

MUSIC AS EXTENDED AGENCY: ON NOTATION AND ENTEXTUALIZATION IN IMPROVISED MUSIC

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IN THE HISTORY OF JAZZ AND IMPROVISED MUSIC, we find many improvisers, performers, and composers who are mainly remembered for their creation of not only composed work, but more broadly of frameworks or systems for developing new kinds of improvisation. Many of their creative endeavours and achievements have been geared towards finding new ways of stimulating performers' creativity and forms of musical interaction on stage. In what might be considered a paradox, this is especially true in the field of free improvisation, where musicians have experimented with all sorts of systems such as conducted improvisation, indeterminate notation, mobile forms, graphic scores, and game pieces. Although there are many improvisers who prefer simply to play 'freely', many improvising musicians have a great knowledge of the history of such systems, and in fact many of them find much of their fascination and creativity in improvisation in working with them. What is the point of such compositions for improvisers; what creative possibilities do they afford musicians who are equally capable of playing great music without them?¹

Music scholarship has made significant progress in understanding and analysing improvisation, but we have little knowledge of the role of such compositional structures within it. In fact, progress in understanding improvised music was partly predicated on rejecting a work-centred view on musical performance. Such work, and musicological work on performance more generally, has mostly revolved around the question of how to analyse and describe the process by which music emerges in the course of performance, and how to find modes of writing that take this process of emergence into account rather than reducing it back to a written text.² To ask how compositions structure this process seems to imply a return towards work-based scholarship and to disregard the interactive, embodied, and fluid nature of performance, as well as the creative agency of performing musicians. However, the same question also challenges us to conceptualize composition

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¹ The phrase 'compositions for improvisers' can be a bit of a misnomer, especially for the two case studies discussed in this article. I use the phrase broadly, to also refer to the kinds of compositional systems described here, or any use of notation or symbolic representation of music used within an improvisatory practice. Part of the interest in studying this phenomenon is precisely how it requires a reconsideration of our standard way of speaking about improvisation, composition, and performance.

² See, for instance, Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York and Oxford, 1995); Nicholas Cook, 'Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance', *Music Theory Online*, 7/2 (2001), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.01.7.2/mto.01.7.2.cook.html>; Carolyn Abbate, 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 505–36.

and notation in ways that move beyond the work-concept. As I have previously argued, a purely performance-based music scholarship fails to do justice to the wide variety of forms and uses of notation (what I call ‘notation cultures’) that occur throughout the world.³

At the same time, of course, the rise of improvisation studies and the turn towards performance in music scholarship have been accompanied by frequent discussions about the complex relations that may exist between text and performance, as well as the ambiguity of seemingly obvious distinctions between composition and improvisation, or between improvised and rehearsed performance.⁴ As Nicholas Cook argued in a foundational manifesto for the performative turn in music studies, music has an existence ‘between process and product’. He cited Bruno Nettl, who suggested that ‘one does not simply “sing”, but one sings *something*’, adding that ‘what matters is the value that attaches to this something in the processes of performance and reception’.⁵ In a stark contrast to the performative turn and the general ethnomusicological emphasis on music as a form of practice, Nettl followed this with the suggestion that ‘music is composed of artifacts, although cultures differ greatly in their view of what constitutes such an artifact’.⁶ Even at a time when music scholarship on all fronts is being swept by a ‘material turn’, this statement might seem to disregard the transient and momentary nature of music, its essential performative element.

In this article, I present some results of fieldwork conducted with two groups of improvisers that use different compositional techniques in their improvisatory work, describing the role that these systems play in the social and creative interactive processes of performance. I argue that the negotiation of this fluctuation between process and product is *itself* a significant part of the creative process of musicians, and that the idea of music as an object can be conducive to creative work rather than detract from it. Indeed, the objecthood of music appears closely related to its improvisatory character, not opposed to it. To make this argument, I draw on theories of ‘entextualization’ from linguistic anthropology to suggest, echoing Nettl, that there is indeed a ‘thingness’ inherent in all music. Pieces or more broadly compositional structures for improvising musicians give them ‘something’ to perform; however, their point is not to determine the course of the performance in advance, but to construct particular ways of improvising and forms of creative interaction. The performance is not considered a reproduction of a pre-existing work of music, but rather an enactment of possibilities inherent in the piece or the system that is used.

However, this also raises the question what is taking shape in the course of performance—what is the ‘something’ that the musicians play? It has an improvisatory character, emerging in the course of performance, yet it also has an identifiable and

³ Floris Schuiling, ‘Notation Cultures: Towards an Ethnomusicology of Notation’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 144 (2019), 429–58.

⁴ Such arguments have been made either on theoretical grounds, or, sometimes closely related, on grounds that such distinctions tend to erase the histories of particular genres or practices. See, for instance, Bruce Ellis Benson, *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (Cambridge, 2003); Laudan Nooshin, ‘Improvisation as “Other”: Creativity, Knowledge and Power: The Case of Iranian Classical Music’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 128 (2003), 242–96; George E. Lewis, ‘Gittin’ to Know Y’all: Improvised Music, Interculturalism and the Racial Imagination’, *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études Critiques en Improvisation*, 1/1 (2004), <http://dx.doi.org/10.21083/csieci.v1i1.6>; Nicholas Cook, ‘Making Music Together: Or, Improvisation and Its Others’, in *Music, Performance, Meaning: Selected Essays* (Aldershot, 2007), 321–41; Benjamin Givan, ‘Rethinking Interaction in Jazz Improvisation’, *Music Theory Online*, 22/3 (2016), <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.16.22.3/mto.16.22.3.givan.html>.

⁵ Cook, ‘Between Process and Product’, para. [9].

⁶ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Twenty-Nine Issues and Concepts* (Urbana and Chicago, 1983), 40.

object-like quality. It fluctuates between what Philip Alperson has called ‘improvisation’ and ‘an improvisation’, and different compositional structures stand in complex relation to this existence of the performed music between process and product.⁷ As music scholarship is increasingly moving away from the idea that the score determines or even somehow ‘contains’ the music that is played in performance, in this article I undertake a broader investigation of what constitutes a musical object. If the rise of performance studies in music has mostly hinged on the realization that all music is ‘improvised’ to some extent, then the question of how an improvised piece of music comes to be seen as just that—a piece—has potential implications for a much wider repertoire than the specific type of music that is considered here.

CASE STUDIES

In my fieldwork, which took place over 2017 and 2018, I observed the practices of two improvising groups. One is the Amsterdam-based Genetic Choir, which describes itself as a ‘utopian singing ensemble’, aimed at developing forms of collective improvisation inspired by ideas of non-hierarchical collaboration, self-organizing systems, and swarm intelligence. The group organizes improvisation workshops for singers who may or may not be professionally involved with the choir, but their main activities are formed by artistic projects, which may include site-specific performances, theatre productions, community projects, and the like. The artistic director Thomas Johannsen, when explaining their practice to audiences or newcomers, frequently uses the image of a flock of birds moving as one, a structure of movement resulting from the mutual coordination of individual birds but not reducible to any single one of them. He is always looking for ways to identify processes and strategies of improvising, and to feed this back into their practice to guide new improvisations. In workshops with a core ensemble, such processes are identified and explored through discussions and reflections on previous improvisations, which lead to principles that can then inform further improvisations. During my fieldwork, the group was mainly concerned with the concepts of time, texture, and meaning, considered to be aspects inherent in any sound. More than other games and exercises used in their workshops, Johannsen considers these concepts to be a core element of their practice. They can be used by the singers as a point of focus, a way of attending to the music they are making and of imagining ways of transforming the music. In addition, they also serve as guiding principles in a project that was the main focus of my fieldwork. Their project, called *Loop, Copy, Mutate*, pursued the question whether the non-hierarchical forms of interaction of the group could be opened up to other actors, including audience members, and computer systems. In this project, five singers were involved, plus the computer musicians Stelios Manousakis and Robert van Heumen.

