Book Review

Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives

Edgar Landgraf
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From sparse “lowercase” excursions to “fire music” assaults and everything in between, improvised music performances play with our expectations. They explore the boundaries of complexity on micro and macro scales, often pushing at the very limits of comprehensibility. Conceptualizing the diverse music, methods, and mindsets associated with improvisation poses a daunting challenge.

When asked about their aesthetic or musical approach, improvisers frequently champion innovation and newness. Yet these qualities arguably can only be heard and understood in relation to a tradition, to lived experience, to the tried and true. Similarly, scholars researching improvisation tend to emphasize the music’s distinctive qualities by separating the fleeting from the fixed, the actual from the ideal, the sensual from the intellectual, the lived from the learned.

In other words, the field of improvisation studies appears stuck in a binary rut. Authors and artists celebrate the process over the product, the body instead of the mind, originality and singularity above and beyond repetition and variation. Some adopt the position from the outset that improvisation is indescribable, that it can’t be taught, that it shouldn’t be theorized. They usually do this, however, as a preamble to describing, teaching, and theorizing the subject, often quite eloquently.

Edgar Landgraf’s book, *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*, confronts this binary rut, and the circle of self-contradiction that often accompanies it, by following a rather unusual but ultimately compelling route. Drawing in somewhat equal measure on contemporary thought in systems theory and neocybernetics and on the work of late eighteenth and nineteenth century German scholars, Landgraf connects the contemporary debates surrounding improvisation to the beginnings of modern aesthetics while also arguing that neocybernetic thought fundamentally changes how we should envision the topic. For some readers not well-versed in these fields, Landgraf’s approach may be a bit intimidating, but his goals are lofty. Ultimately, he asks us to move from a subject-centered to a systems-centered view of improvisation, and he seeks to push the field of improvisation studies past its own humanist assumptions.

Landgraf’s book is not alone in this regard. *The Philosophy of Improvisation* by Gary Peters, a book with which Landgraf’s work often seems in direct conversation, has similar intentions. Both authors emphasize how inherited notions of aesthetic autonomy, subjectivity, and genius have informed contemporary understandings of improvisation. They also see their work as a countermeasure to contemporary accounts that, in their view, overemphasize the potential for improvisation to foster intersubjective communication and community. Peters goes so far as to describe his project as “mounting a resistance to all dialogics that would reduce improvisation to a glorified love-in dressed up as art” (3). More diplomatically, Landgraf cautions against employing ill-defined notions of “community” and encourages researchers to interrogate the actual dynamics of communication at work. According to Landgraf, improvisation does not overcome contradiction and differences to arrive at consensus; rather, it explores “the productivity and inventiveness of contentious social processes that supersede the purview of the individual” (12).

To support his argument, Peters engages deeply with the work of philosophers and aestheticians from Adorno to Artaud and Benjamin, Descartes to Derrida and Deleuze, Kant to Hegel and Heidegger. Many of these usual suspects—Kant, Adorno, and Derrida, in particular—appear in Landgraf’s book as well, but the work of lesser known authors also figures prominently, including Friedrich Schlegel, Adam Müller, Heinrich von Kleist, Heinz von Foerster, Spencer Brown, and Nicklas Luhmann.

Landgraf’s book moves from a general introduction “On Conceptualizing Improvisation,” and an initial chapter that explores “Theoretical Contentions,” through three chapters that are ordered roughly chronologically from the Enlightenment to the “Modern Predicament.” The work concludes with a chapter titled “Experiencing Improvisation as Art” that incorporates ideas from systems theory and neocybernetics. Over the course of the book, Landgraf unpacks

many important issues for improvisation studies including notions of inventiveness, agency, creativity, aesthetic autonomy, the artist-genius, Romantic irony, and improvisation as political practice.

The chapter on “Theoretical Contentions” should be required reading for any scholar planning on writing about contemporary improvisation and especially for those interested in probing the complex and conflicting interpretations of freedom that circulate around its practice. Landgraf recounts a fascinating and rarely mentioned on-stage encounter between Jacques Derrida and Ornette Coleman, which provides a leitmotiv to which he returns at various points in the text.

