

DIALOGUE ON IMPROVISATION,  
COMPOSITION, AND PERFORMANCE:  
ON SINGULARITY, COMPLEXITY AND  
CONTEXT

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**ABSTRACT:** This virtual dialogue that brings into play two seemingly opposing positions actually exposes complementary ideas about improvisation. Marcel Cobussen deals with the complexity of interactive and unique environments and seeks to expand the scope of the concept, pointing to the inevitable presence of a certain degree of improvisation in any musical performance. For him, improvisation is always present. Rogério Costa, in turn states that, on the one hand this broader view can contribute to overcoming rigid and simplistic categorizations, however, can eventually reduce the power of environments specifically centered on improvisation. From this point of view he emphasizes the social significance of free improvisation in specific musical contexts in Brazil. The apparent differences between the two approaches are mainly due to different perspectives from which each of the researchers weaves their reflections. The various issues raised during the dialogue - some of them seemingly unanswered - can serve as starting points for new debates and discussions that contribute to further research on the subject.

**KEYWORDS:** Improvisation; Performance; Composition; Complex systems; Interaction

DIÁLOGO SOBRE IMPROVISACÃO, COMPOSIÇÃO  
E PERFORMANCE: SOBRE SINGULARIDADE, COM-  
PLEXIDADE E CONTEXTO

**RESUMO:** Este diálogo virtual que coloca em jogo duas posições aparentemente opostas, na realidade expõe ideias complementares sobre a improvisação. Marcel Cobussen lida com a complexidade dos ambientes interativos e singulares e

busca ampliar o alcance do conceito, apontando para a presença inevitável de um certo grau de improvisação em qualquer performance musical. Para ele, a improvisação está sempre presente. Rogério Costa, por sua vez afirma que, se por um lado essa visão mais ampla pode contribuir para a superação de categorizações rígidas e simplistas, por outro lado, pode, eventualmente, reduzir o poder dos ambientes centrados especificamente sobre a improvisação. A partir deste ponto de vista ele enfatiza o significado social da improvisação livre em contextos musicais específicos no Brasil. As diferenças aparentes entre as duas abordagens se devem principalmente às diferentes perspectivas a partir das quais cada um dos pesquisadores tece suas reflexões. As várias questões levantadas durante o diálogo - algumas delas aparentemente sem resposta - podem servir como pontos de partida para novos debates e discussões que contribuam para o aprofundamento das pesquisas sobre o assunto.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Improvisação; Performance; Composição; Sistemas complexos; Interação

#### PRESENTATION

Marcel Cobussen (Leiden University) and Rogério Costa (University of São Paulo) met through the Academia.edu website and soon realized they held in common many ideas about the relationship between improvisation and the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. Following this first contact they began exchanging ideas about artistic research, music education, technology, and culture. They had the opportunity to personally meet in Prague in 2014 at a conference on improvisation, organized by the Agosto Foundation. At the end of 2014 Marcel came to Brazil to participate in a series of academic events. At the University of São Paulo (USP) Music Department, Marcel Cobussen presented a lecture in the graduate course taught by Rogério Costa, discussed research in and through the arts with some USP staff, and participated in a rehearsal of the improvisation group coordinated by Rogério Costa, Orquestra Errante. During this enjoyable visit there was also time for meeting Rogério's family, serious conversations, dinners, and some trips around the city. And so, the friendship between

these two researcher-musicians continues, now in the form of a small dialogue on improvisation and its context(s).

## INTRODUCTION

In “Steps to an Ecology of Improvisation,” published in *Soundweaving. Writings on Improvisation*, edited by Franziska Schroeder and Micheál Ó hAodha (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) and *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, a monograph to be published in 2015 by Leiden University Press, Marcel Cobussen presents the idea that improvisation in music can be regarded as a nonlinear dynamic and complex system: each improvisation comes into being through a multifarious network (or field) of human and non-human actants (a term stemming from Bruno Latour, introduced to avoid the word “actor” which has an almost exclusively anthropocentric connotation). In other words, besides musicians, more actants are “at work” during an improvisation: instruments, audience, technicians, musical background, space, acoustics, technology, etc. However, not all of the actants determine every improvisation to the same extent; in certain situations (periods, styles, cultures, as well as more singular circumstances), some are more prominent and active than others. Therefore, Cobussen is not dealing with improvisation “in general.” Instead, he emphasizes singularity: each improvisation will yield a different network of actants and interactions, a different configuration, a different assembly. Besides, as these actants interrelate in all music, Cobussen claims that improvising is an integral part of music making.