The second case study of my fieldwork was a group of students at the HKU Conservatory in Utrecht who learn Kobranie, a system of conducted improvisation developed by their teacher Esmée Olthuis. It involves one person standing in front of a group of musicians and conducting them, using a system of around a hundred signs to communicate musical ideas. These signs include ‘start’, ‘stop’, ‘long note’, ‘short note’, ‘louder’, ‘softer’, ‘faster’, ‘slower’, ‘imitate this’, ‘support this’, ‘play a rhythm’, ‘play chords’, ‘play a melody’, ‘add a second voice’, ‘give me a new idea’, ‘take a solo’, ‘tell me a story’, ‘record this’, ‘take it to the bridge’, ‘return’, ‘return to what we recorded’, ‘come together’, ‘come apart’, ‘chaos’, and so on. The conductor (called a ‘processor’) points to

⁷ Philip Alperson, ‘On Musical Improvisation’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43 (1984), 17–29.

a musician or group of musicians, gives a sign, and then cues its execution (though some signs do not require this last cue). The musicians in the ensemble are free to adapt what they play to the developing musical situation, to raise their hand if they come up with a new idea (a request that always has to be granted by the processor—and that, moreover, can involve giving a sign to someone else rather than playing something themselves), or to stop playing at any point. Olthuis teaches this system, which she developed in her own practice as an improvising musician, to the first-year students of one of the programmes in the Utrecht Conservatory. It aims to teach the students, most of whom have little experience with free improvisation, to make music without any preconceived musical framework, but also to develop skills in effectively and productively leading an ensemble of musicians. The processors have to learn to communicate ideas clearly, but at the same time to respond instantly to new ideas or unexpected developments.

My fieldwork consisted of the observation of rehearsals, classes, workshops, and performances of these two groups, plus their documentation using a video camera and a notebook. In interviews with the groups I asked them to reflect on their creative processes and the role of their use of compositional frameworks. I also played back previously documented material to elicit more specific comments on their musical experience in performance. At the start of my fieldwork, I explained the nature of my work, and that I would document my observations. I also made clear that my findings and any documented material would only be used in academic contexts. On the consent forms that I provided, the members of the Genetic Choir and Esmée Olthuis all agreed to be identified by name; some Kobranie students wished to be identified by initials only, and one student wished not to be identified at all. For the sake of consistency, and also considering that these students are relatively young and only just starting their musical careers, I have chosen to refer to all of the Kobranie students by initials only and not to include any direct comments by the anonymous student.

EMERGENCE AND ENTEXTUALIZATION

Entextualization is a term drawn from linguistic anthropology, where it is used to describe the creation and use of *texts* in spoken discourse, strands of spoken language that are seen to have an autonomous existence distinct from the improvised flow of speech. Concepts of linguistic anthropology have been very important in the rise of improvisation studies in the 1990s. Paul Berliner and Ingrid Monson have proposed the metaphor of conversation as a way to understand the collective interactive creativity involved in improvised performance.⁸ Monson also drew on theories from linguistic anthropology, specifically the work of Michael Silverstein, to suggest a consideration of jazz improvisation in terms of its social pragmatics rather than its syntax or semantics. The creativity researcher Keith Sawyer also draws on Silverstein's work, arguing that improvisation can be seen as an emergent process made possible by the creative use of *indexical presuppositions* and *indexical entailment*.⁹ That is to say, the process of improvisation is one in which musicians (or theatre actors, Sawyer's other main example) playfully engage with the way in which statements play into an existing musical framework to acquire meaning (indexical presuppositions), while also implying or constructing fields of expectations in which future statements will be interpreted (indexical entailment).

⁸ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago, 1994); Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago, 1996).

⁹ Keith Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration* (London, 2003).

Such ideas provided important conceptual models for understanding what happens in musical improvisation and describing this process in terms of the constant interaction between musicians. At the same time as Berliner, Monson, and Sawyer were taking these important steps, however, various linguistic anthropologists (including Silverstein) were asking the *reverse* question.¹⁰ As it was becoming increasingly clear that a text-based model of speech could not account for the centrality of improvisation in spoken conversation, some scholars wondered how it was possible, if spoken language is essentially improvised, that we do nonetheless recognize parts of this flow of speech as independently existing, separate objects. As Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs wrote, if it is now firmly established that spoken language is ‘anchored in and inseparable from its context of use’, then ‘what is it that makes verbal art decenterable despite all these anchoring counterforces’?¹¹ They called this process *entextualization*, which they defined as ‘the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a *text*—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting’.¹²

Entextualization is not simply a matter of writing things down or otherwise recording them. Insofar as the literature on entextualization is concerned with writing and recording, it has emphasized the continuity between written texts and performed speech, rather than seeing them as wholly distinct or even opposed phenomena. Texts can be considered as representations of practical knowledge and concerns, while the process of making and using texts also reciprocally impacts on the process of performance. As far as the notion of entextualization has appeared in music scholarship, it has mostly been in this sense. Roger Moseley suggests that seeing eighteenth-century scores as entextualizations of an improvised past means to locate improvisation not in what the score leaves open, but rather in the interplay between the score and the creative knowledge and skills of performers of eighteenth-century music.¹³ Christopher Williams, in a discussion of performing Benjamin Patterson’s *Variations for Double Bass*, suggests that ‘notation in this piece emerges from and feeds back on improvisation, rather than simply generating or freezing it’ and that improvisation ‘is a continuous thread throughout processes of score-making, preparing and rehearsing, and revision after performance’.¹⁴

This continuity is also a significant element in the cases of Kobranie and the Genetic Choir. The concepts of the Genetic Choir were developed in workshops, where the singers experiment with improvisational games and strategies and reflect on the music they improvise. The concepts reflect certain ideas and concerns emerging from these workshops, and are not meant to represent timeless musical truths. Kobranie has a more lasting existence, as the system of signs has been passed on over the course of a few decades. Still, however, these signs themselves were largely developed to meet practical requirements encountered in the course of performance, changing quite substantially

¹⁰ Joel Kuipers, *Power in Performance: The Creation of Textual Authority in Weyewa Ritual Speech* (Philadelphia, 1990); Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, ‘Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 19 (1990), 59–88; Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (eds.) *Natural Histories of Discourse* (Chicago, 1996).

¹¹ Bauman and Briggs, ‘Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life’, 73.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Roger Moseley, ‘Entextualization and the Improvised Past’, *Music Theory Online*, 19/2 (2013), <http://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.2/mto.13.19.2.moseley.html>.

¹⁴ Christopher Williams, ‘Tactile Paths on and through Notation for Improvisers’ (PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2017), <http://www.tactilepaths.net/patterson/>, <http://www.tactilepaths.net/>, path 03: ‘Entextualization and Preparation in Patterson’s Variations for Double-Bass’.

over the years, and in this sense have evolved with the practice they support. Moreover, signs are frequently forgotten and rediscovered, and students also regularly invent new signs—sometimes even in the course of conducting a piece.

