I would repeat. And then, over time I would drop the C#, and then just continue with the D pizz[icato], and D bow, and that that would last for 10 minutes. That was the first section. [The] second section would be retaining that high D, but with pizz[icato], and playing an open E string at the same time – "Boom… Boom…" [sings]. You know, so somehow, that thread of the high D remains. And then that would last for 10 minutes. And then the last 10 minutes would be that same D and E, but introducing the C# harmonic again. So that was a pretty clear, strict, straight kind of thing.

In such cases, strict limitations could lead to extremely concentrated performances, and Andrea Neumann described how such decisions could shift her focus onto different areas of the music, thereby allowing her to find more improvisational freedom and sensitivity in new terms:

> Since almost more than one year, when I have a solo… I play… a sort of composition that works with movement… that's very set.
>
> The skills of an improviser are in it, because how you work with [electronic] feedbacks, [and] there are quite a lot of decisions you have to make, even when the material's quite clear. How long you have one sound, when the next is starting, if you do it then again, or if you start with another one. […] I [also] have to listen very, very carefully first to produce [the feedback], and also to know then what I want next.

Somewhat predictably, such pre-planning was deemed undesirable by devout "real improvisers" (although some musicians operated in both domains), and in order to distinguish themselves from

"real" purists and to put a name to their practices as "performer-composers," such composers came to describe their work as "Echtzeit Composition."

This body of work exhibited a fascinating range of improvisational practices within partially composed/pre-planned frameworks, and, for percussionist Burkhard Beins, this allowed him to carefully curate known and unknown elements of his work and to compose processes and freedoms specific to each piece, performer, or performance:

> For me, improvisation means appreciating and welcoming the unknown and unforeseeable, in contrast to an attempt to achieving something one already thinks he knows, or one has thoroughly thought out beforehand. In that sense, all areas I'm working in involve improvisation to a certain degree, but usually it's a combination of both [improvisation and composition].
>
> Nowadays I would want to use the term "Improvised Music" exclusively for a musical praxis, which is predominately in favor of ad-hoc meetings and all the challenges coming with it, which can be great. [However,] hopefully as a result of this process of theoretical differentiation currently flourishing within our circuits, "Improvised Music" [...] can become a term distinct from another term for a different musical praxis of long-term groups using a combination of improvisational and compositional elements – maybe something like "Echtzeit composition." Subsuming it all under "Improvisation" seems too unspecific to me.

Aside from solo work, Echtzeit Compositions were often developed collectively, and groups worked together using improvisation, recording and reflection to create musical structures that were fixed to greater or lesser degrees, and performed repeatedly. Written scores (if there were any) were not necessarily legible to other musicians, and were intended mainly as an aide-memoire for the performer-composers themselves (and not as a means for other musicians to recreate their work).

Michael Thieke and Kai Fagashinski's clarinet duo *The International Nothing* had scores that were (quite deliberately) incomprehensible to anyone other than themselves, and the duo evolved a unique notation system specific to their needs – using diagrams of unconventional fingerings (for multiphonics), verbal instructions, durations and graphic elements.

Describing by far the least "improvised" example of performance practice discussed until now, Thieke explained:

> For 4 years, or 3 years, we worked on this stuff, really intensely… [and] it took us a long time always to write these pieces, [and] to record them. The pieces got a lot more detailed by playing them, so when we first recorded them, we'd never played them live, so then the first record came out and only after [that] did we start to play live. And then by playing concerts, those pieces got actually a lot better, but also the pieces then we wrote got a lot more detailed. […] We had these general topics, which was like a search for "beatings,"[8] [but] now there's a lot of little variations on these things.

Biliana Voutchkova compared this process to her work in the dance world:

> [This] is also a way that dancers work a lot more than musicians, I think. And I think this way is really… the way to go, even purely musically. […] You find material just improvising… you somehow shape it in some way, and it could become a piece. […]
>
> You're researching, and you don't know yet what you have. And in order to find it, you have to talk about it. […] You say, "OK, this is what happened in this moment when I was next to the wall, this is what I felt, this is how it felt." Then you write it down. [You] look at it, and then you collect all this information and then a certain clarity appears. Then it becomes really clear that it's working, or it's not.

