

The Rules of Improvisation

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Starting from the experimentations of three European ensembles playing improvised music at the turn of the 1970s, Matthieu Saladin defines an aesthetics of free improvisation, whose genuine political dimension he brings to light.

Book reviewed: Matthieu Saladin, *Esthétique de l'improvisation libre. Expérimentation musicale et politique*, Dijon, Presses du réel, 2014, 391 p.

Improvisation is a practice that is probably as old as music itself. It has played a major role in a large number of musical practices and cultures¹, even though it has gradually disappeared from Western art music during the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries². The unflinching popularity of jazz music throughout the twentieth century – a type of music in which improvisation plays a central role – as well as the growing attention paid to indeterminate and open forms in avant-garde music³, have nevertheless contributed to breathe new life into this practice within European musical consciousness, to the extent that in the 1960s various ensembles began to dedicate themselves wholly to improvisation in its most radical forms. Matthieu Saladin's book, *Esthétique de l'improvisation libre. Expérimentations musicales et politiques*, reviews these European experiments in free improvisation.

A chronicle of the emergence of free improvisation

“Free” improvisation can be described as a radicalised form of improvisation. In other types of improvisation, like jazz in its more traditional forms, improvisation involves using pre-existing material to make something new: jazz musicians use popular tunes, often songs from Broadway musicals, as a vehicle for improvising. They do enjoy a degree of freedom in the elaboration of their melodic lines; a degree of freedom they instantaneously make use of through extempore composition while following the structure of the tune and submitting to the stylistic constraints of jazz music all along. On the contrary, free improvisation, which Matthieu Saladin focuses on, aims at rejecting all forms of initial constraint so that the music is steeped in a continuous flow of spontaneous creation in which anything can happen at any moment. Improvisation could therefore be compared to embroidery without a canvas, so to speak. Thus, with free improvisation, music as a whole is given a freedom that appears to be restricted and localized in more traditional types of improvised music.

The idea of free improvisation, as defined above, is a relatively recent invention. Indeed, this approach to improvisation emerged during the revolutionary background of the 1960s. It had various pioneers in Europe, among which *AMM* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RKSFHh17-tg>) and *Spontaneous Music Ensemble* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ebJfOqQFqw>) in Great-Britain, and *Musica Elettronica Viva* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-J8uyTjYAO>) in Italy. In the first three chapters respectively, Matthieu Saladin draws the portraits of these three

¹ See, for instance, Bernard Lortat-Jacob (dir.), *L'improvisation dans les musiques de tradition orale*, Paris, Sélaf, 1987 ; Derek Bailey, *L'improvisation : sa nature et sa pratique dans la musique*, Paris, Outre-Mesure, 2004.

² See Robin Moore, « The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: an Interpretation of Change », *International Review of Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, vol. 23, n° 1, 1992, p. 61-84.

³ See, for example, Dominique Bosseur and Jean-Yves Bosseur, *Révolutions Musicales. La musique contemporaine depuis 1945*, Paris, Minerve, 1999.

figures of free improvisation, and in the process tells the story of its emergence.

He outlines the different ways in which each group was led to develop its own practice of improvisation, and highlights their particular approach to it. Originally, the members of *SME* were jazz musicians who had been influenced by the development of *free jazz* in the early 1960s⁴. They regarded free improvisation as a method based on mutual listening and grounded in a principle of equality between the members of the group. *AMM*, for its part, was originally composed of musicians who, no longer satisfied with jazz music, took an interest in the new resources they saw in improvisation (Cornelius Cardew). The members of the group were all looking for “the invention of the self” (p. 45); the self in question being a collective self, it involved a “de-identification of the sound identity” “(p. 53) on the part of each musician. *MEV* may be set apart in so far as its main initiators were self-exiled American avant-garde composers in Europe who were fascinated by the latest developments in electro-acoustic technology and the possibilities these offered in terms of direct interaction.

The labyrinths of freedom

Once he has introduced the reader to the world of improvised music through the experiences of these three groups, in the middle chapters of his book, Matthieu Saladin proceeds to bring to light the key elements of an aesthetics of improvisation. Chapter 4 explores the notion of *freedom*. Free improvisation leads music away from dependence on the notion of *musical piece* and its implications in terms of stability and permanence, and towards the idea of a pure process, without any other point of reference in time other than the present. Once posited, this principle leads to various consequences, among which the necessity of oblivion: “oblivion made it possible to approach sound in an immediate way, to focus solely on its presence, listening to it and enveloping it in their own playing” (p. 154). The author rightly underlines the fact that albeit necessary, oblivion is not quite possible in so far as the body and consciousness of the musicians are impregnated with an irreducible musical memory which fossilizes as listening and playing habits. That is why, as a *practice*, improvisation requires musicians to paradoxically adopt a set of *rules* preventing them from developing or falling back into habits.