“Qu'est-ce qui arrive? What's happening? What's going to happen, Ornette, now, right now? [...] This chance frightens me, I have no idea what's going to happen” (qtd. in Landgraf 20). So begins “Play,” a text that Derrida performed alongside Ornette Coleman in Paris on July 1, 1997 as a meta-commentary on issues of performative immediacy and the problem of inventiveness itself. Derrida's text questions the possibility of pure freedom and sheer spontaneity even as its success as a performance, as Derrida is well aware, hinges on countless factors that cannot be controlled or predicted. Ironically, Derrida gets booed off stage halfway through by an audience that likely did not even know who he was. “And so I believe in improvisation,” Derrida remarked in an unpublished interview, “and I fight for improvisation, but always with the belief that it is impossible” (qtd. in Peters 145).

It is common among contemporary advocates for improvisation to lament the gradual disappearance of the practice from western art music in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Landgraf does not dispute this historical understanding; rather, he highlights how the very laws and ideals that increasingly prohibit improvisation in this period simultaneously enabled the inventive reintegration of improvisation into the modern art system. In other words, it is only in the late eighteenth century that the identification of improvisation in art with ideals of inventiveness, newness, and alterity take hold. One of the more memorable passages in Landgraf's book recounts how an eighteenth-century actor, who had been forbidden to improvise by the theater director, finds himself onstage with a horse dropping dung all over the place. The actor steps out of character, defying the prohibitions placed on him, and addresses the horse: “Were *you* not forbidden to improvise?” (111).

Prior to the late eighteenth century, improvisation had traditionally served a mnemonic, persuasive, or decorative role, for instance in epic poetry and in the ancient schools of rhetoric. Improvisation in non-western musical cultures—in Hindustani and Karnatic traditions or among the Shona mbira players of Zimbabwe, for instance—also does not necessarily subscribe to contemporary western views about newness or innovation. Landgraf argues that in late eighteenth-century Germany the concept of aesthetic autonomy is first comprehensively articulated as artists gradually rejected the Aristotelian mimesis postulate, or the idea that art should imitate or represent the products of nature. Instead, artists were increasingly expected to emulate the productive *force* of nature, its drive and stimulus, which gave rise to an aesthetics of expressivity and genius. Ironically, the newness and originality demanded of art in this period made it impossible to plan art fully, requiring that artists draw on improvisational techniques during the creative process.

These developments, according to Landgraf, propelled the Romantic rediscovery and reinvention of improvisation as a practice that “relies on and *stages* the particular constraints that encourage the emergence of something new and inventive” (5). In place of an aesthetics of autonomy, improvisation, for Landgraf, follows an aesthetics of *autopoiesis*, in that “the artwork [must] emerge with and according to a plan that it develops for itself only in the process of creation” (79). Instead of locating inspiration in the figure of the artist-genius, Landgraf views it from the standpoint of an “attentiveness that the artist lends to the emerging artwork” (82). This emphasis on improvisation as autopoietic, as a self-guiding and self-reflexive process, allows him to navigate a fascinating intellectual course that does not separate improvisation from other art practices but rather highlights how, through the process of staging particular constraints and orchestrating inventiveness itself, improvisation *becomes* art, much as art requires improvisation to *become* original, unique, and coherent.

Landgraf's important historiographic work is combined throughout with more speculative ideas based on his reading of neocybernetics and especially the work of Niklas Luhmann on social systems theory. Luhmann's work is neither structuralist nor post-structuralist, in that it challenges the basic assumptions on which these both rely. For example, he does not conceive of communication as an action performed by an actor or as a coded transmission. He dismisses outright the transmission metaphor of communication, arguing instead that communication operates through an autopoietic process of *perturbation* and *selection*.

A basic tenet of neocybernetics holds that a system—whether a system of life, a system of consciousness, or a system of communication—is open to its environment in proportion to the complexity of its closure. Because of grammatical conventions we tend to think of systems “within” or “surrounded by” environments, but in neocybernetics to say that a system is “within” an environment is only to say that it functions while other systems function

simultaneously. For example, a body can be viewed as comprising organs and the various connections between them—a *whole made up of parts*. But a body viewed as a living organism is a series of nested systems functioning simultaneously, including circulatory, digestive, immune, reproductive, and respiratory systems, among others—a *whole made up of other wholes*. The immune system, for instance, cannot be precisely located *in* the body, nor is it transplantable or able to be amputated; yet it only works in the complex environment *of* the body, simultaneous with the other systems just mentioned.

The “interior” of a system, therefore, is not defined by a structural boundary, but by a *zone of reduced complexity*. In other words, communication within a system operates through a particular medium and by selecting only a limited amount of all available information. Systems are thus only able to increase their internal complexity based on what the system *recognizes* as external irritations. On the basis of their operational closure, their self-referentiality and recursion, systems *construct* their interactions with their environment *as information*. To follow neocybernetics is to insist that communication is both subjectless and actionless: it is *coordinated selectivity*. Meaning does not emerge, for instance, as a psychic system *creates* or *receives* information; rather, it involves the *linkage* of a given message to subsequent communications.