In this article, however, I wish to concentrate not on the recording of musical ideas by making material inscriptions, but rather on the process of entextualization inherent in performance itself. As Bauman and Briggs argue, all performance entextualizes discourse to some extent: ‘Performance puts the act of speaking on display—objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. Performance heightens awareness of the act of speaking and licenses the audience to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performer’s accomplishment.’¹⁵ For Barber, the concept goes beyond the familiar idea that all texts have a performative dimension ‘to explore the corresponding claim, that performances within oral traditions entail some kind of textual dimension.’¹⁶ In an argument that resonates with the work of Cook and Nettle discussed earlier, she writes: ‘There is a performance—but it is a performance *of* something. Something identifiable is understood to have pre-existed the moment of utterance. Or, alternatively, something is understood to be constituted in utterance that can be abstracted or detached from the immediate context and re-embodied in a future performance.’¹⁷ Entextualization, in the work of these authors, is something that happens in spoken conversation when through the use of metapragmatic markers we can recognize that a speaker is saying something that is not simply part of the flow of conversation, but steps outside of this framework to use a saying, tell a joke, narrate a story, or relay a myth. It achieves a detachment of speech from its context of utterance, either to indicate that this objectified flow of speech, this text, may be repeated in a different context at a later time, or is itself an instantiation of a previously existing text.

Considering this description, it might still be thought that entextualization describes precisely the opposite of what happens in improvised music, which after all emphasizes its existence as emerging in the moment, not as a repetition of something previously existing or as something that can be repeated on a later occasion without radically altering its meaning and value. Sawyer, in his work on group creativity and emergence, equates entextualization with ‘ritualization’ and ‘ossification’, and he suggests that its fundamental function is to limit the creativity of the performer.¹⁸ Elsewhere in the same book, however, he suggests that the process of entextualization is actually synonymous with the process of emergence that is so central to his theory, namely the construction of an ‘independent constraining force operating on the act which derives from the flow of the prior interaction, and constitutes the indexical presuppositions of the act’.¹⁹ There is a fundamental ambiguity at work here that has to do with the nature of creative constraints, Sawyer’s seeming equation of creativity and innovation, and his apparent restriction of emergent processes to ‘pure’ free collective improvisation.²⁰

Barber argues that after the pervasive and influential turn towards performance in our understanding of human behaviour, in which any notion of ‘textuality’ was treated

¹⁵ Bauman and Briggs, ‘Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life’, 73.

¹⁶ Karin Barber, ‘Text and Performance in Africa’, *Oral Tradition*, 20 (2005), 264–77 at 265.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 266.

¹⁸ Sawyer, *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration*, 229–32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 145.

²⁰ On creativity and innovation see Emily Payne, ‘Creativity beyond Innovation: Musical Performance and Craft’, *Musicae Scientiae*, 20 (2016), 325–44; on Sawyer’s seeming restriction of emergent processes to free improvisation, see Floris Schuiling, *The Instant Composers Pool and Improvisation beyond Jazz* (London, 2019), 157–8.

suspiciously as a distortion and reification of the evanescent nature of performance, it has become possible to see how ‘performance can nonetheless be regarded as something abstracted or detached from the flow of everyday discourse’.²¹ Writing specifically about African oral praise poetry, she notes how performers in this genre make use of stretches of text (either pre-existing or created in the course of performance) that they reinsert into a performance, re-contextualizing them, commenting and varying upon them, and combining them to create new, improvised performances. Thus, she argues, fixed elements can be re-embedded and re-activated in the course of performance, becoming objects of attention and recognition, of quotation, variation, commentary, and exegesis; the process of fixing is thus ‘the condition of possibility of a poetics of fluidity’.²²

ENTEXTUALIZATION IN IMPROVISED PERFORMANCE

To summarize, then, I understand entextualization as the creation or marking out of a potentially repeatable musical ‘unit’ (for want of a better term) *in the act of performance*, and will use ‘text’ to refer to that unit. This is quite a different understanding of ‘text’ than how we usually understand this term, and some readers may find this unhelpful and confusing. I nevertheless retain this term, both because I think that this is ultimately what a text (in the more conventional sense) is, although it would require more research to substantiate this across different musical practices, and because in doing so I hope to loosen the idea that a text is defined by its written material shape and to highlight the reciprocity between text and performance rather than their distinction.

If improvisation studies have mostly emphasized the transient nature of their object of study, the concept of entextualization sheds new light on some other well-known aspects of improvisation as found in the literature. Paul Berliner, in his ethnographic account of the learning and practice of jazz improvisation, notes that playing a solo is frequently compared to ‘telling a story’²³—a metaphor that speaks directly to the idea that improvised, spur-of-the-moment creation and the construction of something with a fixed and coherent identity are intertwined rather than opposed. Berliner calls this ‘composing in the moment’ (a phrase with similar implications) and discusses how this may be achieved through repetition, quotation, imitation, variation, call and response, and the creative use of genre conventions.²⁴ Crucially, such musical techniques have close counterparts in the linguistic strategies that have been identified as contributing towards the entextualization of speech. Monson’s discussion of musical interaction in terms of social pragmatics, in its evocation of Silverstein’s concept of an ‘interactional text’, similarly seems to suggest that part of the process of interaction is to create something with an identifiable, ‘textual’ existence.²⁵

In the discussions between the musicians that I observed as well as the interviews I conducted with them, this idea of the music having a kind of autonomous existence,

²¹ Barber, ‘Text and Performance in Africa’, 266–7.

²² Karin Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics* (Cambridge, 2007), 75.

²³ Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 201–5.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 192–220.

²⁵ Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, 185–91. Monson in fact uses the term ‘entextualization’ (pp. 24, 87), but exclusively to refer to the process of recording speech, which in my perspective is something of a misunderstanding of the concept. Indeed, she mainly discusses it in relation to ethnographic writing about fieldwork experience, explicitly opposing entextualized abstraction to interactional reality when she writes about the ‘process of entextualization that occurs as the ethnographer moves from interactive human encounter to mechanical recording of the experience to transcription of speech into language (and music into notation) to the writing of articles and books interpreting the experience’ (p. 24).

being ‘lifted to a degree from its interactional setting’, to use Bauman and Briggs’ words, was a frequently recurring idea. The Genetic Choir member Yinske Silva, for instance, told me how important it was for there to emerge what she called ‘a thing’ in the course of an improvisation:

You can feel that ‘this is the thing’ and you are aware of that as an individual. It’s an attitude of curiosity and awareness about what ‘the thing’ really is. Without that it doesn’t work: if I’m not doing a ‘thing’ you can never work together on the composition, and that’s the idea: working together to make a composition.

FS: So is it then a kind of reference point for everyone to relate to?

Yes, so if somebody has got a thing that they are doing, it clears things up. And then you can provide a contrast or imitate them, or at least you can relate to it. Of course, that is the ideal, but frequently you have a piece where this thing does not emerge. (Silva, 17 August 2017)²⁶

Much like Barber argues with regard to the performance of praise poetry, Silva indicates that there is a reciprocal movement between the definition of what it is you are doing as a coherent, fixed ‘thing’ and the generation of new musical material.

For the Kobranie students, this reciprocity was also a recurrent point of discussion. As one student put it: ‘when it’s going well, there is a clear consensus of where we are going’ (HA, 12 October 2017). Indeed, the role of the processor is not so much to determine this direction in advance, but rather to respond to what the musicians play and to define in a sense what it is that they are already playing. One student, after a less successful piece, commented afterwards that she ‘did not know where the music was going’, leading her to give a lot of different instructions. Olthuis responded that ‘the music already was somewhere’ and that her role as a processor was to recognize this and to isolate or amplify certain musical ideas to create a sense of clarity or direction (Author’s field notes, 19 May 2017). Another student, reflecting on what she had learned after a year of Kobranie classes, said she had learned to work more from ‘one specific thing’: ‘I ask for a new idea and then everyone is switched onto that, and then I can develop it. I’ve become better at creating a sense of clarity about what that thing is, rather than adding more other things to it to create a generic groove. I want to find the essence of that thing’ (AB, 27 June 2018).