Thieke concluded that, in the end, his process was not so different to conventional (musical) composition methods, but did point out that, in the case of *The International Nothing*, there were now two authors instead of one, and the creative steps leading to the work's completion were executed in a somewhat different order:

> I think also in composition there's a lot more improvisation than people would like to admit – even those ones who have really strict systems of composing. […] The improvisation happens during the composing process [but] instead, improvisers compose in the moment, but still with some material that is pre-conceived. I think that's very close to each other, [and] it's just the meaning of time or maybe the function of time in the process is different. […] Certain things happen at a certain different point of the whole process, looking back from the [perspective of the] product, the concert [or] the recording.

6 In Conclusion

This chapter has offered a whirlwind introduction to concepts of risk and risk-management in the world of Improvised Music-making in Berlin during 2012–13.

Separating the musical/sounding and processual/interactional levels of performance allows for two distinct classifications of risk – one defined by the search for fast homogenous "working," aesthetic outcomes, and the other, by the preservation of genre-specific definitions of "honesty," authenticity and intention (explored through "searching" and rewarded, in the best cases, by the emergence of novel and striking aesthetic results).

Musicians defined their musical identities according to their tastes and relationship with these risks, and chose from four main strategies to negotiate the "perils" of different settings and challenges.

These techniques ranged from flow-state "real improvising," "tricks" and conscious interjections and pre-planned rules and concepts, to the use of concrete compositions (which may or may not have emerged through processes involving improvisation).

These strategies affected the risk of good musical/sounding outcomes being reached (and at what speed), whilst having important implications for musicians' adherence to their underlying ideologies, interactional choices and the emergence of novel, concrete or pre-defined aesthetic aims.

Dicing with death, then, maybe it isn't – but the complexity of risk-taking in Improvised Music, as well as the space for individual taste and identity in navigating these choices, shows how different ideologies can exist simultaneously within a field that is generally considered homogenous to the lay listener, and offers important further insight into a range of improvising behaviours beyond.

Notes

1 For the purposes of this article, the term "Improvised Music" refers to the scene of improvisers or improvising musicians belonging to the post-1960s post-jazz tradition of European Improvised Music (emerging from 1960s American Jazz and Free Jazz). This scene encompasses the historically contested designations "Free Improvisation," "Open Improvisation," "Free Improvised Music." and "Non-Idiomatic Improvisation," (Bailey 1993: 83) and contains several sub-scenes and aesthetic distinctions of its own (Arthurs 2015: 100).

2 Since the early 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin has been commonly held to be one of the most important worldwide centres for Improvised Music-making (Beins et al. 2011; Arthurs 2015).

3 My research identified eight main sub-styles or sub-genres active in Berlin's Improvised Music scene, each with its own different aesthetic aims and values (Arthurs 2015: 110–6).

4 It is important to remember that many improvisers draw on a repertoire of materials that are prepared to various degrees, and have been practiced and explored in advance. Improvised Music also, in this sense, is perhaps not as risky as most people might otherwise believe. Many musicians only made conscious choices to dive into the unknown, such as trumpeter Axel Dörner, who described how only in certain cases, and as a conscious choice:

> I like the idea of controlled-discontrol. […] Basically I know what's happening if I do certain things, but sometimes I like to play the trumpet a little bit like a synthesizer, where you turn a knob and you don't know what's happening. Or you know roughly what's going on [laughs] and… you have to deal with this.

5 Contrary to popular belief, the majority of the improvisers I interviewed practiced intensively and regularly with both conventional and more unconventional technical and musical materials (Arthurs 2015).

6 See (Arthurs 2015: 100) for definitions of these sub-scenes.

7 This system of "conduction" was inspired by the work of American cornetist Butch Morris, and was used by similar improvising orchestras all over the world (Kaluza and others having first encountered the system whilst visiting the *London Improvisers' Orchestra* some years earlier). Whilst they used cards with written text instead of hand signals, Splitter Orchester used a similar method in their 2015 *Creative Construction Set*™ performance at the Berlin Jazz Festival (at the initiation of their guest, trombonist and academic George Lewis), and saxophonist/composer John Zorn's *Cobra* remains an essential reference in the field of directed large group improvisation.

8 A psychoacoustic effect caused by the interference between two sounds of very slightly differing pitch.

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