

## THE ART OF IMPROVISATION AND THE AESTHETICS OF IMPERFECTION

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MILES Davis's *Kind of Blue*, from 1959, is one of the most famous recordings in jazz. The pianist on the date was Bill Evans. In his sleeve note to the album, Evans drew a comparison with a Japanese school of painting on parchment, where change or erasing is impossible without damage to the parchment:

. . . the artist is forced to be spontaneous. . . . These artists must practise a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere. The resulting pictures lack the complex composition and textures of ordinary painting, but it is said that those who see well find something captured that escapes explanation.<sup>1</sup>

These procedures are, he continues, echoed in the 'severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician'. According to Evans, Miles Davis conceived the sketches for *Kind of Blue* only hours before the date, and the musicians were not shown them until they turned up at the studio—yet most performances were completed satisfactorily on a first take. 'Therefore, you will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances', Evans wrote. This is especially remarkable because, as he says, the pieces represented a particular challenge—Davis's settings pioneered a new style of modal as opposed to chord-based improvisation in jazz.

Evans thought deeply about improvisation and was totally committed to it. But unusually, he had a thorough grounding in classical repertoire and technique. Some listeners, hearing only this influence, regarded his style as effete, cocktail piano dressed up as Debussy–Ravel impressionism. More recently an equally questionable adulation by classical writers has appeared; a sophisticated version is found in Peter Pettinger's excellent recent biography.<sup>2</sup> Pettinger is right to argue that Evans generated his deep emotional expression from a classical 'singing tone'. But he neglects Evans's commitment to improvisation, and takes classical masterpieces as the touchstone of artistic excellence.

<sup>1</sup> Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (New York: Columbia, 1959), sleeve note. Reprinted as 'Improvisation in Jazz', in R. O'Meally, *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Pettinger, *Bill Evans: How My Heart Sings* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale U.P., 1998).

On this kind of view, it is hard to explain why improvisers should not write out their ‘improvisations’ in advance, improving and perfecting them—that is, composing them. Improvisation is a near-universal tendency in music and really needs no defence. But from the aesthetic viewpoint of Western art music it appears to have the deficiencies highlighted by Ted Gioia:

Improvisation is doomed, it seems, to offer a pale imitation of the perfection attained by composed music. Errors will creep in, not only in form but also in execution; the improviser, if he sincerely attempts to be creative, will push himself into areas of expression which his technique may be unable to handle. Too often the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages. Why then are we interested in this haphazard art?<sup>3</sup>

Gioia is concerned to show why we are, nonetheless, interested in the ‘imperfect art’ of improvisation. His defence he labels ‘the aesthetics of imperfection’, in contrast to ‘the aesthetics of perfection’ which takes composition as the paradigm. In this essay I will argue that the contrast between composition and improvisation proves more subtle and complex than Gioia and other writers allow. The focus is principally on jazz and related popular music, but much of the discussion is, I think, applicable to other kinds of improvised music.

#### I. AESTHETICS OF PERFECTION AND IMPERFECTION

The dichotomy between improvisation and composition is rooted in historical circumstance and lacked its present meaning, or perhaps any meaning at all, before the musical work-concept achieved hegemony—a process of increasing specificity of the score that was completed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Lydia Goehr writes, ‘By 1800 . . . the notion of extemporization acquired its modern understanding [and] was seen to stand in strict opposition to “composition” proper.’<sup>4</sup>

Philosophers, mesmerized by the vision of the scored musical work, mostly do not think enough about improvisation and its implications. In Roger Scruton’s *The Aesthetics of Music*, for instance, the work-concept dominates and an improvisation is treated as a work that is identical with a performance—an attitude that reflects the hegemony of Western art music. George Lewis rightly argues that since 1800 there has been an ‘ongoing narrative of dismissal’ of improvisation by Western composers, though like Scruton he rather neglects the historicity of the

<sup>3</sup> E. Gioia, *The Imperfect Art* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1988), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> L. Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 234—a brief account of the changing concept of improvisation is found at pp. 188–189 and 232–234. Goehr is possibly influenced by Adorno’s insistence on the historicity of the concepts of improvisation and composition, discussed in Max Paddison, *Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), pp. 192–198.

concept of improvisation.<sup>5</sup> That narrative expresses an aesthetics of perfection which arose with the work-concept, and which is opposed by an aesthetics of imperfection associated with improvisation.

This opposition concerns, in the first instance, whether composition should be privileged over improvisation, or vice versa. But it offers a fruitful framework for looking at certain aesthetic questions in the performing arts—questions that turn out to be fundamental to the nature of music. It is illustrated by the debate between Busoni, the defender of improvisation, and Schoenberg, the compositional determinist.<sup>6</sup> Schoenberg emphasized the autonomy of the composer-genius in the creation of masterworks, which, he insisted, required the complete subservience of the performer; Busoni found virtues in improvisation and in the individual contribution of the performer-interpreter.

Busoni writes:

Notation, the writing out of compositions, is primarily an ingenious expedient for catching an inspiration, with the purpose of exploiting it later. But notation is to improvisation as the portrait is to the living model. . . . What the composer's inspiration necessarily loses through notation, his interpreter should restore by his own . . .

He defends his practice of transcription—the arrangement of a composition for a medium different from the one for which it was originally composed—and argues that ‘Every notation is, in itself, the transcription of an abstract idea. The instant the pen seizes it, the idea loses its original form . . .’ The purity of the improvisation is one step less removed from the locus of artistic inspiration.