Just like the musicians quoted by Berliner in his discussion of improvisation as ‘story-telling’, the musicians felt that when the music acquired such a clearly defined existence, it would start to live a life of its own.²⁷ As one Kobranie student said: ‘When something works, then you can take a step back. Then the music will develop by itself and you can just sit back and enjoy it, it becomes very relaxed’ (AD, 23 October 2017). The Genetic Choir singer Ralph de Rijke described how this sense of an autonomous existence of the music was central to his musical experience and creativity:

Part of our relationship with music is an appreciation of the fact that it holds a mystery that we have not yet found... I’m a very scientific person, all my instincts are towards the rational and

²⁶ All quotations from fieldwork participants are my translations, except those from my interview with Ralph de Rijke below, which was conducted in English.

²⁷ Don Pate, for instance, says that ‘There is such a thing as letting the music take you, if you are willing, or if you are open enough’. Leroy Williams recalls advice from another musician: ‘Instead of trying to play the music all the time ... you sometimes have to let it play you.’ Quoted in Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 219.

the intellectual, but there is something about our relationship with music which I acknowledge and I think is acknowledged by a lot of musicians, which is that it is much bigger than we are... . There's a kind of unspoken implicit understanding ... that what comes up, the music that you start to make has... a standing, an importance, or a status, an existence independent of ours... . If I just play two notes on a piano, I've given life to something to which I automatically feel a responsibility of some kind... . For me, music has always been a world within a world, of this world but also separate from it in some really magical unexplainable way. (De Rijke, 8 April 2018)

So in both these groups of improvising musicians, then, although they highly value the moment-by-moment emergence of the music in the course of performance, they also describe a successful improvisation with metaphors that suggest something having a fixed shape: it becomes a 'thing', it helps to create a 'composition', it has a sense of 'direction' or 'substance'. Moreover, they suggest that at such moments the music acquires an independent existence; it becomes slightly detached from their individual contributions and starts to develop quasi-autonomously.

Monson and Sawyer drew on theories of the social pragmatics of language to show how improvised musical statements are fundamentally context-dependent, that they acquire their meaning largely through their indexical semiotic function. The comments by the musicians quoted above, however, seem to suggest that in addition to the constant contextualization of statements, there also occurs a process of entextualization, by means of which statements become somewhat detached from their immediate context of utterance so that they may be recontextualized in the course of performance. Some of this may be due to the particular importance of concepts of 'instant composition' in Dutch improvised music. As I have shown in earlier research, since the emergence of free improvisation in the Netherlands, and especially because of the formative role of the Instant Composers Pool, much Dutch improvised music is conceptually concerned with the intersection of composed and improvised musical elements, leading not only to a compositional approach to improvisation, but also to a particular interest in notations and compositions written for improvisers.²⁸ The Genetic Choir and Kobranie can certainly be understood as part of this tradition, and the concept of 'instant composition' was an important point of reference for both groups.

However, beyond this specific cultural context, I would argue that these two processes of entextualization and contextualization are intrinsic to musical performance more generally, and indeed are two sides of the same coin: the detachment of music from its immediate context of utterance makes possible the playful negotiation of indexical presupposition and entailment described by Monson and Sawyer. Their emphasis on the context-dependence of improvisation was necessary to develop a performance-based understanding of music rather than the more common view of music that detached it from acts of performance completely. My argument is that this detachment, this textuality of music, is not given beforehand by a score, but is itself performatively constituted. Hence, rather than dismissing text-based understandings of music as necessarily stifling performers' creativity, I argue that this reification is a reflection, and indeed a catalyst, of the creative concerns of performers.

MUSIC AS EXTENDED AGENCY

One of the things which most struck me when doing my fieldwork with these two groups was that in their discussions and reflections they frequently emphasized that what they

²⁸ Schuiling, *The Instant Composers Pool and Improvisation beyond Jazz*.

did should be, as they put it, ‘in service of the music’. I associated this phrase with a classical music discourse that sees performance as a ‘reproduction’ of a work and that considers the primary task of the performer to represent ‘the work’ and/or the composer’s intentions accurately. Igor Stravinsky, for instance, wrote that ‘the secret of perfection lies above all in his consciousness of the law imposed upon him by the work he is performing’, arguing that the guiding principle of performance is ‘the great principle of submission’ and that good music requires an ‘aristocratic culture’.²⁹ In opposition to this explicitly top-down hierarchical discourse, studies of improvisation have emphasized that this process is interpersonal and dialogic. As Monson writes, in improvised music ‘there are always musical personalities interacting, not merely instruments or pitches or rhythms’.³⁰ That this phrase nonetheless came up so frequently in the discourse of improvising musicians, for whom there is no pre-existing ‘work’ or composer to submit to, suggests there might be more to this idea.

I asked the musicians what they meant by this phrase; De Rijke’s earlier statement about the sense of responsibility to the life of the music was one response to this question. Jeannette Huizinga, another Genetic Choir singer, answered the question with a familiar metaphor:

Of course ideally what you sing should come from inside you. But sometimes you might feel something come up, and you feel this impulse but at that moment something else is happening musically. Then you can choose, either to hold your horses and say wait, let’s see what somebody has to say. Or you can think, no, I have something really important to say. It’s like a conversation—and then you can wait and trust that whatever you have to say is important enough that you won’t forget, and you can listen, maybe what they’re saying is interesting too and you can take that along in what you want to contribute. Or maybe they’ve already said it, that’s possible. Then the ego thing, of *but I wanted to say that*, becomes less important. (Huizinga, 11 August 2017)

Huizinga uses the metaphor of collective improvisation as conversation to make a rather different point than that for which it is commonly used. Rather than emphasizing the importance of the musical personalities interacting in improvisation, and the dialogic nature of the music, she suggests that the conversation can have a direction of its own, and that one’s personal expression is secondary to this.

In fact, there was a general sentiment among musicians in both groups that personal expression can be detrimental to the creative process. The Genetic Choir singer Martine van Ditzhuyzen said that ‘the clearer the improvisation is, the more attention is focused on what you’re doing. And the looser it becomes, the more attention is focused on the performer. And the performer usually doesn’t interest me. I don’t need to know how you feel’ (Van Ditzhuyzen, 28 August 2017). Olthuis similarly expressed a disinterest in personal expression: ‘I think there is a lot of improvisation that starts with the ego. Then it’s not about the music but about all sorts of other stuff I’m not sure I want to hear. The responsibility to the music is the most important thing’ (Olthuis, 29 May 2017). Olthuis also indicated that the students in her Kobranie classes need to learn to think in terms of what the music needs, rather than worry that they haven’t involved one of the musicians or that somebody has been playing a certain riff for quite a long time now and might get bored.

²⁹ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 127.

³⁰ Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, 26.

You really have to push right through that. You're not here to be nice, the music comes first. If someone asks a ruthless question, a very good piece might emerge, and then they recognize—oh, I had to keep doing this one thing for a really long time, but it was really worth it, I understood it. And if they don't get it, I have to explain to them—yes you had to do that one thing and that wasn't very much fun but didn't you realize how cool your part was? Without you the piece would have crashed... You are always in service of the music. (Olthuis, 29 May 2017)

As Olthuis indicates, to learn to improvise together, her students have to learn to put aside personal preferences or certain forms of politeness, not just to think on an intersubjective level and develop what Garry Hagberg has called a 'collective intention', but to see their actions as following the direction of the music rather than (or as well as) the other way around.³¹

In theories of entextualization, one of its core characteristics is the removal of deixis—that is to say, the dependence of the meaning of language on its immediate context of utterance, such as a shared frame of time and place, but also the individual or collective identity of speaker and listener. 'I' no longer simply refers to the speaker, just as 'you' no longer refers simply to the audience. Barber writes that

Entextualisation lifts words out of an immediate speech context, so that ... personal pronouns and deictic forms have to be provided with a surrogate context: a narrative setting within the text, a fictional or abstract speaker and hearer, or a kind of virtual, hollow speaking position which different performers and listeners can occupy.³²

In other words, this removal of deixis allows one to speak in a name other than one's own. Barber draws on a body of anthropological work on personhood, including that of Marilyn Strathern, Roy Wagner, and particularly the work of Alfred Gell, to argue that texts are a way of extending and distributing personhood, allowing people to project different kinds of agencies such as deities, forefathers, animals, disciplines, or governments. That is to say, a text does not simply reflect a pre-existing agency, but serves to construct a social persona.

