

The Improvisation Studies Reader

Spontaneous Acts

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36 Improvised Responsibility: Opening Statements

(Call and) Responsibility: Improvisation, Ethics, Co-creation

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In improvisation, Daniel Fischlin believes, one encounters the other, and has a responsibility to this encounter. His essay reframes what is known as “jazz” as “an embodiment of hope— ... a musical and social practice of hope and responsibility that has profoundly changed the world.” Dr Fischlin is a composer and instrumentalist (guitar, lute) and a scholar specialising in early music, improvisational studies, human rights, and Shakespeare. In the latter field alone he has produced the book *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2000), co-edited with Mark Fortier, and launched, at the University of Guelph, the SSHRC-funded Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project (CASP), the Shakespeare Learning Commons, *Speare* (an online 3D video game) and The Romeo and Juliet iPhone/iPad/iPod App. With Ajay Heble, Dr Fischlin has edited two books on the socio-political implications of improvised creative musics: *The Other Side of Nowhere* (2004) and *Rebel Musics* (2003). Dr Fischlin has a BFA in Music Performance and an MA in Interdisciplinary Studies from Concordia University, and a PhD in English literature from York University. His most recent books are *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, co-authored with Ajay Heble and George Lipsitz (2013), and *Community of Rights – Rights of Community*, co-authored with Martha Nandorfy (2011).

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I

Improvisation does not occur in a sonic, or for that matter, social vacuum. Its cries and calls, hoots and hollers, invocations and incantations address fellow musicians, audience members, and the protean self of the person making the sound. But improvisation also includes among its addressees, histories, memories, feelings, unspoken and unthought imaginaries barely hinted at, spectral – or that see the light of day only because a *particular* improvisation made it so, made it thinkable, feel-able, articulable as the sound of that precise moment of address.

Every scene of improvisation is haunted by these multiple addressees – is *composed* of these hauntings.

Speaking or sounding in an improvisation carries with it the responsibility of these multiple, synchronic, and diachronic audiences. How to address these audiences in good faith? How to reflect in the aesthetics of the improvisation the wider social contexts out of which any given improvisation arises? How to be beautiful, dissonant, unpredictable,

emancipatory, and playful out of respect for what it means to be fully human, fully expressive of creation as a necessary response to being?

Improvisation is *apostrophe* in the old rhetorical sense of an address to an absence, a personification of something that is called into being by *apostrophe*. It is expressive of a co-dependent relation between creative iteration (call) and the response of others to that invitation to speak and sound together.

Co-dependent relations entail responsibilities: the need to consider what the other has to say; to respond constructively; to disagree; to remain silent *until* one has something to say; to add consonance or dissonance; to change the topic of conversation; even to critique ossified notions of what being responsible might mean in order to provide means of achieving new creative outcomes (think bebop in relation to big-band swing; or free playing in response to bebop). Moreover, improvisation entails vulnerability – a responsibility to the self and other, their interdependent relations, and their commitment to engage in co-creative acts of listening and sounding as a function of what it means to make oneself vulnerable to the other, to address the vulnerability of the self.

Improvisation is simultaneously autonomous in the moment of its creation (anything can potentially happen) and dependent in that same moment on all the contingencies that have produced that moment. Improvisation can:

emphasize the responsibility of the improviser for every aspect of the work, not just the moment of performance but also the tradition of which it is a part and the originary mimetic impulse that this tradition struggles to preserve. What this entails is a responsibility for the alterity that interrupts the familiar situation ... such that the distance between improviser and improvisation is not mystified but recognized for what it is as an integral part of the continuation of the work beyond the instant of its beginning.

(Peters 108)

Improvisation embodies alterity and the conditions that not only produce alterity but that allow us to encounter it creatively, ethically. The other is always a token of co-dependency, co-creation. Being in creative, sustainable relation to one's own contingency requires responsibility to the other. Improvisation is the practice of that relation: a living embodiment of multiple ways of addressing the ethical relation to alterity.

