

IMPROVISATIONAL SPACE: BETWEEN ACTION AND ARTWORK

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With its aptitude for spontaneity and variation, improvisation challenges the standard theory of action and the ontological status of musical works. Responding to this dual problem, I propose a conception of improvisational space: a loosely demarcated field of musical material from which the sound organization is spontaneously produced. Drawing on Taylor's characterization of negative and positive liberty, I argue that an improvisational space presents a series of musical opportunities in which an improviser exercises and extends their skilled behaviour. An improviser is held authorially responsible for the sound organization because they deliberate engender, and work to cultivate, the improvisational space. With this distinction between improvisational space and sound organization, and through an analysis of the doppelganger album, Blue, I illustrate how improvisations persist as artworks.

1 Introduction

Jazz improvisation challenges the standard theory of action and the ontological status of musical works. Responding to this dual problem, I propose a conception of *improvisational space*: a loosely demarcated field of musical material from which the sound organization is spontaneously produced. This distinction appreciates both the improvisation's dynamic production and the coherency of the sound organization, explaining how improvisors are authorially responsible for the sound organization without having a clear idea of what will unfold. A consideration of this space indicates the sense in which improvisations persist as artworks and how they serve as platforms for further improvisation. Improvisational space ties together the problematic of liberty and novelty, linking action and artwork. In improvisation's claims to novelty, I contend that this is not exclusive to the sound organization but the improvisational space as well.

Standard theories of action hold that actors control an action via their intentions, specifying goals they work to accomplish. Improvisation, however, demands that intentions cannot be specified in advance of their execution. They must be spontaneous. Furthermore, an improvisor's intentions are outstripped by the demands of the action. Burke and Onsman (2018, 32) note that an improvisation's spontaneity is underpinned by a myriad of factors – the improvisor, band members, audience, wider performance contexts, and the improvisor's relationship with the performance as it is being performed. Improvisation is not a simple process in which a sovereign actor executes an action. Rather, improvisors respond to and are changed by the performance.

Challenged by and open to external factors outside their control, improvisation is enabled by trained habits and extensive know-how. Gallagher explains, "Performers, based on their well-trained skills ... are able to move beyond controlled engagement to the point of not-knowing", embracing a selective uncertainty (2022, 8). Similarly, Peters (2017,

118-120) supposes an improviser scrambles to preserve rehearsed patterns and aesthetic decisions to make sense of the complex and unfolding musical terrain. What is unclear is how known patterns produce this uncertainty. Further, this openness to the unforeseen and uncertain obfuscates the improvisor's liberty and the conferral of agential responsibility. There is a link between freedom and novelty that remains to be explicated.

Improvisation has become almost synonymous with jazz due to its centrality in the idiom, typically taking the form of theme and variations. Paradigmatically, improvising musicians take jazz standards as little more than a starting point, extending and transforming melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic motifs. Jazz bands typically begin by playing a tune before a soloist begins to improvise. The rest of the band accompanies the soloist, offering harmonic and rhythmic material so they can improvise new melodies. This is done over the song-form, sticking to the basic harmonic structure of the tune. Certain chord substitutions can be used, but these follow a certain harmonic pattern. Improvisation is not chaotic, nor is it accidental, but enabled by intense listening and training.

With its variation, Kania (2011, 400) observes that an ontology of jazz improvisation cannot consist in the same "work-performance tradition" that characterises Western classical music. Here, instances are separated from the musical work to evaluate the performance's success. But improvisors who only recite what has been played before do not seem to be improvising. Improvisors are compelled to differentiate their improvisations. Besides raising questions about the novelty of improvisation, this muddies the delineation between musical work and performance instance. Conversely, doppelgänger albums, like *Blue*, by Mostly Other People do the Killing—a note-for-note sound recreation of seminal album, *Kind of Blue*, by the Miles Davis Sextet—pose questions about what happens to improvisation after performance.

In this problematic, there are two senses of improvisation, denoting both a noun, an artwork, and a verb, a music-making process. Improvisation does not challenge the ontological status of musical works because it deviates from a score, but instead because it obfuscates whether the artwork is the determinate sequence of musical notes or its dynamic processes. Considering instances where a listener might think an improviser failed to render a particular tune adequately, Lewis (2019, 106) compellingly contends that the performance is the musical work. While I concur with this analysis, explaining the relationship between action and artwork is necessary.