I suggest that the idea of 'the music itself' as described by the musicians I have studied might similarly be considered not as a negation of their personal expression but rather as a form of extended agency. It allows musicians to relate to each other not just as the individual persons they are, but in terms of the emergent entity that they are creating; if we recall Monson's phrase, they interact not just as musical *personalities*, but as *musical personalities*. Gell's terminology might help to clarify what I mean by this. His anthropology of art treats art works as 'indexes', that is, as signs from which we may make a 'causal inference' as to who or what made it come into being.³³ Using a somewhat formalized symbolic language, he shows how an art work may be embedded in what he calls a 'nexus' of agency, a network of all the causes that we can infer. For instance, and simplifying Gell's original symbolic language somewhat, the formula [[[artist → prototype] → index] → recipient] describes how an artist imagines something to make [artist → prototype], makes it [→ index], and an audience [→ recipient] is affected by the

³¹ Garry L. Hagberg, 'Ensemble Improvisation, Collective Intention, and Group Attention', in George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, i (2016), 481–99; <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780195370935-e-011>.

³² Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 108.

³³ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998), 13–14.

resulting work, which extends the way in which the work has itself been affected by artist and prototype. The idea of being ‘in service of the music’ might be expressed as a move from [artist → index] to [index → index], thus removing the strict indexical relation of a sound to the musician who makes it and replacing it with an indexical relation to other sounds, so that the musician is no longer the primary origin but acts in response to the music that starts to live a life of its own.

The signs and concepts as used in the two groups I studied are a useful tool to enact this transition, and thus help to entextualize the musical statements of performers. Since they do not make music simply on their own account, but, in the case of the Genetic Choir, respond to the temporal, textural or meaningful aspects of the sounding music, or in the case of Kobranie, respond to a sign of the processor, there is a removal of deixis. The musicians’ contributions are not simply their individual expression, but relate to the ongoing, collective emergence of the music. Hence, the musicians become less concerned with the worth of their individual contribution than how it is defined in relation to that of the others. For instance, one musician who had been trained as a classical guitarist and had little experience improvising said that Kobranie had taught him to

just play. It’s not just about coming up with something good, but coming up with something quickly. If somebody asks a rhythm of you and you need to think about it for two minutes, that doesn’t work. Then it might be the best rhythm you’ve ever heard, but you can’t work with that. While if you just play something then you can develop it, see how it works with what is already happening. (AV, 26 June 2018)

Conversely, somebody who did come from an improvising background similarly learned to be less concerned with his own contribution and to see that its value can lie not in expressing his personal taste but in helping someone else create a piece:

I initially found it difficult to go along with somebody conducting me, when I didn’t agree with where somebody was going, to shut off that judgement and go along with them. You develop a sense of trust, and confidence. I now try to really jump in, get into their idea and by doing so also develop new ideas for myself. (HA, 12 October 2017)

For these young students, who come from a variety of musical backgrounds, the occasionally abstract and chaotic sound world of improvised music can create a sense of insecurity, and the conducting signs give them something to hold on to. Olthuis said that this was part of the point of teaching Kobranie to the first-year students, who are challenged during their curriculum to rethink their musical identities up to that point.

Everyone has their tastes, and that’s fine, that’s your identity—you can hear that I have a jazz background, and I’m attached to that. But I want to take apart those new students as much as possible, and that makes them very insecure. Because they can play their instrument really well and that got them into the conservatory, and then suddenly they have to play chaos. That can be a big step. Because they think, I play this instrument so well, the chaos used to be when I couldn’t play it yet... . But then somebody asks them just ‘play a long note, now’, OK, dooooooooooooo... that creates a framework that is safe, because you can meet someone’s expectations. And then you start to anticipate, what am I hearing, what is the processor hearing? They are making an instant composition and I am part of that. (Olthuis, 29 May 2017)

Something similar is true in the case of the Genetic Choir. In my interview with Johannsen, he said that the point of developing these concepts of time, texture, and

meaning—or indeed of any other rules or ideas to guide their improvisations—was exactly that they allow you to develop things that are inherent in the music that is already taking place, so that what you do as a singer is not just your individual action, but grows naturally from the music. This can also help to give singers confidence in what they do; as he put it: ‘Everything that gives you permission for your choice is good. It removes the distraction of doubt. If you focus on a specific thing, then you don’t need to make a choice and defend or justify it to yourself. That’s very liberating’ (Johannsen, 18 September 2017).

TEXT AND NOTATION

Through the process of entextualization, different forms and uses of notation allow performers to take up different subject positions in the musical texts that they construct—to determine who is speaking, in whose name, and to whom. In this last section I wish to highlight how some of the ways in which the use of notation, the relation between text and performance, and the creative agency of performers are intertwined in the two groups I have studied. I will discuss each case separately, in order to explain in more detail how these two forms of notation work and how they influence the processes of entextualization in each group.

The Genetic Choir

The ideal of the Genetic Choir, with its emphasis on ideas of swarm intelligence and non-hierarchical systems, is to make music in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. From the interaction between the individual musicians emerges a musical structure that grows independently from their individual contributions. As I argued above, the processes of entextualization and the emphasis on fluidity and emergence in the choir should not be understood as necessarily opposed. This was illustrated particularly by the group’s use of samples in parts of their performances. Prior to the concert, audience members had been asked to manipulate samples digitally in various ways, and to make short recordings of a few seconds of these manipulations. These recorded samples were then used as a basis for an improvisation in the performance. I asked some singers how they related to these fixed pieces of music. Interestingly, they generally replied that just because it was recorded it did not automatically have a fixed, autonomous existence, suggesting that recording alone is not enough for music to be entextualized. Huizinga said that ‘it isn’t so clearly defined at all; perhaps the people who made the sample did so with a certain intention but this isn’t clear to you as a performer... . So you might start just by imitating what you hear, but then you can never imitate exactly what you hear, and then because of that it starts to acquire a sense of direction’ (Huizinga, 11 August 2017). Silva said that ‘It might present you with something, but you as a singer don’t really have a thing yet... . So these concepts of time, texture, and meaning can help you to respond to something you hear without directly imitating it, and then you find a way to relate to it’ (Silva, 17 August 2017).

Thus, the concepts of time, texture, and meaning allow the singers to relate to the sounds around them, even if these are dense digitally manipulated samples. Johannsen’s comment that anything that gives you ‘permission’ for your musical choices can have a liberating effect suggests that notation can be used to stimulate rather than constrain a performer’s creative agency. The first time we met, he remarked that he was not interested in freedom, but rather in describing ways of working. When I asked him about this later, he said:

Yes, it's a kind of fallacy, that freedom exists without context. You might be free from school, that means you don't have to go to school. But just being free, that doesn't mean anything. There are always unconscious entanglements, and I think freedom is seeing your entanglements with more transparency. Understanding your context and determining a course of action. (Johannsen, 18 September 2017)

Van Ditzhuyzen, in an earlier conversation, made a very similar point using an elaborate metaphor, suggesting that the use of the choir's three concepts allowed her to take the music into new directions consciously rather than just going along with its flow:

Suppose you have a river. You have to cross the river. And that river stands for all the possibilities and thoughts that flash through your head while improvising, all the possibilities of possibilities. And if there are some rocks, you can use them to cross the river. So in our case that's Time, Texture, and Meaning. So it helps you to think, I'll jump to this rock first, and then this, and so on. If you can do that with some calm and attentiveness, you can reach the other side with a feeling of flow. Alternatively, you can say, there are no rocks. I'll swim. I'll join the flow of the river, and that's how I get to the other side. But then, I might end up all the way over there! With the rocks I have some choice where I want to go, and how I want to relate to what the others are doing. Otherwise I'll swim and the current just sweeps me away. (Van Ditzhuyzen, 28 August 2017)

As she describes it, the use of these concepts does not detract from the emergent quality of the music, but can be used to negotiate between performance and text—to accommodate the fluid, surprising, creative, and emergent qualities of performance in an improvised piece of music that retains a sense of coherence, direction, and identity. The concepts used by the choir help singers to demarcate aspects of the ongoing music, or of their own internal flow of ideas, so as to confidently respond to the musical situation and generate new material.