For Schoenberg, in contrast, there is only gain in the working-up of an improvisation into a crafted composition. He rejects Busoni's claim that improvisation has artistic priority: ‘the portrait has higher artistic life, while the model has only a lower life’. The interpreter is the servant of the work: ‘He must read every wish from its lips’. Interpreters' attempts to express their own individuality are regrettable: ‘And so the interpreter mostly becomes a parasite on the exterior, when he could be the artery in the circulation of the blood’.

The aesthetics of imperfection thus focuses on the moment or event of performance, while its rival emphasizes the timelessness of the work. The rival aesthetics are tendencies in the rather complex thought of Busoni and Schoenberg, and the dichotomy, as will become clear, implies others: process and product; impermanence and permanence; spontaneity and deliberation. A

<sup>5</sup> R. Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); George Lewis, ‘Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives’, *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1996), pp. 91–122.

<sup>6</sup> The ‘debate’ consisted of Schoenberg writing marginal comments in his copy of Busoni's book; subsequent quotations are from F. Busoni, ‘Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music’, in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover, 1962), p. 84, and H. H. Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg: His Life, World and Work* (London: John Calder, 1977), pp. 226–227.

contemporary expression of an aesthetics of perfection is found, for instance, in comments by British composer Thomas Adès, who is evidently more interested in product than process: 'I'm trying to fix something . . . I don't know how a jazz artist or improviser goes about their work, it's a mystery to me. And I would think that what I do is rather a mystery to them.' Adès is not tempted, like Mark-Anthony Turnage, to incorporate passages of improvisation in his compositions. Revealingly, he says that if he did, 'in 70 or 80 years' time there'll be this very weird situation where you'll have these scores with holes in them, and the people won't be there to fill the holes in'.<sup>7</sup>

To some readers the idea of an 'aesthetics of imperfection' will be overly paradoxical, its connotations too negative: how could imperfection possibly be an aesthetic value? But 'perfection' and 'imperfection' have a descriptive sense close to their Latin derivation: 'perficere' means 'to do thoroughly, to complete, to finish, to work up'; 'imperfectus' means 'unfinished, incomplete'. The aesthetics of imperfection finds virtues in improvisation which transcend the errors in form and execution acknowledged by Gioia. Indeed, it claims, these virtues arise precisely because of the 'unfinished state' of such performances.

While acknowledging the unique value of improvisation, the argument of this essay consists of a progressive qualification of the rival aesthetics, and in particular a rejection of their common assumption that improvisation is a kind of instant composition. The rival aesthetics offer an account of both interpretation and improvisation. Here I focus on the latter, but an essential part of my argument is that there is in important respects a fluid contrast between a composed work and an improvisation. Their exemplars stand in a continuum, and 'improvisation' and 'composition' denote ideal types or interpenetrating opposites. The latter term derives from Hegel—interpenetration of opposites is a law of Hegelian logic—and I hope it is not too pretentious to regard the argument in the present article as a kind of dialectic. A feature that seems definitive of one ideal type also turns out to be present, in some sense, in the other—or so I will argue with regard to preparation, spontaneity, and structure.

The continuum can be illustrated as follows. Pre-realized electronic music stands at the far end of the pre-structured spectrum since although possibly possessing spontaneity at the level of composition, at the level of performance—strictly a misnomer—it is fixed. Composers such as Bach who leave much to the performer, and trial-and-error compositional efforts of students in a recording studio, contrast with the organic, motivically developing, through-composed works of composers such as Schoenberg. Within the improvised sector, pre-performance structuring ranges from the work of jazz composers such as Ellington and Gil Evans to the very loose frameworks brought along by Miles Davis to the *Kind of Blue* recording session. At the furthest 'improvised' limit of

<sup>7</sup> A. Hamilton, 'Thomas Adès: Sleaze Operas', *The Wire*, issue 176 (October 1998), p. 13.

the continuum stands free improvisation, a development of 1960s free jazz, which dispensed with recurring harmonic sequences and an explicit metre.

Thus the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection apply not just at the level of performance, but within the process of composition also. Or rather, there is a sense in which these levels overlap; there may, for instance, be little difference between a loosely constructed studio composition and the recording of an improvisation. It may, for some purposes, be useful to divide the continuum in two, with works on one side and improvisations on the other, but this glosses over continuities and similarities.

The rival aesthetics extend into other aspects of artistic production. With recording, for instance, the arena of debate is shifted onto new ground, again with a contrasting focus on the moment of performance (imperfection) or the timelessness of the work (perfection). Recording offers new possibilities of vindicating an aesthetics of perfection, since allegedly contingent conditions of live performance can be screened out—an approach expressed most thoughtfully in the creative recording techniques of pianist Glenn Gould. The imperfectionist view, in contrast, is that recording should be treated as a transparent medium giving a faithful representation of a particular performance, with only the grossest imperfections eliminated.<sup>8</sup>

Although an aesthetics of perfection seems to demand absolute fidelity to the composer's intentions—or rather, it has a very narrow and stringent conception of what such fidelity involves—it should be separated from a commitment to authentic performance in its present-day sense. The aesthetics of perfection perhaps implies a Platonist conception of the musical work as a timeless sound-structure detachable from its original conditions of performance—instruments as well as locations. The implication from Platonism to perfectionism is stronger, as Glenn Gould's remarks illustrate:

Music need not be performed any more than books need to be read aloud, for its logic is perfectly represented on the printed page; and the performer . . . is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.<sup>9</sup>

The recent concept of authenticity, in contrast, is more ambivalent between perfection and imperfection. It has been argued that it rejects the 'portability of music' in favour of an ideal of acoustic interdependence of composer, ensemble, and environment.<sup>10</sup> But it may also be regarded as a confused expression of a

<sup>8</sup> I discuss later the sense in which recordings convert improvisations into works; and address the issue of recording in a sequel to the present essay. My inadequate first thoughts on the general issue appeared as 'The Aesthetics of Imperfection', *Philosophy*, vol. 65, no. 253 (1990), pp. 323–340.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Kevin Bazzana, *Glenn Gould: The Performer in the Work* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 20–21.