The paradox is real and even crucial. Access to freedom does not come for free in improvisation: it requires a specific type of training, with its own principles and rules (listening to the other musicians, refraining from occupying the whole musical space, avoiding automatisms). However, far from acting as external constraints restricting the freedom of the performer, these rules create the conditions for genuine freedom. For improvisers, being free does not mean that they can act as they please in an indeterminate kind of space; on the contrary, their role is to build up and maintain an intersubjective space whose structure is not imposed from the outside but gradually emerges from and evolves with the various interactions within that space.

The collective dimension of improvisation is the main topic of chapter 5; the author shows that listening has a structuring role in the constitution of an improvising group. In the wake of literary theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin, collective improvisation is conceived as a form of expression that intrinsically rests on *dialogue*, in the sense that an improvised utterance always comes as a response to a presupposed utterance, even if it takes place at the outset of a collective improvisation or in the course of a solo improvisation. In that case, the improvising soloist is indeed listening to virtual utterances belonging to a shared musical culture or to the idiosyncrasies of a personal musical construction, with which he implicitly converses.

In chapter 6, the author studies the experimental dimension of these improvised forms of music by differentiating them from the kind of musical experimentation that was carried out by the

⁴ For a presentation of this particular trend, see Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz*, 1974, 1994 by Da Capo Press.

followers of John Cage⁵ : while the latter implies an absence of artistic intentionality, improvised experimentation allows for a subjectivity that is supposed to come into play in the event of an accident during the performance. Unlike in the Cagean tradition, in free improvisation, the possibility of mistakes is not only recognized but also welcome as a source of creativity.

Improvisation politics

The aesthetics of improvisation that emerges from the middle chapters of the book would remain incomplete if the author had not taken into account its social and political dimensions, as if restricting free improvisation to the field of art or of aesthetics proceeded from a reductive approach. The last two chapters address this socio-political dimension: in chapter 7, the author focuses on the resistance this practice came up against; chapter 8 concentrates on the kind of politics it implicitly contains.

By challenging a number of “self-evident” musical truths (for instance, the idea that a concert presupposes a distinction between the audience and the musicians, or the idea of a distinction between musicians and non-musicians) free improvisation naturally leads to a confrontation with the socio-economic structures that dominate musical production, and therefore with capitalism more generally (if we may say so). Interestingly, from the musicians’ point of view, free improvisation first emerged in a non-political context, in the sense that practicing free improvisation did not derive from any *a priori* political agenda. And when some of these musicians did get involved in politics (Keith Rowe and Cornelius Cardew from *AMM* embraced Maoism in the early 1970s), this might ultimately have led them to turn away from free improvisation and to opt for a genuinely “revolutionary” type of music with a predefined political message.

The political dimension of free improvisation, as described in the last chapter, appears to lie not so much in the activism some musicians engaged in as in the immanent politics emerging from the practice of improvisation itself. By rejecting the authority of the written score as well as the constraint of a predefined framework, free experimentation naturally creates the conditions of a politics of musical creation. Matthieu Saladin places the politics he thus brings to light under the philosophical patronage of Jacques Rancière (<http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Rester-a-sa-place-ou-s-emanciper.html>), whose concepts of politics and of democracy he relies on. The principle of equality that characterizes a democratic politics because it works on the presupposition that “everyone” is the equal of “everyone else”, as defined by Rancière (*Aux bords du politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004), is a feature that can easily be identified in improvised music: *MEV*, for instance, when performing in established music venues, used to invite people who claimed they were not musicians to join them and make music, as if “anyone”, whatever their skills, could become a music maker. Free improvisation thus appears to be the epitome of a genuinely democratic form of musical creation.

A case study aesthetics

As a matter of fact, Matthieu Saladin’s aesthetics might be described as empirical aesthetics, or even as case study aesthetics. Indeed, his approach consists in starting from the contextualized description of three contemporary musical experimentations in order to bring out a subtle network of analogies and differences – rather than a set of common features – that captures the interplay of similarities and reveals – not its “essence” – but the various facets of free improvisation.

One of the great merits of Matthieu Saladin’s book is that it does not indulge in an apology of free improvisation. The paradoxes and problems that must inevitably arise when one tries to work out improvisation aesthetics, are not eluded; indeed, they are clearly identified and interpreted as such, which testifies to the reflexivity and depth of insight that characterize Matthieu Saladin’s

⁵ On that topic, see *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Music in the Twentieth Century) 2nd Edition, Cambridge UP, 1999.

aesthetics. His book is a welcome and significant addition to the budding French literature on the aesthetics of musical improvisation.

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