Improvisation is also an invocation of the event horizon of what is thinkable, doable in the moment in which it occurs. It embodies both the finality of the moment and what occurs in that moment and the ineluctable potential that any moment releases as a veering toward that event horizon of possibility. Its quandary is that it embodies both presence and absence. Both the moment itself as it is created and the "what-could-have-been" buried in every moment, the alternative potential that improvisation artfully explores.

Being "in time" necessitates a response to time, expresses a relationship to time that is at once intensely ludic in the moment but also a memorialisation of all past times, and a salute to times that could be. Histories flow from these improvisatory acts in time. Improvisation responds to time, is responsible to the potential always found in time.

Improvisation, then, is *always already* a response to something.

That something is the call, the invocation to speak in sound.

From the call – from all precedent calls, all antecedents to the possibility of the call – comes the moment in the now in which improvisatory iteration occurs.

That moment is the response, but also the responsibility to speak – to enter into the warp and weft of past iterations, past addressees, past improvisatory articulations that

respond to the call, that enter into dialogue with the history of the call, that share the responsibility of responding to the call, that make sound the response to an ethical interrelation provoked by dialogue, community, dissonance, consonance and the striving to communicate.

II

There is no improvisation without a response that is also a responsibility to the underlying questions that ground all improvisation: What do *you* have to say? Here and now? Whom will you address? What will you add to the ineluctable, unavoidable dialogue that improvisatory music emblematises?

Though every improvisatory call-out may not have an adequate response, if a response is even necessary, nonetheless the call-out bears with it a responsibility to ask the right question, to give a timely response, to engage in the potential for dialogue that improvisation makes possible.

Evan Parker, in a 2006 talk on Coltrane, tells the following story:

I found out also that when [Frank] Kofsky was a student at Berkeley University, he asked Coltrane to play a concert to raise money for an organization for improving the situation for Black students in the University system there. Coltrane was agreeable to that idea but the University then forbade the organization to exist. This is as recently as 1961, so it's important to remember and to keep our eye on what people are telling us we can't have today. Two million people on the streets of London saying they didn't want a war, but one man [Tony Blair] and his friend in America [George W. Bush] decided it was a good idea, and now we have to live with the consequences of that for the rest of our lives. Coltrane spoke to the Vietnam War in the same interview [with Frank Kofsky]: "This music is an expression of higher ideals to me, so therefore, brotherhood is there. I believe with brotherhood there would be no poverty, and with brotherhood there would be no war." So Coltrane is no longer a jobbing musician at this point, he's feeling the weight of responsibility that comes with his position, his new position as being considered one of the leading voices in the music and he's using that situation to speak up.

The weight of responsibility Coltrane felt in large part stemmed from his spirituality, which was awakened after Miles Davis sacked him because he was drunk and drug addicted and unreliable. For Coltrane, being fired by Davis must have come as a very profound shock, as well as he was playing, because he always played very well. But clearly he felt something had to be done about this and so the famous story of him going to a room in his auntie's house and shutting the door and staying there until he had broken his addiction to heroin. I suppose that's what he's referring to when he said: "During the year 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life." At this point Coltrane was clearly moving towards a sense of his own destiny and perhaps even a sub-conscious intimation that his life would not be a long one. An urgent sense of purpose begins to motivate all of his playing. And I think at this point we also hear that he's moving away from the conventions of the day.

The responsibility to exercise one's freedom of speech, to one's own sense of purpose, to testing and overturning conventions, to non-violence, to brotherhood and sisterhood – all

are explicit in Parker's anecdote about Coltrane struggling into his own improvisatory voice, a sense of the responsibility that voice carried with it, both politically and aesthetically.

Coltrane's epiphany, as Parker puts it, echoes one of the key tenets of Sufi master and Northern Indian classical musician Hazrat Inayat Khan, who states, "The value of man [sic] is as great as his responsibility, for what mountains cannot bear mankind has carried through life; and that is why a responsible man [sic] naturally shows a spiritual quality in all connections, in all relationships."

Improvisation is the embodiment of this spiritual quality that makes connections and relationships worthy of being called such. Connections require links forged out of dialogue, listening, responding – being responsible to what makes it possible to be together with others.