**On January 10, 2015 at 9:57 PM Rogerio Costa wrote:**

Dear Marcel,

I liked your article very much, and I agree with almost all your ideas, especially when you affirm that improvisation operates as a complex network, an interactive environment, an ecological means, a Deleuzian assemblage. Incidentally, the title of my doctoral thesis is “The musician as a milieu and the territories of free improvisation.” In it I seek to relate the Deleuzian concepts of rhythm, milieu, rhizome, (de/re)territorialization processes, face and faciality, refrain, planes of consistency, and organization, etc. to free improvisation. I strongly concur with your at-

tention to the quality, simultaneously emergent and immanent, of improvisation. I agree with you, too, when you call upon the seemingly antagonistic positions of Derrida and Benson to conclude that both bring important contributions to the debate on improvisation, but that the right thing to do is to consider it in terms of gradations and singularities.

What I find a bit problematic is the apparently excessive relativization of the definition of improvisation when you say, quoting Benson and Ingarden, that “every performance is (also) an improvisation.” From a certain point of view I agree with this proposition. However, I think we cannot forget certain problematic political characteristics of the environments of institutionalized music, dominated by powerful ideological and economic structures and forces that propagate extensive sterile territorializations by:

- Emphasizing reproduction (in opposition to production)
- Maintaining rigid hierarchies (conceptualize the symphony orchestra as a large company or factory) and division of labor (composer – conductor – interpreter – public)
- Supporting technical homogenization (through a rigid educational system based on conservatories) and repressing difference
- “Worshipping” sterile virtuosity
- Spectacularization and commodification of music, etc.

Quoting Deleuze and Guattari: “The more circles there are around a hole, the more the bordering effect acts to increase the surface over which the hole slides and to give that surface a force to capture [...] [T]he sedentary assemblages and State apparatuses effect a capture of the phylum, put the traits of expression into a form or a code, make the holes resonate together, plug the lines of flight, subordinate the technological operation to the work model, impose upon the connections a whole regime of arborescent conjunctions” (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 182, 415).

And, as we know, capitalism is a huge capturing machine.

For all this, I believe that free improvisation could be thought as part of a broad questioning movement of these power structures that point to a kind of utopia: the socialization of artistic creativity. In this utopia there is no need for “composers.” Everyone could and should be creative. Here I inevitably think of Derek Bailey’s concert titled “You can’t always wait for the composer to write the music you want to play” (PARKER in SCHROEDER; O’ HAODHA, 2014, p. 5).

Another aspect of free improvisation is that it emphasizes collaborative creativity and demystifies the figure of the composer as a genius. I regularly deal with this issue in my pedagogical

work with musicians who are very rigid and conditioned to function as non-creative performers whose only skill-development must lead to becoming good instrumentalists. They always want to be told what to do. They don't behave as creative artists. They don't have their own "voice." If you take away the score in front of them, they just don't know what to do. In this context, a well-conducted workshop with free improvisation might function as a kind of liberation or a kind of "cure." Of course, there is a creative act in every performance, and there are always decisions (on a micro level) that are made in real time by a musician who plays, let's say, Beethoven's Appassionata Sonata. But we can't deny the fact that the creator of the discourse is Ludwig van Beethoven.

Also, I don't know if I agree with you when you say that "improvisation must be captured within a system of conventions and can only be understood through pre-existing laws, laws of language and/or music." It makes me think about the difference between a game with rules (idiomatic improvisation) and the ideal game according to Deleuze and Guattari: "The abstract machine of language is not universal, or even general, but singular; it is not actual, but virtual-real, it has, not invariable or obligatory rules, but optional rules that ceaselessly vary with the variation itself, as in a game in which each move changes the rules." (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 100)

**On January 12, 2015 at 02:32 PM, Marcel Cobussen wrote:**

Dear Rogerio,

First of all I am happy that you also recognize improvisation as a complex, dynamic, and ecological configuration. Instead of the regular academic tradition of reductionism – trying to unravel a phenomenon into its constituting parts – I deem it necessary to acknowledge that those parts should be studied in their interconnectivity.