<sup>10</sup> This is the view of Robin Maconie, *The Concept of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 150–151.

timeless conception—a preservation in aspic. But the issue of musical Platonism requires development elsewhere.

It is necessary at this point to say a few inadequate words about terminology. Just as ‘composition’ is not a unitary phenomenon, neither is ‘Western art music’. The concept of an ‘art music’ requires more than an article in itself; jazz, for instance, may now be an art music in its own right. Most people know what is being referred to by the term ‘classical music’, but its drawbacks are manifest. In the other arts the term refers to a period of particular excellence or influence. Only in music is it ever simply equated with ‘serious’, signalling the museum of musical works which constitutes the modern concert repertoire, an end-product of post-Romantic historicism. So here I stick with ‘Western art music’.

## II. INSTRUMENTAL IMPULSE AND INDIVIDUAL TONE

The idea that improvisation involves ‘pure transmission of the musical idea’ is emphasized by many proponents of an aesthetics of imperfection, including Busoni and Bill Evans. W. F. Bach wrote of his father:

. . . his organ compositions were indeed full of the expression of devotion, solemnity and dignity; but his unpremeditated organ playing, in which nothing was lost in the process of writing down but everything came directly to life out of his imagination, is said to have been still more devout, solemn, dignified and sublime.<sup>11</sup>

The view is echoed by Leo Smith, avant-garde trumpet-player and ideologist of free jazz:

improvisation . . . is not like composition . . . [where an] idea [is conceived] at one instant, only to be funneled at a later time through a standard system of notation onto paper as merely a related idea, and finally interpreted and performed . . . as an idea removed at least three times from the original.<sup>12</sup>

These writers regard improvisation as a kind of instant composition, a natural picture which the present essay is concerned to undermine. I will do so indirectly at first, by exploring the immediacy which arises from the improviser’s close relation with their instrument, then directly by looking at the spontaneity present in improvised performances.

Proponents of an aesthetics of imperfection such as Derek Bailey have maintained that there is an ‘instrumental impulse’ which improvisation encourages, and which is much stronger than among interpreters. For the improviser the instrument is ‘a source of material, and technique is often an exploitation of the natural resources of that instrument’. Saxophonist Steve Lacy writes: ‘The

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in ‘Improvisation’ by Eva Badura-Skoda, in S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> L. Smith, *notes (8 pieces). source a new world music* (creative music, USA: Leo Smith, 1973—the pamphlet has no page numbers or capital letters).

instrument—that’s the matter—the stuff—your subject.’<sup>13</sup> Bailey could have cited Beethoven’s riposte to Schuppanzigh, when the violinist complained about a difficult passage in the Violin Concerto: ‘Do you believe I was thinking of your wretched fiddle when the Spirit spoke to me?’<sup>14</sup>

But perhaps even Beethoven was not always so confident about the Spirit’s lack of concern with mundane technical matters. Many improvisers see the instrument as musical material, but so also do many composers. Where they are not performers of the instrument they are writing for, such composers sensibly learn about its possibilities from those who are. A contemporary example is Luciano Berio’s virtuoso *Sequenze* for solo instruments, which explore new sonorities and effects, many of which are now passing into mainstream tradition.

However, Bailey’s remarks about the instrumental impulse highlight a significant contrast between improvisers and interpreters. In improvised music, instrumental timbre and instrumental technique are non-standard and more individual. Jazz saxophonist Sam Rivers provides an uncompromising instance: ‘I listened to everyone I could hear to make sure I didn’t sound like them. I wasn’t taking any chances; I wanted to be sure I didn’t sound like anyone else.’<sup>15</sup> Classical saxophonists, in contrast, seem to subscribe to a standard of correctness involving a plummy tone and string-style legato, evolved to blend with the rest of the section and orchestra, and resulting in stylistic anonymity.

Classical saxophone is an extreme case. But in Western art music there is, within a particular period and within broad parameters, at least the concept of a standard of correct technique and tone—though authorities may differ over the nature of rubato, the desirability of vibrato, and so on. Individualities of tone are narrower, if still important and inevitably subject to fashion. (To the extent to which this no longer applies in contemporary Western art music, there is a break-down of barriers between composed and improvised music.)

The jazz ethos of freedom has led to a marked variety of timbre and tone in certain instruments, notably trumpet, saxophone, and string bass, while in other cases, for instance piano, jazz has been less innovative in comparison to classical music. But it is hard to see how the concept of a standard of correctness has application anywhere in jazz. A jazz saxophonist who resorted to the vaudeville technique of slap-tonguing, or the classical player’s woodwind tone, would be unfashionable but not ‘incorrect’. (Wynton Marsalis’s aspirations towards a jazz academy are peripheral to the main development of the music.)

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (Ashbourne, Derby: Moorland, 1980; 2nd edn London: British Library, 1992), pp. 92, 94 (1st edn). This groundbreaking book is an invaluable resource for discussion of improvisation.

<sup>14</sup> Or words to that effect—for a less pithy version, see I. Crofton *et al.* (eds), *A Dictionary of Musical Quotations* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Sam Rivers, *Dimensions and Extensions* (New York: Blue Note, 1986), sleeve note.