Still, although the concepts help the performers to act in the name of the developing music, there is a thin line between their use as a tool for this negotiation between text and performance and their being experienced as an unhelpful external constraint themselves: between allowing musicians to act in the name of the music or in the name of this system of three concepts. Indeed, in my conversations with musicians they frequently indicated they had an ambivalent relationship with them. When I mentioned to Huizinga how the concepts of Time, Texture, and Meaning, although perhaps not really a form of notation, could at least be called a protocol, she responded: 'Yes, well, it's starting to become a protocol and I try to resist that' (Huizinga, 11 August 2017). She added that although she found it very important to create common points of focus, to get a grip on tacit working methods, and to train people's musical awareness or technique through such concepts, she did note that too much emphasis could become unhelpfully constraining on the creativity of individual musicians. Therefore, the concepts that they use are constantly a point of discussion. While Van Ditzhuyzen, as indicated above, found them very valuable, De Rijke told me that he found them useful as exercises in workshops but found it only distracting to use them during a performance. Johannsen himself, who invented these concepts, acknowledged that 'the danger of these kinds of systems is that you become too distracted by your own thoughts, and then you are no longer focusing on the music' (Johannsen, 18 September 2017). In fact, he indicated that in an ideal situation the use of the concepts would not be necessary, because everyone would automatically feel connected to the music.

The systems used by the choir derive from the research they do in their workshops and rehearsals; however, as Huizinga said, ‘a lot of the things you discover will be found in a general music dictionary—those Italian names all exist and they are general knowledge’ (Huizinga, 11 August 2017). By externalizing them, however, the singers are able to discuss their relation to the music, to develop a critical reflection on aspects of their individual or collective practice, and to train a musical awareness. De Rijke called this ‘developing muscle memory’, comparing it to practising scales and arpeggios on an instrument (De Rijke, 8 April 2018). Huizinga emphasized that the point of these concepts is to be found not in the extent to which they accurately capture musical ideas, but rather in the process of reflection that they generate: ‘Ideally you should have a different system every month!’ (Huizinga, 11 August 2017).

Their obscurity, in this regard, although also a point of contention, is an important property of these concepts. Although the singers, upon hearing a recording I played back to them, would sometimes indicate on which aspect they were concentrating at a particular moment in the performance, as a listener this was generally very difficult to distinguish. The fact that the three properties identified by these concepts are inherent to all sounds was felt to be very important to the singers. It relieved them of the idea that they should consciously try to recognize if another singer was attending to one concept or another, and allowed them to engage with the sounds on their own terms. As Barber writes, the obscurity of some texts in African praise poetry, especially of personal epithets, is an important aspect in their use in improvised performances. These short, enigmatic phrases invite exegesis through their obscurity, thus constituting two symbiotically related genres of aphorisms and their explanatory narratives, to the extent that the epithet ‘seems to exist as a stimulus to creative acts of narration and explanation rather than as a bearer of narrative meaning in itself’.³⁴

This quite accurately describes the role that the concepts of the Genetic Choir had during the period that I did my fieldwork with them. During the first rehearsals, the singers sang improvised pieces focusing on the individual concepts, discussing how each informed their relation to the emerging music and guided their musical imagination. In their collaborations with Manousakis and Van Heumen, they discussed at length how they might translate to particular algorithms for analysing sound, and how such analysis was different from human hearing. At a later stage, they became the subject of experiments with audience participation, looking how to use them as a means to help audience members get a clearer understanding of their music and their way of working. I will not go into any of these processes in more detail, but I mention them to suggest that ultimately the role of these concepts was not really related to their content or the extent to which they accurately describe sound, but lay in the way in which they acted as a stimulus for creative experimentation and reflection on musical skills and ways of working. Indeed, in the course of my fieldwork individual musicians constructed their own relation and understanding of these concepts. Silva, for instance, indicated that she sometimes found time to be confusing as it led her to consider particular metres or rhythms rather than focusing on the music; Van Ditzhuyzen said that she could relate to music most directly through time and texture and found meaning to be too abstract, while Huizinga took meaning to be the most fundamental concept, affording

³⁴ Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 85. A comparison suggests itself here of these two mutually dependent genres of obscure text and its exegesis to what Nicholas Cook has called the ‘two sides of the musical fabric’ in classical music, referring to the reciprocal relation between the classical tradition as a literary as well as a performance tradition; see Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination, and Culture* (Oxford, 1990), 122.

her a direct, felt, and bodily relation to the ongoing music. In this sense, the exegesis of the concepts by each individual musician also became a tool for self-reflection, and stimulated the construction of a particular creative agency within this way of working.

Kobranie

Turning to Kobranie, some of this applies equally to the use of symbols and gestures in conducting an improvising ensemble. Although these signs are much more specific than the three broad categories of the Genetic Choir, they still purposefully have some degree of indeterminacy. Especially when the students are only just starting to learn, Olthuis will frequently repeat the same sign over and over again, asking them to respond differently each time. This way, students are invited to explore the large range of different possibilities in playing ‘chaos’, ‘short note’, ‘rhythm’, ‘melody’, and so on, as well as to learn to respond quickly with a new idea. In an interview, Olthuis and I spoke about the fact that some systems for conducted improvisation (such as Walter Thompson’s Soundpainting, or the system used by the Dutch hip hop artist Kytteman to conduct his orchestra) are much more specific, indicating pitches and note lengths. Olthuis saw the relative obscurity of her system as an advantage:

You can be *very* specific; in Kobranie it is possible to indicate steps or half steps up or down, or scale degrees, but I like it that the signs are mostly quite broad. If you want to specify too much, just take a piece of paper and write it down; we have a notation system for that and it works perfectly well... . Specifying too much in conducted improvisation approaches another way of working that has already been perfected—plus, it leads away from improvisation. A musician is perfectly capable of deciding what notes to play, and it becomes much more interesting if you just ask for three chords instead of three particular chords. If I start doing that as a processor, then I start interfering with the composition. (Olthuis, 29 June 2018)

This last phrase is interesting, as it seems to suggest that the composition is not simply the product of the processor, the person conducting and giving signs, but distinct from them in a significant way. To understand this argument requires a further consideration of how the Kobranie sign language mediates between text and performance.

In Kobranie, there was a general agreement that a piece is ultimately the product of the individual processor, and the processor is seen as the primary creative agent of the composition—the students even do two exams in the course of their year where they are judged as individuals for conducting a piece. Many of the students also said that after a year of learning Kobranie, one of the things they had learned was a kind of ‘compositional thinking’. However, this compositional thinking is not a matter of planning out the direction of the music in advance. The students generally agreed that it was a risk to start a piece with a pre-conceived idea about where to end up, as you are always surprised by how the musicians respond to a given sign.