However, my idea that improvisation is an inextricable part of all music making is definitely not meant as an "excessive relativization" of this concept. I would even say that the opposite is the case. By claiming that each improvisation is a complex network of actants interacting with one another in a very specific constellation, I'm explicitly asking attention for the idea that improvisation takes different shapes in different musics. In other words, improvisation in 17th-century continuo playing differs from the way James Brown improvises during a live performance of "Sex Machine" or the way Javanese musicians perform their traditional gamelan music.

By claiming that music making will always contain elements of improvisation, I'm (also) making a "political" statement. Of course I'm aware of the institutional and ideological dogma's you mention, although I simultaneously have the impression that they are regularly questioned by inventive, trailblazing musicians and scholars. What I'm proposing is a shift of perspective in order to make clear that improvisation is "always already" taking place and that thinking within and through these dogmata leaves an important aspect of every music making unattended and concealed, namely that certain decisions must be taken during a performance. In my opinion the opposition you seem to create – between (free) improvisation on the one hand and composed music on the other – needs more refinement: as Bruno Nettl already stated in the mid-1970s, these two concepts should be regarded as poles on a continuum instead of as mutually exclusive quantities, and that's exactly what I try to do in my writings. In a way, it has also been my intention to liberate improvisation from the dogmata of "free improvisation." As I write in "Steps to an Ecology of Improvisation," "musical improvisation is not the same as improvised music" (COBUSSEN in SCHROEDER AND O HAODHA, 2014, p. 17). I'm not convinced by the claim that the only truly improvised music is free improvisation. In fact, I try to argue against certain "stereotypical" ideas about so-called "free improvisation." First, I think that "free improvisation" often involves clear leaders who tell their fellow musicians what to do (at least to a certain extent), John Zorn being a perfect example here. Second, "free" is, of course, only "free" within certain limits. In other words, "free improvisation" – or "non-idiomatic improvisation" as Derek Bailey defines it – is far from free or non-idiomatic; musicians within this tradition share a wealth of common knowledge, understanding, musical background, and aesthetic conventions. Three, stating that improvisation depends on laws and conventions should not be interpreted as a negative remark; it is simply the structures by which we can come into contact with it. That's why Derrida says that "real improvisation" is not possible: we wouldn't even be able to recognize it as such – it would be beyond our cognitive and conceptual schemes. Four, I do agree with you that "rules" should be temporary and bound to specific circumstances. But, once more, I think this should apply to both improvisation and composition (if we want to maintain that differentiation): perhaps we could think of composing as improvising upon existing rules, traditions, achievements, conventions, etc., thereby transforming them. In other words, composers are not excluded from dealing with improvisation either.

**On January 15, 2015 at 5:06 PM Rogério Costa wrote:**

Dear Marcel,

As I said, I agree with almost everything you wrote. Especially when you say that improvisation can take many different shapes in many different musics. I think the questions I put to you in my last email are closely related to the fact that I work as a teacher and am intimately involved with the reality of undergraduate courses in music in Brazil, still based on very conservative models. Within these models a rigid division prevails between those who can and should be creative (composers) and those who must acquire technical expertise to perform the works of those composers, usually under the guidance of a conductor who is responsible for translating the composers' ideas "in a proper way." And this only occurs even when there is room for "new music." In most cases, musicians in Brazil receive "training" to execute only traditional repertoire (let's say, up to Debussy). Thus, music is presented to students as something that "has already been accomplished" in the past by the great masters. Their only task or ambition should be to perform it well. In this context most students always want to be told what is right and what is wrong.