Although the need for orchestral homogeneity is a factor, the contrast in individuality follows principally from the fact that classical players are interpreters of a composed work to which they must strive to be faithful—a requirement understood differently depending on whether the interpreter agrees with Busoni or Schoenberg, but one that inevitably imposes limits on tonal idiosyncrasy. Moreover, the whole interpretative enterprise is underwritten by the authority of the art music. Denigration of more individual, unschooled techniques by proponents of an aesthetics of perfection is an expression of classical authority, in the sense found in John Potter's recent book *Vocal Authority*. Potter is concerned to explain, in ideological terms, how one variety of singing, 'that used for what we in the West call classical music, appears to have a uniquely authoritative status relative to all other possible kinds'.<sup>16</sup>

A subtle illustration of the operation of authority is found in Peter Pettinger's discussion of Bill Evans, who developed an individual timbre for jazz piano precisely by drawing on the classical model. Pettinger's musical thesis is that from classical arm-weight technique Evans created an apparently understated but powerful emotional expression unprecedented in jazz, wresting a singing tone from what is essentially a percussion instrument. What attracted him was that Evans 'sounded like a classical pianist, and yet he was playing jazz . . . it was the very idea that one style of music could be played with the skills and finesse normally only brought to another'. Sonny Clark, a possible influence on Evans, is described as

one of those pianists who feel, and show, respect for the instrument; one who collaborates with it rather than acts the aggressor upon it. Such a player is immediately in a position to judge and vary sound quantity (while maintaining quality), and thereby to control tonal nuance within a line.<sup>17</sup>

Pettinger's subtext is an expression of classical authority over keyboard technique. His implication is that great jazz pianists such as Ellington, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, and Cecil Taylor fall short. It is true that in earlier jazz, pianists had to play on substandard instruments where an attempt to extract a singing tone would be futile; Evans's style is possible only on a grand piano of superior quality. But there are other timbral effects to be gained from a piano than a singing tone, and it would be more correct to say that it was a concern with *classical* tone which most jazz pianists lacked.

Consider Cecil Taylor's description of being influenced by Horace Silver, who

<sup>16</sup> John Potter, *Vocal Authority: Singing Style and Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Pettinger, *How My Heart Sings*, pp. ix, 72. The cantabile style appeared during the nineteenth century—it was clearly not possible on the fortepiano—though Bartok was not the only classical composer who later rejected it. No one has explained how its production is physically possible, even with the mechanism of the modern piano.



played 'the real thing of Bud [Powell], with all the physicality of it, with the filth of it, and the movement in the attack', which Taylor at that time called 'the Negro idea'. Visceral energy, funk, and bluesiness are unlikely to be obtained with classical arm-weight technique, and they are not qualities associated with Bill Evans.<sup>18</sup> But his lines exhibit a lean rhythmic vitality lacking in the Evans transcriptions played 'perfectly' but unidiomatically by classical pianist Jean-Yves Thibaudet.<sup>19</sup> Thibaudet is typical of classical pianists who try to play jazz, putting effort into irrelevant expressive effects while neglecting the crucial improvised feel. Pettinger is wrong to privilege one kind of technique over another. The prescriptions of the authoritative art music are not universal; good technique must be characterized with reference to the kind of musical effects the performer is trying to achieve.

I claimed earlier that improvisation and composition constitute interpenetrating opposites. This is illustrated by the way in which both composers and improvisers use the instrument as musical material; the creation of an individual timbre in improvised music is matched by a more circumscribed tonal individuality in great classical soloists. But the dialectic of interpenetration is more clearly observed in respect of the alleged unique spontaneity of improvised music.

### III. THE CONCEPT OF IMPROVISATION: IMPROVISED FEEL AND INTENTIONAL FALLACY

'You will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances', Evans wrote of *Kind of Blue*. This claim is an essential element of an aesthetics of imperfection, but it has not always been the improviser's ideal. According to a report of the 1760s, Austrian composer and violinist Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf performed a violin concerto followed by an encore of brilliant 'improvised' virtuosity which, he later admitted, had been prepared in advance.<sup>20</sup>

This attitude to improvisation persists after the development of the work-concept. Most jazz musicians up to the Swing Era would have felt no compunction in rehearsing and working-up their solos. Billie Holiday was one among many whose performances of the same song varied only in minor details, though her interpretations evolved over time.<sup>21</sup> Harry Carney from the Ellington

<sup>18</sup> Quotation from J. Collier, *The Making of Jazz* (London: Granada, 1978), p. 456. One irony is that Taylor is also conservatory-trained; another is that Evans himself always cited Bud Powell as his key jazz influence. The interesting case of Thelonious Monk is discussed in T. Fitterling, *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music*, trans. R. Dobbin (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 1997), pp. 98–104.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Yves Thibaudet, *Conversations with Bill Evans* (London: Decca, 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Badura-Skoda, 'Improvisation', p. 43.

<sup>21</sup> We know this from alternative takes of the same song. On improvisation in early jazz, see G. Schuller, *The Swing Era* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1989), pp. 162n. and 307n.; and Conrad Cork, *Harmony with Lego Bricks* (Leicester: Tadley Ewing, rev. edn 1996), pp. 81–86.

orchestra rarely varied his solos on given numbers at all. The influence of Charlie Parker in the artistically self-conscious modern jazz of the 1940s was paramount in generating an ideal of genuinely spontaneous creation. But performers with his genius, where alternative takes of the same song at the same recording session will be radically different, remain very rare.