In *The Mysticism of Music, Sound and Word*, Khan took pains to explain that "Music loses its freedom by being subject to the laws of technique, but mystics in their sacred music ... free both their composition and improvisations from the limitations of technicality." Coltrane's struggles with addiction coincide with his struggle to free himself from the technical considerations of the tenor saxophone. He took on the responsibility of addressing what it might mean to free himself from both in order to achieve purpose in his life via aesthetic freedom of speech.

Improvisation embodies the spirit of this self-transformation that arises from a response to conditions that limit freedom.

American jazz guitarist Sonny Sharrock, renowned for his forays into free jazz in the 60s, had this to say about free improvisation:

Finally, there is freedom – the most misunderstood and the most misused of all these elements [of improvisation]. Freedom grows out of improvisation. It is both your emotional peak and your deeper self. It is the cry of jazz. The one rule for playing free is that you can play anything you want. A critic once remarked to me that it takes a great amount of taste to play free. He was wrong. Artists cannot be hampered by the restriction of taste. What playing free does take is imagination and confidence. In free playing, there is nothing else to stand on; it's like walking in space. If you're confident, you will not fall. The road forms beneath your feet as your imagination takes you places arrived at by no other means. My confidence in the beauty of the music carries me through. Coltrane's *Ascension* [MCA, 29020] is the best example of freedom. Jugglers, tinkers, and fools try to play free; however, they will never succeed. It is reserved only for the masters.

(Sharrock, 2002)

The key line in Sharrock's comments is that "Freedom grows out of improvisation." Freedom, as an event horizon of the possible, is what improvisation as a musical and social practice invokes, leads toward, produces as a potential outcome. In all improvisation there is a fundamental responsibility to making manifest this key principle, however difficult it is to attain. It is the responsibility of the improviser to strive toward freedom of the imagination, of expression, of iteration, of technique in ways that expand what it means to be human in unexpected form.

If music is "entangled in a prison of expectations,"¹ improvisation provides a potential antidote to the prison-house of expectation. Freedom in improvisation comes with the responsibility to break with expectation – to find new meaning outside of imposed conventions; new tools for saying things differently, apart, outside of orthodoxies that are creative constraints.

III

In the 1590s, in its earliest English uses, the word “responsible” was used to mean “answerable (to another, for something),” from the Latin word *respondere*, “to respond” or to “offer something in return.” By the nineteenth century the meaning had shifted to include the sense of being “morally accountable for one’s actions,” while retaining the sense of “obligation” in the Latin root.

The etymology of the word sets forth an array of principles that describe dialogue, interchange, listening, being answerable to someone for something, being ethically obligated. These meanings are at work in any improvisation where similar ethical frames are evident. In listening one prepares to answer. In playing one calls out for an answer. There is an ethical charge to these basic structures of improvisation that carries over into the social practice of responsibility, the social practice of improvisation. Observing these principles allows for right, mindful action to occur.

And, in some cases, the responsible thing to do in an improvisation is to test what it means to be irresponsible. Improvisation always allows for contention, for being with dissonance and tension, for outbreaks that test the limits of a collective sounding even when obligation is present.

Sometimes disavowal of an imposed obligation is the only way forward, as was the case with the oppressive conditions defining slavery. Being non-compliant, in the etymological sense of “irresponsible,” in this situation led to resistant forms of musical expression, led to the civil rights movement, led to redefining exploitative relations and systemic racism. This example teaches us that one group in oppressive relations of power to another cannot arbitrarily define responsibility. Responsibility is co-created out of group dynamics and consensus, where tension and dissonance are key factors in establishing a mutually acceptable, dynamic, processual form of being in community. Improvisation acts out this form of social practice in musical terms.

Creative spontaneity, spontaneous acts of creativity enact hope. They beckon toward what might come of the moment – a hope for what creative interaction brings. Hope is an avatar of freedom – it is the imagination of freedom, the imagination of what the world might be like. Improvisation is a form of responsible hope.

Hope is also intimate liberation. It lives on under oppression in ways that ally it with intimate, sometimes unknowable acts of the imagination, flourishing even as it is constrained or deprived of enactment. It cannot be dissociated from spirit, conscience, creative being.