It is in this type of scenario that improvisation practices hold the potential to function as a kind of liberation. Of course, there are also environments where creative, experimental, and collaborative work is developed, both inside and outside schools and universities. But the vast majority of students are still formed within the old conservatory model. Nearly the same can be said about music schools here that deal with jazz and popular music. I totally agree with you that the differences between improvisation and composition are not so strict. In fact, there are many intermediate situations between these two threshold categories. Obviously, both share many features and deal with the same types of agency: sound flows, sound objects, or moments characterized by articulations differentiated between its various sound components (intensity, density, etc.). Both deal with ideas of structure, form, content, parts, continuity, homogeneity, unity, contrast, heterogeneity, multiplicity, complementarity, repetition, similarity, difference, directionality, density, variation, development, transformation, enhancement, accumulation, saturation, consolidation, fission, segregation, cut, figure, gesture, texture, etc.

I also think that the word "free" isn't adequate, and I agree with Derrida that to improvise truly "freely" is impossible. But I believe as well that it can continually be approached as a utopian

horizon. And it would almost be possible in an environment that favors a musical practice where the “rules” are immanent. When I improvise with my colleagues, I don’t appreciate somebody telling me what to do. I just want to create something meaningful (in a broad sense) in a collaborative way. And this “something” doesn’t need to last longer than the performance. I could compare it to a kind of conversation or a ritual.

Although I am also not fond of stereotypical ideas about so-called “free improvisation,” we must admit that there are some very radical forms of musical practice. There are some forms of improvisation in which (almost all) decisions are taken in real time by the musicians, without explicit pre-established, idiomatic, “grammatical” rules (related to musical materials or procedures). In these forms of improvisation, conventionally titled as “free,” there are some implicit rules: concentration, adaptability, malleability, deep listening, respect for the contributions of the other(s), incorporation of any sound, use of traditional and extended techniques, experimentalism, etc. (You are aware of all this...). Obviously, there is more that is pre-established in this type of environment: the history and biography of each participant, and a kind of tacit agreement between the performers, configured as a kind of ethics of interaction.

I remember the wonderful jam session between Joëlle Léandre, George Lewis, and Pauline Oliveros in Prague. We were there together, right? They had never played together, had not set any script or score, and still they concocted a wonderful sonic brew for those who were listening. A few days before that event, I attended a conference in Berlin, organized by Reinhard Gagel, in which there were several “surprise improvisation sessions” between musicians who did not know each other, stemming from very different places (Italy, Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Holland, Colombia, etc.). The line-ups were most unlikely: saxophone, guitar, flute, and horn; guitar, vocals, trombone, and harp; trumpet, violin, and two basses, etc. The results were very impressive. I am sure that this radical kind of collaborative musical practice contributes to some very important changes in our thoughts about music making (just as it is also symptomatic of these changes).

Along these lines, I find fitting this intriguing text by David Borgo that follows yours in *Soundweaving*:

“As I continue to refine my relationship to the digital world [...] through, I might add, constant collaboration with other flesh-and-blood humans - my view of myself has become less unitary, more protean [...] I prefer to argue that the improvisor’s



lifetime of engagement and expansion can show us a different way of being in the world, one in which our very notions of ourselves and our relationships with the social-material world we inhabit are constantly in flux, under continuous negotiation”. (BORGO in SCHROEDER; Ó HAODHA, 2014, p. 48)

**On January 21, 2015 at 1:27 PM Marcel Cobussen wrote:**

Dear Rogerio,

As I have written before, I do recognize and understand your concerns with regard to the education of “classical” musicians. The so-called Master-Apprentice model is also still firmly rooted in the curriculum of Dutch (professional) art education. However, I’m also currently supervising the work of five “classically” trained musicians, artistic researchers, who not only investigate the – until recently almost unnoticed – role of improvisation in the music of the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries, but who also play concerts in which they improvise in the style of, for example, Chambonnières, Czerny, and Schumann. And they teach their own students to improvise too. Of course, these are (mostly) very idiomatic improvisations, often bound to rather strict rules and conventions, but these new initiatives and research practices do influence the way people – both professionals and laymen – think about “classical” music, its preservation and presentation.

In my opinion, this kind of playing and thinking about playing should not be excluded from the discourses around improvisation; improvisation is not a game or a quiz, the winner determined by the question of who is improvising more, Derek Bailey or Robert Levin, John Coltrane or Rabih Abou-Khalil, Katy Perry or “Chico” Buarque.