What does spontaneity amount to in improvised performances? And how does it matter aesthetically? These questions bring us to the heart of the concept of improvisation. A useful case-study is the contemporary von Dittersdorf observed by a journalist from *Downbeat* magazine:

How much is improvised? Tonight, [Ray] Bryant played 'After Hours' in a note-for-note copy of the way he played it on the Dizzy, Rollins and Stitt album on Verve some fifteen years ago. Was it written then? Or worse. Has he transcribed and memorised his own solo, as if it were an archaeological classic? It was fine blues piano indeed, but it was odd to hear it petrified in this way.<sup>22</sup>

If it was 'fine blues piano', would it matter that it was 'petrified'?

Writers who adopt a purely genetic or causal account of the concept of improvisation imply that its presence is of little aesthetic consequence. Stanley Cavell claims that the standard concept of improvisation 'seems merely to name events which one knows, as matters of historical fact . . . independent of anything a critic would have to discover by an analysis or interpretation . . . not to have been composed'. And Eric Hobsbawm writes: 'There is no special merit in improvisation. . . . For the listener it is musically irrelevant that what he hears is improvised or written down. If he did not know he could generally not tell the difference.' However, he continues, 'improvisation, or at least a margin of it around even the most "written" jazz compositions, is rightly cherished, because it stands for the constant living re-creation of the music, the excitement and inspiration of the players which is communicated to us'.<sup>23</sup>

Of course, the concept of improvisation has an essential genetic component. Although it glosses over crucial complexities, a succinct definition would be 'not written down or otherwise fixed in advance'—Ray Bryant's performance was apparently fixed though not written down. A purely genetic account claims that whether a performance is improvised is not usually apparent merely by listening to it. It suggests, furthermore, that the mere fact that a performance is improvised is not an aesthetically or critically relevant feature. (There will be several

<sup>22</sup> *Downbeat* report from May 1978, quoted in Gioia, *Imperfect Art*, pp. 52–53. How did Hollenberg, the journalist, know the solos were note-for-note the same—he wasn't taping without the artist's permission by any chance? Even von Dittersdorfs have performing rights.

<sup>23</sup> S. Cavell, 'Music Discomposed', in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976), p. 200; Hobsbawm quote from *The Jazz Scene*, first published 1959 under the pseudonym of Francis Newton, quoted in R. Gottlieb, *Reading Jazz* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 813. Cavell offers a more elusive sense of 'improvised' on pp. 200–201.

variations on the latter claim.) This amounts to the formalistic claim that there is an ‘intentional fallacy’ concerning improvisation—reminiscent of the suggestion that extraneous knowledge of authorial intention is irrelevant to critical evaluation.

The genetic account exaggerates the extent to which improvisation is undetectable, I would argue. There is a genuine phenomenon of an *improvised feel*, gestured at by Hobsbawm’s comments on what improvisation symbolizes. Curiously, the best description of it is found in a book aimed at the few remaining improvisers in the organ-loft. In *The Art of Improvisation* from 1934, T. C. Whitmer offered a set of ‘General Basic Principles’ which included the following description, one which justifies the term ‘aesthetics of imperfection’:

Don’t look forward to a finished and complete entity. The idea must always be kept in a state of flux. An error may only be an unintentional rightness. Polishing is not at all the important thing; instead strive for a rough go-ahead energy. Do not be afraid of being wrong; just be afraid of being uninteresting.<sup>24</sup>

From this feel, I think, arises the distinctive form of melodic lines and voicings in an improvised performance. The qualities Whitmer cites are salient features, present to varying degrees. Although Bill Evans’s beauty of tone seems in conflict with a ‘rough go-ahead energy’, there is an understated tensile quality in his work. Jean-Yves Thibaudet’s performances of Evans transcriptions, in contrast, do not sound improvised.

One might say of a purported improvisation ‘That couldn’t have been improvised’—meaning, for instance, that the figuration is too complex, the instrumental voicings too clear to be created under the constraints of an improvised performance. (Although one might consider that J. S. Bach was able to improvise music of such complexity.) The converse claim—‘That couldn’t have been composed’—sounds odd, because the features which justify it are more elusive. But it is often possible to justify the claim ‘That *wasn’t* composed’.

It is true, however, that an improvised feel might be present in music which takes improvisation as its model—Ray Bryant’s example might be a case in point—and possibly even where a composer is looking to create an improvised effect. Would the fact that the performance was not improvised ‘matter aesthetically’? One might justifiably alter one’s view of the skill of the performer; but there is a more elusive sense in which it matters. The sense of disappointment on discovering that the performer was a von Dittersdorf belongs to an interesting family of responses to what appears to be extraneous knowledge that some artistic ideal has been transgressed. The listener is surprised and disappointed to discover that an enjoyable piece by John Cage was created randomly using chance operations based on the *I Ching*; that a classical recording

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation*, p. 48.

was constructed from tape-extracts of many separate takes; that an art photographer's work involves superimposition of figures or objects not in the original scene; that a putative abstract painting is in fact a piece of discarded interior decoration; or—a more extreme case—that a favourite painting is a fake. (Improvisation used to be called 'faking', hence 'fake books', collections of melodies and chord sequences of standard songs for improvisation; the idea, presumably, was that the player would be 'faking' that they were playing something composed.)

In the case of improvisation, the artistic ideal is part of what separates art from entertainment.<sup>25</sup> Ray Bryant's performance, for all its skill, seems indebted to the routine that wows the audience. (Oscar Peterson might be a better example of this approach.) A routine is something perfected by the performer, who knows it works and sticks with it. Insofar as improvisation is present, it involves a 'bag of tricks' model. Routines are just what is avoided by the 'modernists' who reject the culture industry—Bill Evans, Paul Bley, and all those who despise flashy virtuosity. There are obvious parallels here with the development of Western art music.