I once had this idea to work with shifting dissonant vocal textures, resolving to chords. It was a very nice idea, but when I turned people on, obviously I couldn’t tell them what notes to sing, so it became a kind of cluster—which was also good but not what I had in mind. So then you have to work with that, you have to immediately let go of your idea. The others are improvising too, so if you can’t let go then it is very bad for the music. They don’t know what your idea is and then if you try to force that it will take ages, or you might want to start talking and they end up doing something different anyway and you have to turn it off... that’s lethal for the music. You

ask someone to do something and you take that with you, but you can never go back. (AV, 26 June 2018)

Indeed, one of the students explained that the development of a compositional mindset had to do precisely with the relative indeterminacy of the signs that was also highlighted by Olthuis:

It's mostly a way to learn to see music in terms of movement and shape. The fact that I can ask for a melody but don't know what kind of melody I will get, that forces you to think on a more abstract, structural level. You start focusing less on detail, and normally you would say every detail has to be right, but this is also very refreshing. It's more of a helicopter view. (HA, 12 October 2017)

In other words, on the one hand the signs demarcate particular musical ideas as 'texts', but because the input of the musicians is so crucial to the actual form of these musical ideas, they also detach this text from the direct agency of either processor or musician and hypostasize the emerging composition as though it were self-generating, living a life of its own.

Indeed, much of the skill developed by the students who learn Kobranie in the first year of their curriculum has to do with learning to manage this living music. If the first step in learning to make a piece of music using this sign language is to create something that has a sense of identity and direction, to make the music start living a life of its own, the next step is to know how to respond to this—a situation that the students sometimes referred to as the 'now what?' moment. When, for instance, a strong groove is established and musicians in the ensemble start raising their hands because they want to play a solo or create a background riff, processors can be overwhelmed by what they have created—especially because of the rule that they have to grant any request coming from the ensemble. They then find it difficult to lead the music into a new direction or to create a satisfying ending. Olthuis noted that students who are still learning can have a tendency to 'step out of it':

Then you don't lose control of 'the beast' as much as of your own concentration. The difficult thing about being a processor is that you are dependent on the ideas people contribute. Once you start worrying about that, you've taken a step away from the moment and the flow in which a solution will usually present itself. . . . If you're cycling down a hill and you feel you're going too fast, then some people will suddenly let go of their handlebars. So they don't lose control over the bicycle but over themselves, and then they crash. (Olthuis, 29 June 2018)

Like Van Ditzhuyzen's metaphor of using stones for navigating the flow of the river, Olthuis describes the music as a living entity, one that, moreover, is somewhat detached from the individual musicians involved. Both describe the process of improvisation, to use Mark Butler's phrase, in terms of 'playing with something that runs', with musicians not simply shaping the music in real time, but relating and responding to something that has an autonomous existence and sense of direction.³⁵

This process of entextualization also means that different interactional roles may emerge in the course of interaction. One student, commenting on a recorded example I played back to him, described the situation as follows:

³⁵ Mark J. Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (New York and Oxford, 2014).

So K is playing the harmonium and Q is on drums, and B was doing those staccato bass riffs. At that moment, if I give H a guitar solo, then I know the piece will start going somewhere under H's leadership. That gives me room to turn off K, invite another drummer to join in... so when that happens, I can leave it up to them. (KM, 12 October 2017)

In other words, when a musical interactional text is established, this also implies a distribution of roles and of leadership; in this example, the processor could rely on the musicians to recognize their roles in keeping the structure going that was established, so he could turn his attention to other musicians to generate new musical ideas. There is in fact a Kobranie sign to make someone the leader of a given musical situation, but as this example shows, the emergent text can itself imply such musical roles without the need for an explicit sign.

The leadership of a Kobranie processor, then, is necessarily of a reciprocal rather than a top-down nature. One student argued that 'there are really two kinds of leadership: the processor decides the form, the ensemble decides the content' (AB, 27 June 2018). As I cited HA in the previous section, however, the decisions with regard to content by the musicians in the ensemble are made in service of the developing musical situation—just like the decisions of the processor with regard to form. HA emphasized the ethical aspects of this form of interaction:

It's a certain idea of what leadership can be. You can tell someone to do something, but in this case all the musicians actually have as much to say about what they're doing as you are. So you fulfil your leadership role, but that doesn't mean that your actions are more valuable than what the others do. So that makes your ensemble members much more... really musical people, rather than just people who are doing what you tell them to. (HA, 12 October 2017)

His comment that the processor relates to the musicians as 'musical people' illustrates my earlier argument that the idea of being 'in service of the music' indicates an extension rather than a negation of agency, the taking up of a subject position within the emergent interactional text.

More experienced Kobranie processors, then, are able to make use of the ongoing development of the music—the downward slope in Olthuis's metaphor, or the flow of the river in Van Ditzhuyzen's—and to use it to their advantage. Indeed, the processor does not determine the form of the music by applying a predetermined framework to the music—something that AV indicated could be 'lethal' for the music—but rather by guiding the movement of the music into certain directions.³⁶ AV, similarly to other students, suggested that he had acquired a greater compositional awareness as a processor in the course of his first year. However, he also made clear that this formal awareness was only a secondary concern in the course of actually making music:

Usually you're so busy that you're not actually aware of the larger structural aspects. You just think, what am I hearing and what can I come up with. So the point is to practice often to make sure that these larger aspects will turn out well; you make small changes in the moment itself—you might think, for instance, we need a quieter section now—and as long as you do that well then the large-scale structure will be good, but when you're in the middle of it you don't necessarily think in terms of this structure. (AV, 26 June 2018)

³⁶ In a discussion of creativity that may be compared to my argument here, Tim Ingold argues that form is often misunderstood from what he calls a 'hylomorphic' perspective, which assumes that form can pre-exist its 'application' to matter, and instead defends the view that form is always only a result of managing the 'flows of materials'. Tim Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34 (2010), 91–102.

Olthuis expressed a similar idea when she commented favourably on a recording I showed her:

He is actually very modest, he doesn't do so much. He is turning people off, loosening things up—he's making sure the water keeps flowing. He can see it when there's something impeding the flow of the river, or where he needs to build a little dam so that the flow can be controlled. (Olthuis, 29 June 2018)

These comments indicate that learning to use the Kobranie system is not so much a matter of learning the meaning of all the different signs, but rather of acquiring a repertory of skills to manage the flow of the music. As a processor, this means knowing how to steer the music in the right direction, or at least make sure its development does not stagnate, using a minimum of means to make small changes at particular moments.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that entextualization forms part of the creative process of improvising musicians, that part of their work is the construction and negotiation of 'the music', considered as an entity with its own identity, self-generating and somewhat distinct from the contributions of the musicians participating in a performance. In conclusion, I wish to reflect briefly on the nature of this 'text' that is constructed in performance. What kind of life does it lead? In what sense is it self-generating? I suggested, perhaps rather cryptically, that the extension of musicians' agency might be considered a shift from what Gell calls [artist → index] to [index → index] causality, effected by the removal of deixis through entextualization. It is worth explaining what I mean by this in more detail.

Gell discusses several examples of [index → index] relations in his work: we find them, for instance, in acrobats' human pyramids, where the pyramid is simultaneously made *by* and made *from* the acrobats involved; in abstract visual art, where ideas of 'balance' and 'dynamics' in a static painting suggest that its parts are seen to have some agency with regard to each other (and the whole of the painting); and in realistic sculpture, where an actual action may be depicted in a similarly static object—Gell uses the work of Bernini as an example.³⁷ These latter two examples are, as it were, 'internal' to the art work, and they may be most readily compared to musical processes. Indeed, there is a large body of music-theoretical work about the ways in which we may perceive and interpret works of music as dramatic stories in which we follow the actions of one or more agents as expressed in musical gestures.³⁸ Robert Hatten, for instance, has recently argued that our understanding of music is based on the recognition of what he calls 'virtual agency' in music, inferred from the movements and gestures that make up the musical surface; he distinguishes various levels at which such agency might be expressed and explores how composers and performers anticipate such understanding in the ways that they create music.³⁹

³⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 41–5.