Once more, I am not denying the differences between the musical practices of these musicians, nor the amount of freedom they have in the choice of notes, rhythms, musical structures, etc. On the contrary, it is all about differences, the differences between the performances of Oliveros/Lewis/Léandre and Branford Marsalis, Led Zeppelin, or La Petite Bande as well as the differences between one performance of Oliveros/Lewis/Léandre and another. But I don’t want to be a participant in the above mentioned “strategies of in- and exclusion”; for me, the question of what improvisation is is less important than what improvisation does, how it works, on stage, in a studio, at home with your instrument or behind a computer, how it works for a performer but also for a listener.

Like you, I have sympathy for the quote by David Borgo (as a matter of fact, lots of my thoughts on improvisation and complexity are formed and informed by his book *Sync or Swarm*). I also tend to think that someone who is consciously dealing with improvisation develops a specific way of being-in-the-world. However, I simultaneously believe that we should be very cautious in making these kinds of deductive claims. First, it is my conviction that “everyone” is in a more or less constant negotiation with her or his socio-material environment, especially after the decline of what Lyotard named *les grandes récits*, the master narratives. In a way, I could defend the thesis that we cannot not improvise. Second, I would not put all my money on the idea that someone who is a great improviser in music is also very open-minded with regard to other aspects of life.

Well, having explained and defended my thoughts on improvisation so far, allow me a question for you: do you think that the discourses around this so-called “free improvisation” could somehow benefit from the ways (historical) research about improvisation in relation to “classical,” “pop,” and “non-Western” music has been developing over the past decades? Or, to put it differently, given the enormous growth of publications on improvisation, which directions should thinking about this musical phenomenon take? What is needed once the emancipatory move has been completed?

**On January 30, 2015 at 8:22 PM Rogerio Costa wrote:**

Dear Marcel,

I completely agree with you when you say that “each improvisation is a complex network of actants that interact with one another in a very specific constellation” and “that improvisation takes different shapes in many different musics.” Unfortunately, I cannot – drawing from my experience as a teacher dealing with students at a university (which can be thought of as a very specific constellation) – agree with the statement that improvisation is “always already” taking place. In most cases what is observed with respect to instrumentalists (in the Brazilian environment of the so-called “classical music”) is that many of them are limited to the task of “correctly” interpreting the music created by “eminent” composers. In most cases they do not view the interpretation and performance as a creative act. Obviously, as you say, they have to make choices in the real-time of performance. But these choices and decisions are generally stereotyped or dictated by rigid, “stable,” academic, and institutionalized knowledge. It is regarded as a physical skill. It is rare to find a performer in

such an environment that views the act of performance and all the preparations involved in a dynamic and creative manner. It is even more rare to find performers, embedded in this traditional environment of “classical” music, who are able to improvise, idiomatically or “freely.” I personally know only one (besides me, of course).

I know this may be a feature of Brazil’s conservative music education, but for me that’s a very meaningful issue. And this relates, in a very complex way, to the extreme economic and political inequality of our country. So it’s impossible for me to disconnect this reflection on improvisation from the social, artistic, and political environment in which we live. In this sense, I think what is perhaps not clear in my argument is that I am not opposing improvisation to composition, but, rather, to a certain type of institutionalized environment of music making and music education that focuses on “training” and which reaffirms the traditional division of labor between musicians who create (composers) and musicians who play (instrumentalists).

I completely agree with you when you say that improvisation and composition “should be regarded as poles on a continuum,” insofar as both activities may be thought of as creative music practices. However, a fundamental difference between improvisation and composition seems to be that in the former, the figure of the individual composer will gradually disappear in favor of a creative practice, which is increasingly collective. Obviously, this is a radical position in the continuum you’ve mentioned. We know that there are “open” composed works which request an effective participation of the performers. However, at least in Brazil, there are many obstacles and boundaries between these two types of musical practice.

Maybe there is no disagreement between us, it being only a matter of emphasis. It appears you experience a less polarized situation in Europe and, therefore, you are more optimistic.

Also, drawing upon my experience as a performer of “written music” (I used to play Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, Ravel, Vivaldi, etc. with my violin in ensembles and in orchestras) and comparing it with my experience as an improviser, I can tell that these are substantially different situations. My attitude towards music is completely different during collective improvisation performances. I feel like I am, with my instrument, part of a collective sound flux created in a collaborative way. The whole group interaction functions as a complex machine that includes different biographical backgrounds, instruments, technologies, techniques, etc. (By the way, I love to play Brahms...).