So there are various senses in which improvisation matters aesthetically. Claims of an intentional fallacy are not vindicated, even assuming that there is a viable notion of 'extraneous' knowledge. The role of preparation further undermines such claims. Cavell and Hobsbawm seem to subscribe to the 'instant composition' view of improvisation. In my criticism of this view I will develop the negative definition of improvisation, and the beginnings of a positive one in terms of improvised feel. The idea of a continuum of composition and improvisation has been rather neglected in the preceding discussion, but it reappears in the idea of different kinds of preparation for performance.

#### IV. SPONTANEITY AND THE AESTHETICS OF PERFECTION

The view of improvisation as instant composition is a characterization shared both by an aesthetics of imperfection with its ideal of complete spontaneity, and by the aesthetics of perfection which denigrates improvisation. These positions are, in a way, mutually dependent; the difference is that one eulogizes instant composition while the other declares it hopeless. Later I will criticize the first position. Here I will argue against the first, which claims that all improvisers, precisely because of their aspiration to complete spontaneity, are really like von Dittersdorf; improvisation is a barrier to individual self-expression, not a way of realizing it. Modernist composers are almost unanimous in this view. (The positions of Stockhausen and, if it is possible to extend the debate to other art forms, Jackson Pollock, are ambivalent.)

Elliott Carter, for instance, argues that improvisation allows undigested frag-

<sup>25</sup> I owe this suggestion to Max Paddison.

ments of the unconscious to float to the surface. Since he is not an Expressionist, he does not approve:

carefully written scores produce the most unroutinized performances because, in preventing performers from playing in their usual way, they suggest another kind of spontaneous reaction—to the musical concepts underlying the music—which has greater potential for liveliness than is usually the case with improvisation.

His conclusion is that ‘improvisation is undertaken mainly to appeal to the theatrical side of musical performance and rarely reaches the highest artistic level of . . . Western [art] music’.<sup>26</sup>

Pierre Boulez questions the more radical chance or aleatoric techniques deployed during the 1960s by Stockhausen and others, which leave much to the performer’s decision:

If the player were an inventor of primary forms or material, he would be a composer . . . if you do not provide him with sufficient information to perform a work, what can he do? He can only turn to information he has been given on some earlier occasion, in fact to what he has already played.<sup>27</sup>

The criticism is that familiar patterns of notes are embedded in the performer’s muscular memory as a result of countless hours spent with the instrument, and regurgitated when there is no restraining score. Improvisers express themselves less than they think because so much of what they play is what they are remembering, including things they do not even know they are remembering. This, at least, is the Carter–Boulez line.

Carter, like Adorno earlier, neglects those modernists in improvisation who do not just appeal to the ‘theatrical side of musical performance’. Boulez’s statement clearly begs the question against improvisation. It amounts to an assertion of the classical hegemony expressed by the honorific title ‘composer’. Improvisation precisely constitutes a denial of the view that if the player were an ‘inventor of primary forms or material’, he or she would be a composer. (What the force of ‘primary’ is remains unclear.) It is true that the improviser has less chance than the composer to eradicate cliché in their work—as the aesthetics of imperfection recognizes. But there are various ways in which the critique may be addressed. One is to view the improviser’s successive performances of a song or number as

<sup>26</sup> E. Carter, *Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937–95*, ed. J. Bernard (Rochester, NY: Rochester U.P., 1997), pp. 324–325. Carter’s music has been much-influenced by jazz rhythms—maybe he just prefers his jazz well-rehearsed, like Jelly Roll Morton’s.

<sup>27</sup> P. Boulez, *Orientations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 461. Lukas Foss says that in improvisation ‘one plays what one already knows’, while John Cage, who is not a modernist and so might be more sympathetic, agrees; see Lewis, ‘Improvised Music after 1950’, p. 106. Aleatoric music is in fact only marginally influenced by improvisation—an issue discussed in A. Hamilton, ‘Undercurrents #5: Music of Chance’, *The Wire*, issue 183 (May 1999), pp. 42–45.

constituting a developing work, incrementally altered and never wholly spontaneous. I am not sympathetic to this view, which could not cover all cases, but will return to it in the final section.

Here I want to argue that Carter and Boulez neglect the fact that the improviser's preparation and practice is precisely intended to 'keep [them] from playing what [they] already know'. Saxophonist Steve Lacy, one of the most thoughtful improvisers in contemporary jazz, argues that:

[There] is a freshness, a certain quality that can only be obtained by improvisation, something you cannot possibly get by writing. It is something to do with the 'edge'. Always being on the brink of the unknown and being prepared for the leap. And when you go on out there you have all your years of preparation and all your sensibilities and your prepared means but it is a leap into the unknown . . .

LaMonte Young, the pioneer of minimalism, commented:

There's a very fine balance between structure, preparation and control, and letting things come through. When I play *The Well-Tuned Piano*, even though I've practised and have a great deal of information under my fingers and running through my head . . . I totally open myself up to a higher source of inspiration and try to let it flow through me. I play things that I could've never played, that I couldn't imagine.<sup>28</sup>

Other improvisers, instead of talking mystically of a 'higher source', will appeal to the unconscious as a fertile source of musical ideas, in a way which Carter rejects.

Thus there is a relation between performance and pre-performance activity not envisaged by Carter and Boulez—nor by the polar opposite of their view, the pure spontaneity of an aesthetics of imperfection. Interpreters think about and practice a work with the aim of giving a faithful representation of it in performance. Improvisers also practice, but with the aim of being better prepared for Lacy's 'leap'. Many improvisers will formulate structures and ideas, and at an unconscious level these phrases will provide openings for a new creation. Thus there are different ways for a performer to get beyond what they already do, to avoid repeating themselves.