This article outlines the features of improvisational space and then expands this conception with Taylor's categorisation of positive and negative liberty. This makes several claims. To count as an improvisation, improvisors cannot know precisely what they will perform. Describing a complex field of opportunities in which an improvisor exercises their faculties, improvisational space accounts for their positive activity. An improvisor is authorially responsible for a spontaneously produced sound organization because they engender an improvisational space. In my view, improvisations exist as artworks both as the sound organization and the dynamic processes of opportunity and exercise that saw its performance. Finally, this indicates how doppelgänger scenarios like the album *Blue*, are novel, outlining how improvisations persist as musical works and how they serve as platforms for further improvisation.

2 Improvisational Space

An improvisational space is a mobile complex of musical material that offers opportunities in which improvisors can exercise their faculties, trained skills, and thinking. Before and during the improvised performance, improvisors set parameters around what is to be performed. The musician calls a tune and begins in a particular key at a certain tempo, dictating, at least for a short while, speed and a tonal centre. In other

free jazz idioms, an improviser might offer a phrase before investigating less rigidly codified elements. Burke and Onsman (2018, 29) summarise that improvisors are actively cultivating a “sonic environment” that accords with their aesthetic tastes. Intuitively, they improvise with material they want to play with and explore. The improvisor does not know what will unfold, but in this loose demarcation, they delimit and direct future opportunities. An improvisor is authorially responsible for an improvisation because of their cultivation of the improvisational space, despite being affected by and responding to the demands of the action.

After this initial selection of musical epithets that they want to improvise with, an improvisational space becomes increasingly cluttered with disparate musical material. The improvisor oscillates between selecting particular patterns that delimit opportunities and relies on their trained habits to navigate the now uncertain terrain. I discern five interrelated features of improvisational space. First, an improvisational space is deliberately propagated by an improvisor. This involves a selection process which impacts what they can then perform. Second, improvisational space relies on a shared expressive media in which an improvisor is immersed. Third, the border of an improvisational space is fluid, although formally constituted by various embodied habits and patterns of musical elements. Fourth, improvisational space is not static but shifts as the sound organization is produced. Lastly, improvisational space provides a buffer zone between music and noise.

The bass and piano introduction to the song “So What” opens the album *Kind of Blue*. Specifying a swinging D Dorian scale, this song sets the tone of the rest of the album, establishing it as the harbinger of modal jazz. This engenders a complex improvisational space, corralling musical material together – an easy swing with some basic harmonic information – for the other bandmembers to play with. “So what” is composed in a way that encourages a melodic style of improvisation and

exploration rather than the precisely executed chord changes of bebop. In order to stay musically coherent, the bandmembers, habitually and intentionally, respond with complementary patterns rather than antagonistic or unrelated motifs. Similarly, during the famous trumpet solo, Miles begins by loosely outlining the musical material he wants to play with, subtly specifying in his lilting swing and sharp staccato what sort of rhythmic accompaniment he is after.

By directing his bandmembers on how they can contribute, we witness that improvisational space relies on the notion of shared expressive media. An improviser does not possess a birds-eye or external point of view of the musical material amongst the material. The determinate set of sounds that are produced in the improvisational space changes its landscape and affects the improvisors. Davis insisted on little to no rehearsal prior to recording; he wanted to capture the dynamism of improvisation with the improvisor's initial responses. Intuitively, the sudden influx of musical information would make it more difficult to communicate, but the bandmembers are able to appreciate each other's varied contributions. They move within the improvisational space, navigating the various combinations of musical elements that comprise the space. Recognising relationships between musical material, improvisors affect these elements, dislocating musical phrases from a history of sedimented usages to another context and transforming the musical material. However, the improvisor is also affected—their faculties are extended to make sense of the unfamiliar territory.

The third property of improvisational space concerns what is *in* an improvisational space, stipulating that it does not have a well-defined edge. An improvisational space is comprised not simply of musical material in the performance but also of its relations to various musical opportunities. This concurs with Maldonato's supposition that improvisation lies "between accuracy and inaccuracy; rationality and irrationality, completeness and incompleteness" (2018, 168). "So What"

is a simple tune in the form AABA. Because it consists in two Dorian scales, rather than a series of fast chord changes, it presents a wealth of musical opportunities harmonically and melodically. Improvisors do not need to simply spell out the chord tones of an arpeggio—they can investigate how the notes of the modal scales relate to each other. As such, although an improvisational space is deliberately engendered and indicates certain aesthetic goals, it remains open to unexpected interjections, accidents, and mistakes.