I didn't say and I don't think that the only truly improvised music is free improvisation, and I agree with you that there are some "stereotypical" ideas about so-called "free improvisation." As you say, "free" is, of course, only "free" within certain limits. No one is free from his or her own biographical conditioning and – to use Deleuzian terms – refrains, faces, and territories. But, if there is a continuum between composition and improvisation, I would say that free improvisation is located in the more radical position. If thought of as a kind of game (as proposed by Hickmann and Rebelo (in SCHROEDER; O HAODHA, 2014, p. 131-149), the degree of uncertainty and indetermination of this kind of practice is much bigger. The "referent" (cf. Jeff Pressing) has almost no density; i.e., nothing in particular can be predicted with respect to the sonic results.

Nothing is pre-established: structure, form, time, frequencies, rhythms, tones, etc. Of course, musicians within this tradition might share a great deal of common knowledge, understanding, musical background, and aesthetic conventions. But I, for example, have always played with musicians of very different backgrounds. As I say in an article about Orquesta Errante: "Orquesta Errante welcomes diverse 'faces.' That is, different and complex musical biographies coexist and cooperate in this open and non-hierarchical environment. And this is not simple. It is necessary that each one give up their particular sound world in favor of a new collective, unprecedented, unexpected, and unpredictable world. It is necessary to dive into the deeper levels of the languages and probe their minimum and molecular elements. It is at these levels – the levels of pure sound and instrumental gesture – that a productive becoming between musicians of specific and diverse backgrounds is established: romantic pianists, jazz and rock guitarists, Andean and baroque flute players, samba and reggae drummers, saxophonists of blues and bebop and 'exotic' percussionists. During the performances these specifications are diluted" (COSTA, 2013, p. 282).

But I do not agree with you when you say that free improvisation is far from being "non-idiomatic." It depends on how we define idiomatic. For me, in the musical realm, an idiom (in the context of an analogy with language) is a complex system, more or less stable, based on a specific vocabulary (scales, chords, forms, sonorities) and a specific (even if dynamic) syntactic system of articulation. This is the case with jazz and even with free jazz. Of course, all these systems are in continuous transformation. But, as long as you can define it as, let's say, jazz, it has something that makes it possible to connect it to the "main stream" of this idiom. Maybe we could concede that free improvisation is a

kind of “pan-idiomatic” musical environment/practice, because in it, almost everything is possible, even the use of deterritorialized fragments of idioms (cf. Cristian Munthe).

I agree with you when you assert that the idea that improvisation depends on laws and conventions should not be interpreted as a negative remark. I only think that these laws and conventions that surely exist in free improvisation are much more flexible, malleable, and meant to prepare a propitious environment for interaction and individual and collective creativity.

Now, let’s try to answer your provocative questions. Yes, I am sure that the discourses about “free improvisation” can benefit enormously from the ways historical research about improvisation has been developing. Indeed, I think that it is very important to contextualize free improvisation as part of a bigger historical, philosophical, cultural, social, and political scene. Obviously I don’t think free improvisation is the culmination of the history of occidental music or that it represents the end of the individual composer as some people insist. In fact, I am trying to contribute to this collective effort of investigation concerning the historical traces of this phenomenon. In one of my recent publications, “Free improvisation and sound ecology: an approach from the aesthetic of sonority”, I’ve tried to investigate the relations between the historical emergence (in the 20th and 21st Centuries) of the so-called “sound paradigm” (according to Makis Solomos in opposition to the “note paradigm”) and free improvisation. In this text we can read that “free improvisation can be seen not only as a symptom, but also as a decisive line of force that contributes, as much as other creative aspects of the twentieth and twenty-first century mentioned here, for the important changes in current musical practices, resulting from the expansion and enhancement of the spatial dimension, overcoming the boundaries between sound and noise and rethinking ideas of time [...] In the historical context outlined here, free improvisation has taken an important social and cultural significance in Brazil to the extent that it is constituted as a territory of education and artistic practice, free, socialized, autonomous, libertarian and democratic” (COSTA, 2014, p. 204).