For the improviser, the performance must feel like a 'leap into the unknown', and it will be an inspired one when the hours of preparation connect with the requirements of the moment and help to shape a fresh and compelling creation. At the time of performance they must clear their conscious minds of prepared patterns and simply play. Thus it makes sense to talk of preparation for the spontaneous effort. This is the limited truth in the claim that improvisation is valuable because it is closer to the original idea.

These are elusive claims, and they can be vindicated only by looking at actual

<sup>28</sup> B. Case, 'Steve Lacy', interview in *The Wire*, issue 1 (Summer 1982), pp. 6–7; M. Webber, 'LaMonte Young meets Mark Webber', *The Wire*, issue 178 (December 1998), p. 44.

cases. For instance, the contrast between relatively mechanical and spontaneous deployment of prepared ideas is illuminated by Carl Woideck's excellent book on Charlie Parker. A central claim is that Parker's creativity declined after 1950, for health and drug-related reasons. His huge repertoire of motifs was deployed increasingly mechanically—though still with a brilliance his peers could not match—and no longer developed, Woideck argues. This does not mean that Parker was reproducing practised solos; indeed, part of the problem seems to have been that he ceased practising from the late 1940s onwards. Here we have a case of pre-existing structures being employed in progressively less spontaneous ways.<sup>29</sup>

#### V. FREE IMPROVISERS, INTERPRETERS, AND 'IMPROVISATION AS A COMPOSITIONAL METHOD'

Proponents of a radical aesthetics of imperfection can also be criticized for neglecting the connection between preparation and performance. Some free improvisers claim to go beyond even Charlie Parker-like standards of freshness and improvise, in Ornette Coleman's words, 'without memory'. Leo Smith writes that 'at its highest level, improvisation [is] created entirely within the improviser at the moment of improvisation without any prior structuring'. Derek Bailey advocates 'non-idiomatic improvisation', apparently without a personal vocabulary; I also recall an interview on BBC Radio 3, where pianist Keith Tippett told how in his practising and performing he attempted to exclude phrases he had played before. This aspiration is surely unattainable and fortunately so. An improviser's individuality precisely resides in, among other things, their creative development of favourite stylistic or structural devices, without which they risk incoherence and non-communication. Bailey's ideal paradoxically ends up as impersonal improvisation; the guitarist himself, whatever he may think, is a highly idiomatic and individual improviser.

It is important to realize that both imperfectionists and perfectionists share similar misconceptions concerning the interpretation of a work. Many proponents of an aesthetics of imperfection believe that interpreters simply 'reproduce the score'. The dialectic here is the counterpart of that concerning instant composition: imperfectionists condemn interpretation as mere reproduction, while perfectionists praise it for the same reason, since a reproduction allows no corrupting role for the performer's individuality. (These are extreme statements of the rival positions; the views of Busoni and Schoenberg are more subtle.)

<sup>29</sup> C. Woideck, *Charlie Parker: His Music and Life* (Ann Arbor: Michigan U.P., 1996), pp. 175–176, 199–200, and *passim*. The distinction between creative and non-creative use of motifs is also well discussed by Lewis Porter, *Lester Young* (London: Macmillan, 1986), and Cork, *Harmony With Lego-Bricks*. Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950', pp. 106–107, discusses the 'motif theory' proposed by cognitive psychologists.

It is true that commentators from various traditions have criticized the increasingly uniform and soulless perfection of classical performances.<sup>30</sup> But it is the achievement of the greatest interpreters to produce the illusion of spontaneous creation.<sup>31</sup> When artists of the stature of Lipatti or Brendel or Furtwängler perform or conduct, and the circumstances are propitious, the work is heard new and fresh, in a way it never has before. There is a genuine phenomenon here as well as an artistic illusion. In the sense of spontaneity as freedom to reconceive something at the moment of performance, there is a micro-freedom for interpreters, involving many subtle parameters such as tone and dynamics, in contrast to the macro-freedom of improvisers. So as interpreters get to know a work intimately, a certain freedom can develop; a performance will then feel like a 'leap into the unknown' and have, in a sense, an improvised feel. Performers make the work their own, they internalize it; just as actors do not merely recite the lines of a play, but become the part. But great performances can illuminate a truth about the work; the performer does not simply strive to 'do something different'. George Lewis is therefore wrong to contrast composition with 'real-time music'—interpretation occurs in 'real-time' too.

However, an aesthetics of perfection also misunderstands the process of interpretation. A well-rehearsed performance of a familiar work will, after all, involve something that the performer has already played, and this could become stultifying. So the interpreter must strive for that improvisational freshness which gives the illusion that they are not playing 'what they already know'—that is, a pre-existing work. (The quotation from Carter does acknowledge that scores 'suggest another kind of spontaneous reaction'.)

Improvisation makes the performer alive in the moment; it brings one to a state of alertness, even what Ian Carr in his biography of Keith Jarrett has called the 'state of grace'.<sup>32</sup> This state is enhanced in a group situation of interactive empathy. But all players, except those in a large orchestra, have choices inviting spontaneity at the point of performance. These begin with the room in which they are playing, its humidity and temperature, who they are playing with, and so on. Thus interactive empathy is present in classical music too, at a high level, for

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes comments that with recording 'the various manners of playing are all flattened out into perfection' ('The Grain of the Voice', in his *Music, Image, Text* [London: Fontana, 1977], p. 189); and see, for instance, Adorno's discussion of Toscanini in 'The Mastery of the Maestro', in his *Sound Figures*, trans. R. Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P., 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Stressed by Gunther Schuller in 'The Future of Form in Jazz', in his *Musings* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1986), pp. 24–25. Despite the illusion of spontaneous creation, the sad truth is that my article has been reworked to death with almost all traces of the original idea completely obliterated—so in answer to the repeated and irritating question, 'No it wasn't improvised'.