The ill-defined edge of an improvisational space is inextricably linked to the fourth trait of improvisational space, which concerns its dynamic rather than static nature. An extra comping chord affects the rhythmic information offered to the soloist, resulting in different melodies being performed. As improvisation continues, more relations between musical elements can be explored. There are safe, well-trodden routes of traversing the musical material at the centre but also riskier, obscure, and unclear musical opportunities at the periphery. This is seen in Miles' trumpet solo in "Flamenco Sketches". Moving from the C Ionian to the A^b Mixolydian scale, Miles takes increasingly large intervals that are commensurately difficult to play. Tricky to pitch, Miles' muted trumpet obscures the imprecise tuning. Yet, both the use of the mute and the lead-up to the intervallic leaps warp the constellation of relations in the improvisational space. Had some other note or phrase been played instead, some other musical opportunities would have been realised—a different improvisational space and sound organization. As Miles plays an ascending phrase, the top note becomes increasingly expected as the climax. Originally on the periphery of the improvisational space, it suddenly comes to the fore. The parameters around an improvisational space are not fixed but move according to the markings of the sound organisation.

If this were a performance of classical music, Miles' tuning would be derided as a skill error. Despite the supposed inaccuracies, Miles never

sounds out of tune. The improvisational space functions as a safety net between music and noise. By virtue of its indeterminate edge, an improvisational space is open to unexpected contributions and so-called errors. These contributions are codified and interpreted by the existing material and patterns within the improvisational space. Removed from such an improvisational space, this kind of playing would expose tuning inaccuracies. Yet Miles' playing engenders an improvisational space so that these inflections are heard as bluesy, introspective, and harmonically ambiguous.

3 Opportunity and Exercise

These five characteristics explain the dynamism of improvisation, outlining the sense in which an improviser is authorially responsible for the sound organization. Distinguishing between improvisational space and sound organization also illustrates how improvisations persist as artworks. The sound organization is the constellation that points to the intersecting patterns of the improvisational space. Once sounded, it serves as a springboard for other possibilities to be explored – a continual process of transformation of musical material that reciprocally extends the faculties of the improviser. While the improviser is changed by the demands of the action, they can be held authorially responsible for the sound organization. To explore the relationship between liberty and novelty, I turn to Taylor's conceptions of opportunity and exercise.

Taylor (1979) expands Berlin's separation of positive and negative liberty, cogently arguing that negative liberty is an opportunity-concept while positive liberty is an exercise concept. To avoid the aporia of negative liberty as the absence of constraint, Taylor reimagines this as a maximization of opportunities. With fewer restrictions, an agent has a greater number of opportunities available. Positive liberty is described as an exercise concept, involving some sort of self-realization. For Taylor, freedom does not stem from the absence regulations, but is founded in an individual's ability to recognise their motivations and their capaci-

ties to execute them.

Taylor asserts that negative liberty insufficiently describes why someone is motivated towards a specific action. He writes, “you are not free if you are motivated, through fear, inauthentically internalized standards, false consciousness, to thwart your self-realization; ... you have to be able to do what you want, to follow your real will, or to fulfill the desires of your own true self” (1979, 180). People are not typically held authorially responsible for their actions when there are mitigating circumstances. Taylor’s point is that one does not realise what they are doing and why from a list of opportunities.

To my mind, Taylor incorrectly grounds negative liberty in the individual rather than the background of the action. Situating opportunities in the background of the action exhibits how improvisation embraces both a positive and negative liberty. As musical elements and patterns overlap, musical opportunities arise. How opportunities are interpreted and realized is contingent on the musician’s abilities and education and are further delimited by what an improviser can feasibly exercise. However, a history of sedimented usages also direct the improviser to execute particular phrases over others. From the prior analysis of the first trait of improvisational space, an improviser cultivates certain musical opportunities by the performance of a sequence they can exercise. As the improvisation goes on and the improvisational space becomes increasingly complex, an improviser cannot foresee what musical opportunities will arise as they exercise their faculties. This clarifies the sense in which improvisation is open to the unexpected, and the sense in which improvisation is novel.

Describing a link between the improviser’s activity and the musical opportunities that arise, understanding improvisational space in this way also appreciates how opportunities outstrip the performer’s control. Although Taylor argues that negative liberty does not involve self-realization, it seems that improvisation does. Altered by the very

doing of the action, improvisors learn how and why certain musical opportunities arise. However, as their habits and faculties are extended and tested, they also learn about themselves – the dynamism that Miles wanted to record. An improvisor opens up musical opportunities, investigates what can become of their abilities, learns about patterns in musical material and in themselves, and how and why they arise.