³⁸ Such metaphors may be found throughout music history, but the modern theory of musical agency is often traced back to Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974); See also Fred Everett Maus, 'Music as Drama', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 10 (1988), 56–73; Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics* (Bloomington, Ind., 1994); Seth Monahan, 'Action and Agency Revisited', *Journal of Music Theory*, 57 (2013), 321–71; Robert S. Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music* (Bloomington, Ind., 2018). Theories of agency or 'persona' in music also appear in philosophical aesthetics, most notably Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art, and Metaphysics: Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics* (Oxford, 1990).

³⁹ Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*.

Comparing such work to Gell's theory, however, raises some interesting discrepancies. Whereas Gell focuses mainly on visual art and forms of material culture, the performance-based nature of music means that its indexical relations are constantly in motion, constantly suggesting new ways in which the 'nexus of agency' may be construed. Although he starts out with simple binary relations, expanding them to formulas with up to four terms to explain the basic elements of his thought (as I also introduced it earlier), he quickly moves onto complex networks in which multiple relations are hierarchically nested, and the same term may appear various times, folding back onto itself as it is both acting and acted upon the various elements in this tangle. Gell refers to this as the 'involute character' of the index, and this is ultimately whence the agency of art derives.⁴⁰ What I have referred to as the [index → index] relation is in fact a shorthand for a complex network of nested causal relations. Gell explicitly limits his consideration to a biographical timescale, arguing that this focus is characteristic of an anthropological theory.⁴¹ If an artist's oeuvre is constructed in the course of a lifetime, and the material culture of a particular society may span several, in music such involuted relationships emerge within a matter of seconds—indeed, we could go so far as to say that music *is* a process of involution.

This suggests interesting approaches to a problem that has recently been recognized in the aforementioned music theories of virtual agency, namely how to relate the virtual agencies of a piece of music to the actual agency of composers and performers.⁴² Seth Monahan suggests that the consideration of real human agents would quickly destabilize the various forms of agency we might discern in a composition, and the patterns of relation that exist between them, 'since performers and composers can easily be considered one another's actions simultaneously', in the sense that the composer constructs the performer in their writing of the music, while the performer constructs the composer in the way that they subsequently interpret it.⁴³ Hatten argues that virtual agency within the musical text 'is to be distinguished from the actual agency of composers and performers'.⁴⁴ As we have seen, however, the improvisers discussed above try to achieve a situation in which their own agency is secondary to that of the music—in which they are not guided by their own intentions or those of their fellow musicians, but by the music itself. As 'musical *personalities*' become '*musical* personalities', the [index → index] causality becomes less like the dynamics of an abstract painting and more like that of the acrobats' pyramid.

Text, as Barber reminds us, etymologically derives from *texere*, meaning to weave or braid, and we can recognize this in words like texture or textile.⁴⁵ The ways in which the agency of performing musicians is interwoven with that of the sounds that they play underlines recent work on the distributed nature of musical creativity.⁴⁶ Such work

⁴⁰ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 54.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 10–11.

⁴² This suggestion is also made by Lawrence M. Zbikowski, 'Performing Agency: A Response', *Music Theory Online*, 24/3 (2018), <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.18.24.3/mto.18.24.3.zbikowski.html>.

⁴³ Monahan, 'Action and Agency Revisited', 362.

⁴⁴ Hatten, *A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music*, 8.

⁴⁵ Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 1; see also Emily Payne and Floris Schuiling, 'The Textuality of Marking: Performers' Annotations as Indicators of the Creative Process in Performance', *Music & Letters*, 98 (2017), 438–64.

⁴⁶ Eric Clarke and Mark Doffman (eds.), *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music*, Studies in Musical Performance as Creative Practice (New York and Oxford, 2018).

emphasizes that creativity is not a unique capacity of particularly gifted minds, but inherently social, distributed across time and space, and over a network of people, media, institutions, and traditions.⁴⁷ In a case study of such a distributed creative process, Eric Clarke, Mark Doffman, and Liza Lim characterize music as ‘a tangle of local interactions and feedback loops, initiated by the actions of multiple agents and giving rise to the structures sonic, temporal, and inter-social “threads” of the work’, a complex entanglement that is ‘neither completely ordered nor entirely disorderly, in which composer, performer, conductor, listener, and their embedding institutions operate together as a fluctuating field of power relations’.⁴⁸

Still, this fundamental entanglement does not entail that the distinction between the agency of performers and that of the music is wholly irrelevant; indeed, for the improvisers discussed above, the distinction is very important, as part of the process of entextualization is precisely to think on the level of virtual agencies rather than their own ‘actual agencies’. It is a crucial part of their creative process that they feel a responsibility to ‘the music itself’ rather than to their fellow performers, even though the latter are fundamentally entangled with the former.⁴⁹ Crucially, however, in their practice this distinction is the outcome of their creative effort, not an unchangeable characteristic of a pre-established text. The notations they use help them to create this distinction; they do not determine it in advance.⁵⁰ Of course, this is especially salient in these cases of improvised music, where the text is clearly an outcome of the process of musical performance. Further research might elucidate how processes of entextualization function in cases where the notation is more elaborate and precise than the examples discussed here, and this would need to address the performativity of the analyst as well as the score itself.

Barber writes that texts can be considered ‘a community’s ethnography of itself’.⁵¹ This is not because of the way in which they function as a description of a community, but because textual practices are themselves ways of negotiating conceptions of personhood, authority, and social organization. As I hope to have shown in my discussion of these two groups of musicians, the ways in which musicians construct relations between text and performance, between the fluid nature of making music and the building of something that has a lasting identity, are ways of constructing and extending one’s creative agency as a performer. That is to say, the ontological question of music’s existence between process and product is inherently tied up with questions of ethics, of agency, and of responsibility.

⁴⁷ Gell’s work has been an important inspiration for such theories of distributed creativity. He uses the networked relations of agency that he uncovers in particular artworks to argue that the various artworks that exist in a particular culture, or in a particular artist’s oeuvre, can be seen as one distributed object, and moreover that this object is itself a form of cognition, distributed across space and time.

⁴⁸ Eric Clarke, Mark Doffman, and Liza Lim, ‘Distributed Creativity and Ecological Dynamics: A Case Study of Liza Lim’s “Tongue of the Invisible”’, *Music & Letters*, 94 (2013), 628–63 at 662.

⁴⁹ Nicholas Cook speaks of the ‘hidden socialities’ that form part of the process of composition as well as solo performance, where a dialogue between the composer or performer and ‘the music’ can be seen to mediate their relations to broader social structures. Nicholas Cook, *Music as Creative Practice*, Studies in Musical Performance as Creative Practice (New York and Oxford, 2018), 131.

⁵⁰ As I have suggested, notations may be understood as ‘interfaces’ rather than texts, highlighting their role in the creation of boundaries between inside and outside; see Schuiling, ‘Notation Cultures’.

⁵¹ Barber, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, 4.

ABSTRACT

This article presents results from fieldwork with two groups of improvisers using different forms of notation in their creative practice. Such practices raise fundamental questions about the relation of notation to performance. Drawing on theories of entextualization in linguistic anthropology, I argue that, contrary to many arguments for a performative understanding of music, performance is partly about creating something that has an identifiable existence, transcending space and time. The notations and compositional systems used by improvisers are a means of achieving this entextualization of their musical utterances. One of the main findings of my fieldwork was that improvisers frequently speak of acting ‘in service of the music’, a phrase commonly associated with composition-centred musical discourse. Drawing on the work of Karin Barber and Alfred Gell, I argue that this idea represents a process of entextualization that is not a negation of performers’ creative agency, but an extension of it.