<sup>32</sup> I. Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and his Music* (New York: Da Capo, 1992). Jarrett's 'state of grace' makes frequent appearances, on pp. 67, 72, 92, 104, 131, 151, 159, 163. Indeed it is sometimes described as 'the usual state of grace'—'it is uncanny how often [Jarrett] manages to achieve the inspired state' (p. 104).



instance, in the traditional string quartet. Again, the rival aesthetics fail to recognize that improvisation and composition are interpenetrating opposites—features that appear definitive of one are found in the other also.

It remains finally to consider the view put forward by writers from various standpoints, that improvisation should be regarded as a variety of composition—where this does not mean ‘instant composition’. Now there is a sense in which recordings convert improvisation into composition. They can be subject to critical analysis, enter a canon, and help to establish art music status—all this is found in jazz.<sup>33</sup> Thus improvisations can perhaps become works from the viewpoint of their reception. But it has also been argued that from the viewpoint of their production, improvisations can count as compositions. There may be an immediate practical impetus behind such claims. The Arts Council of England and Wales, for instance, operated a *de facto* policy that was product-based, funding composers but not improvisers—hence a profusion of uninspired ‘suites’ by jazz musicians.<sup>34</sup>

Jazz writer Sidney Finkelstein wrote in 1948:

Improvisation is a form of composition. Improvisation is music that is not written down, composition is music that is written down. . . . The ability to write music makes possible a bigness of form and richness of expression that is beyond the limits of improvisation. . . . [But the] slow creation of a great jazz solo [from performance to performance] is a form of musical composition . . .<sup>35</sup>

I think that Charlie Parker was not unique in transcending Finkelstein’s analysis; but his central claim has been echoed in different ways by later writers.

Roger Scruton, writing from a Western art music perspective, maintains that an improvisation is a work that is identical with a performance, while apparently suggesting that there is a stricter sense in which the work-concept supersedes improvised music:

the distinction between work and performance grows spontaneously in the practice of acousmatic hearing . . . [involving] a peculiar experience of ‘same again’. . . . There could not be meaningful improvisation without this experience, and the emergence of ‘works’ from a tradition of spontaneous performance is exactly what we must expect when people listen, and therefore recognise what they hear as ‘the same again’.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The point is made by W. Brooks in ‘Music in America: An Overview (Part 2)’, in D. Nicholls (ed.), *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998), p. 269.

<sup>34</sup> I owe this point to Conrad Cork, who was a panel member in the 1980s.

<sup>35</sup> S. Finkelstein, *Jazz: A People’s Music* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948, repr. London: Jazz Book Club, 1964), pp. 109, 111.

<sup>36</sup> Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*, p. 111; *idem*, ‘Reply to Hamilton, “The Aesthetics of Western Art Music”’, *Philosophical Books*, vol. 40 (1999), pp. 157–158.

Scruton fails to recognize that the concept of improvisation, in its present-day sense, precisely arose as a *reaction* to the emergence of works; there is plenty of scope for ‘playing it again’ in the way that jazz utilizes the standard songs of Tin Pan Alley.

Some improvising musicians put a very different slant on this kind of claim. Evan Parker, one of the leading free improvisers, advocates ‘improvisation as a compositional method’, and describes his piece ‘De Motu’ as ‘an improvisation composed uniquely and expressly during its performance in Zaal de Unie in Rotterdam on Friday May 15th 1992’. He continues: ‘In the period of preparation I made notes of ideas and patterns . . . in a method that can be seen as analogous to a painter’s sketchbook where fragments of what might become the final work are treated in isolation from one another.’<sup>37</sup>

Possibly with Parker’s view in mind, George Lewis objects to the claim that ‘any kind of generating music is a kind of composing’:

the problem is not just taxonomical . . . what you’re doing is placing yourself under the hegemony of composers, or people who call themselves composers. . . . Once you decide you don’t *need* to be accepted as a composer, then you should be accepted as doing what *you* do. You should be accepted as an improviser.<sup>38</sup>

Lewis is right: the issue is not taxonomic. But both his attitude and Evan Parker’s can be seen as contesting the Western art music hegemony, possibly with equal effectiveness. They are right to give weight to the ideological import of the traditional vocabulary, and either view is defensible; what is essential is that the picture of instant composition is avoided.

It would be wrong to give the impression that improvisers and composers are in two mutually uncomprehending camps; this no longer reflects the situation on the ground, at least among the avant-garde in America. But there are many pervasive misunderstandings of improvisation which I hope this essay helps to correct. Despite the qualifications of it presented here, I believe that the aesthetics of imperfection is right to focus on music as event. This position perhaps points to the primacy of the performance over the work, subverting the standard account whereby works are exemplified in performance. But that is material for another occasion.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Quotations from a manuscript written to accompany the performance at the Zaal De Unie, and donated to the Rotterdamse Kunststichting.

<sup>38</sup> Interview in sleevenote to George Lewis and Miya Masaoka, *Duets* (Berkeley CA: Music & Arts, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> I am grateful for discussion of these issues over some years with Conrad Cork and David Udolf, and more recently Max Paddison, Ben Watson, Evan Parker, Berys Gaut, and Gary Kemp. Thanks also to Peter Jones and Derek Bailey for the initial inspiration, and to the anonymous referee and editor of this journal.