**On February 3, 2015 at 10:49 AM Marcel Cobussen wrote:**

Dear Rogerio,

I understand that, for all kinds or reasons (political, social, economic, ethical, aesthetical, etc.) you want and need to defend “free improvisation.” However, within the context of our virtual conversation, my question would be: against what? I am not

trying to equate “free improvisation” with manifestations and articulations of improvisation in other musics: on the contrary, I’m constantly emphasizing their differences. In that sense I also prefer not to talk about “free improvisation” as a category with clear boundaries and conventions. The aim of my work on improvisation is to show how improvisation works and takes place in different ways in specific situations. That’s why I introduce, besides the concept of complexity, the idea of singularity: we have to go to very concrete musical examples to investigate how improvisation happens there, how it is shaped, which actants are (the most) active and prominent. Improvisation has a different form when Alfred Brendel performs Mozart’s Piano Concerto K537 as when Cecil Taylor plays “Silent Tongues”; it sounds and works differently when Vlatko Stefanovski performs the traditional Macedonian tune “Jovano Jovanke” or when the Ensemble Modern plays Heiner Goebbels’ music theater piece *Schwarz auf Weiss*. My only proposal is to call all decisions that are taken “in the course of performance” (cf. Bruno Nettl’s book with the same title) “improvisation.” What I add to this idea is that composers are, in my opinion, also improvising while composing as they play with and transform certain conventions when creating new music. So, what I ask from my readers is an open and liberal attitude to the concept of improvisation instead of using “free improvisation” or “jazz” as the standard against which all other “musicking” should be measured.

The Ukrainian-American pianist Shura Cherkassky once stated in an interview that during a performance he sometimes liked to decide on the spot whether he would play a passage very tenderly and quietly or, instead, give the audience a fright by suddenly playing it very ferociously. According to me, this evidence of late romantic capriciousness could be seen as an improvised change of topos. Filling in “details” such as tempo, timbre, attack, dynamics, and even sometimes instrumentation, especially when not indicated in scores, belong to the everyday practice of every classical musician. As Bruce Ellis Benson writes in *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue* “improvisation of this sort is necessary simply in order to perform the piece” (BENSON, 2003, p. 26). The question is not so much whether this practice is still ignored by institutes such as conservatories or neglected by composers who ask from performers to play exactly what is notated – the question is, first of all, whether we are willing to include this practice into the category of improvisation, thereby liberating it from certain dogmatic definitions: improvisation defended against its devotees!

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

**ROGÉRIO:** This virtual dialogue that brings into play two seemingly opposing positions, in fact, in my opinion, exposes complementary and not antagonistic ideas to address improvisation. Marcel, primarily concerned with the working of improvisation, deals with the complexity of interactive and singular environments and seeks to expand the scope of the concept by pointing to the inevitable presence of some degree of improvisation in any musical performance. For him, improvisation is always there. And I've always been in agreement with him in a certain way. However, I think that, if on the one hand this broader view can contribute to overcoming rigid and simplistic categorizations, on the other it can eventually reduce the power of environments specifically focusing on improvisational practices. For this reason, and drawing from my artistic and pedagogical experience, I wanted to emphasize the profound social significance of free improvisation in specific musical contexts in Brazil. Therefore, I believe that the apparent differences are mainly due to different perspectives from which both of us develop our reflections, documented in the dialogue above. I also believe that the various issues raised during the dialogue – some of them apparently unanswered – can serve as starting points for new debates and discussions that will contribute to the deepening of research on this subject.

**MARCEL:** Tonight and tomorrow I will attend two improvisation concerts, one of electronic music, the other a strange mix of African folk, free playing, and modern classical chamber music. Yesterday evening, however, I acted out my “other life” – the life of a fanatical supporter of “my” soccer team. They lost. During the intermission I was thinking about the similarities and differences between playing soccer and improvising in music. What could they learn from one another? What could Robin van Persie teach those Brazilian performers who are so locked up in their respect for the composer-God? And what could Rogerio's Orquestra Errante teach “my” team which sometimes seems to be drowning in tactical concepts invented by the coach?

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