Explicating liberty in terms of opportunity and exercise indicates the improvisor's activity and how their contributions affect the improvisational space and the sound organization. Having expanded this distinction with opportunity and exercise, I now turn to the ramifications for novelty by considering how the doppelganger album, *Blue*, relates to improvisational space. Ordinarily, this sound-for-sound reproduction is not considered a new musical work because the concrete musical material is the same. On this view, it is just an homage to *Kind of Blue*. In their repetition, Mostly Other People do the Killing reduce the original to a composed score. *Blue* is not an improvisation and, perhaps worse, has turned an improvisation into a composition. While this poses intriguing questions about what happens to an improvisation after it is has been performed, locating the aesthetic import of an improvisation only in sound organization fails to capture the differences in its production. This leads reviewers like Magnus (2016, 182), who is neutral on whether this is an instance of an existing musical work or a new work in its own right, to conclude that the difference between the two albums is in their aesthetic evaluation.

In 1959, the Miles Davis Sextet went into Columbia's recording studio in New York and, with some sketches of tunes from Miles Davis, engendered an improvisational space. The sound organization that emerged was the album, *Kind of Blue*. As a constellation of musical material, it details information about the improvisational space, recording studio, aesthetic and economic attitudes towards jazz, and skills of the bandmembers. While the sound organization is only trivially different, *Kind*

of Blue and *Blue* emerge from different improvisational spaces. Produced in another era, Mostly Other People do the Killing embraces different social and cultural norms around jazz music. With their accuracy in replicating the original sound organization, *Blue* does not innovate a new musical style, but is produced out of reverence for the great jazz improvisors on *Kind of Blue*.

Magnus observes that *Blue* comes with a booklet of Jorge Luis Borges' famous story of Pierre Menard, an author who strives to replicate *Don Quixote*. Menard's aim is not reproduction, "but to put himself in a state of mind where he would write words that coincided with the words in Cervantes' original" (Magnus, 2016, 180). Here, the significance of this Taylorian explanation of improvisational space is realised. While cultivating an improvisational space, an improviser learns about musical material and themselves as certain musical opportunities are realized. For the analogy to Menard, Mostly Other People do the Killing, when in the same state as the band that produced *Kind of Blue*, are re-learning not just their instruments but how they think about music.

Producing in another era, Mostly Other People do the Killing embrace different social and cultural norms around jazz music. By accurately replicating the original sound organization, *Blue* does not innovate a new musical style; it was produced to revere the great jazz improvisors on *Kind of Blue*. Mostly Other People do the Killing cannot realize all the same musical opportunities as those of the Miles Davis sextet. The goal of *Blue* was to examine the opportunities that arise from their predilections, and what they had to relearn and change in themselves so as to produce the same sound organization as that of *Kind of Blue*. While not presenting a novel sound organization, *Blue* presents a novel improvisational space with a different set of opportunities.

Kania rebuts the notion that improvised performances are musical works. This would mean having to call performances of classical music novel musical works as well. As such, "In classical music, performances

are precisely distinguished from the works they are of” (2011, 398). The reasoning cannot be faulted here. The notion of improvisational space is useful because it demonstrates the relationship between action and artwork. Knowing the sound organization in advance, it is unlikely that *Blue* was spontaneously improvised, but its improvisational space is one in which the performers were trying to unlearn their skills and relearn those of the Miles Davis sextet. Such doppelgänger scenarios illustrate how improvisations exist as musical works, both as the sound organization and as the dynamic interplay between opportunity and exercise in an improvisational space. This relationship explains how, once performed, an improviser can launch into other improvisations.

Calling a tune and drawing particular musical material together delimits its musical opportunities and creates an improvisational space. While this closes certain avenues, how an improviser exercises their faculties will beget other opportunities. In this way, improvisors learn about musical material and themselves. While an improviser cannot have concrete ideas about the sound organization, they are nonetheless responsible for it because of how they cultivate the improvisational space. Improvisational space thus describes a relation between action and artwork. With this distinction, novelty in improvisation is either in the sound organization or the constellation of opportunities that make up the improvisational space – these same opportunities indicating how it is then used as a platform for further improvisation.

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