Frederick Douglass, speaking against slavery, said “The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish *men* from *things*, and *persons* from *property*. Its first aim is to destroy all sense of high moral and religious responsibility” (167). Spirit entails responsibility, conscience – the recognition, in this case, that people are not property.

The oppression located firmly in the African diaspora and enslavement that produced the conditions for one of the greatest improvising musical traditions ever also gave rise to the spirit of the civil rights movement. The latter is the expression of ethical commitment to a deep underlying spiritual recognition of the underlying integrity and equality of all humans. The *telos* of slavery may have been to destroy the responsibility of ethical conduct. Instead it produced a musical and social practice of hope and responsibility that has profoundly changed the world. Hope will not be denied. Improvisation is a constant reminder that it is possible to hope – and to do so in response to conditions that seek to limit human potential and creativity. Again, hope as intimate liberation.

And improvisation as an embodiment of hope – a social practice, practising hope through creation. But also a musical practice with wider applications to other social forms in which hope and responsibility are ineluctably linked.

These aspects of what it means to hope imply corresponding responsibilities. What to do with that freedom? How to map the imaginary onto the real in ways that enhance the quality of life, the right to create, the need for community, the mindful adaptation to the environment that makes life possible.

Improvisation is creative activity oriented toward hope: both a response and a responsibility to the question of what to make of freedom in a contingent world. Like one of the underlying principles associated with civil rights – the need to begin all encounter out of a fundamental respect for difference and the need to encounter difference creatively, non-violently, with integrity – improvisation embodies in practice a similar principle.

Improvisation is, in its most achieved forms of expression, fundamentally opposed to univocal discourse and drawn to pluralist practices. With the hope for creative means of expressing freedom, encountering difference, and exploring pluralist, contingent relations to the world, improvisation takes on the responsibility of performing that hope publicly, enacting it in ways that demonstrate the principle in practice:

Successful improvisations ... are those which build tensions through a process of inventive performance strategies and soundings offered up by individual performers in order that these contributions might be considered and contested by others in the group. The group has the responsibility of listening, and the freedom to reinterpret individual offerings, so that they might creatively resolve the “problem situation” in such a way that, ideally, a rich, coherent musical experience issues forth ...

(Nicholls 98)

Embedded in that hope, in that call toward hope, is also a response. The response that is a responsibility to take on hope, make it real in the moment, seize hold of what is *there* in *that* moment and transmute it into something new, compelling, transformative, active.

Engaging in spontaneous acts of creation embodies the hope that these acts will produce something meaningful. In that meaning that is created, whether as a sign of community, as a marker of what I have called earlier the event horizon of the possible, or as a critical intervention, there is a responsibility in the making of spontaneity towards the meaning generated out of it.

This is so because the so-called freedom implicit in spontaneous acts of creation is heavily mediated by histories, disciplines, affective memories, technical and environmental contingencies, economics, power, identity, and so forth. The moment may be free or an expression of the search for a tangible freedom but it carries forward with it the contexts that make any given moment possible. These contexts are a form of call. The specific histories of diasporic Africans responding to slavery and oppression are one such call. So, too, is the network of community affiliations, dissonances, and creative outputs that precede any response. There is a responsibility to those contexts in every improvised act, if only to provide an adequate response to these calls that precede the moment of making.

Improvisation requires deep listening. It requires the intimacy that comes of listening to the other soundings calling out for response. Listening in that creative register is an ethical act – an act that embodies responsibility, an expression of contingent encounter, a

co-dependent and co-creative ethical relation. It arises from self as a function of otherness.

What might it mean to take the musical practice of improvisation – its rich models of call and responsibility – into the embodied social practice of being in community, being in biotic relation to the earth, being an ethical expression of the idea, “you are therefore I am”?

In the improvised, potential answers to that question is the beginning of what it might mean to be response-ible.

Notes

- 1 I'm indebted to my fifteen-year old daughter Esmé Nandorfy-Fischlin for this phrase from a very frank poem she wrote (“A Silent Tune”) about her complicated relationship to the piano and to music in general.

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