Phenomenologically speaking, improvisers often perceive various levels of agency connected to the gestures and “materials” they produce. Kent de Spain describes it this way: “there are things that we *do*, things that are *happening* that we feel we are a part of, and things that feel like they happen to us” (29). A cybernetic reading of improvisation moves us even further towards a subjectless reading of communication, away from basic notions of materiality and substance to the idea of *distinction* and *indication*. Individual improvisers draw distinctions in the music that will, by necessity, be condensed, confirmed, canceled, or compensated by subsequent distinctions (either made by the initial musician or by others), and on and on.

Instead of trying to reconcile the standard Cartesian dualism of mind and body, thought and being, neocybernetics asks us to shift to a mind-body-communication plurality. Neither body nor mind nor society are the definite “home” of the human being, and therefore the “human being” is neither a sufficient nor necessary entry point into understanding social and communicative dynamics. Rather than describe society on the basis of its members, social systems theory attempts to describe society on the basis of its events: it looks at what actually happens. A passage from Hans Georg Moeller’s useful *Luhmann Explained* may help to ground some of these rather abstract ideas:

Is it really more convincing to describe what happens when one buys a chocolate bar at a store or stock on the Internet as instances of “human interaction” than to describe them as events in the function system of the economy? On what factual grounds can one hold that zapping to a TV channel or acting in a soap opera is a way of taking part in the life of a community rather than taking part in the system of mass media? And to what extent is the mechanical counting of a vote in an election more an act of recognizing the individual intentions of a citizen than an element of a social procedure to distribute power? If one opts for the second description in each case, one steps towards social systems theory and one of its most basic assumptions: *human beings do not and cannot communicate—only communication can*. (6)

This last phrase read alone may seem rather demoralizing, but Moeller stresses that social systems theory requires us to look beyond notions of a unified “in-dividual” (not-divided) to a model of “dividuals” in which communication is constantly occurring on many planes and in many directions. Human beings and their individual thoughts are necessary for communication to take place, but they are inaccessible within communication. We can, in communication, only connect to the communication of others, but never directly to their minds or brains, much less to the “human being” as such.

Overcoming the anthropocentric traditions of European and North American social philosophy is, of course, no small order. It is worth noting that Luhmann does not argue that society and art have always been autopoietic, only that they reached this level of complexity in the past few centuries.

Landgraf finds social systems theory especially appealing for understanding art in general and musical communication in particular. “The neocybernetic discourse,” he writes, “allows us to understand the ‘experience’ created by a person’s cognitive engagement with art without having to assume a representational or an interpretive stance toward the work of art or performance” (150). “With the help of such conceptual substitutions,” he continues a bit later, “we can comprehend the psychic and the nervous system as observing and relating to their environment long before comprehension mediated through language and abstraction is initiated and yet, without having to ignore the laws of iterability or the idea that ‘experience’ is necessary for the appreciation of art” (150).

This non-representationalist, non-interpretive, yet still experiential stance would seem to have strong resonance in the community of contemporary improvisation. But its implications only rarely creep into the surrounding discourse,

which, as Peters lightheartedly points out, tends either to posit improvisation as a new form of healthy living, or, in Marcusian fashion, to project its aesthetic substance onto political problems yet to be solved (23-5). "The worst cases," according to Landgraf, "amount to little more than the replication of stereotypes about improvisation, about the non-improvised arts, arts in general, and even about academic approaches to matters of praxis" (2).

Landgraf and Peters appear to be similarly interested in a freedom that does not free itself from concepts, or from hegemonic forms of political oppression, but is in fact prior to all of these. Both authors are concerned not with an art that expresses the self but in an art that *configures* the self. Landgraf describes a "model of agonality in which agency might be conceived of as the effect rather than the source of improvisation" (10). They view improvisation as collaborative but not intersubjective, collective but not communal, human but not humanistic. "If there is a collaborative dimension to improvisation," Peters writes, "it is not empathic but closer to what Heidegger describes as the 'unsociability' of 'being with'" (17).

Both authors highlight the temporal and material constraints of improvisation—Peters uses the example of a televised scrap yard challenge to make his case—and they insist on not only the specific situation but also the *staging* of improvisation. They contest the view that improvisation is radically autonomous or transcendently innovative, although they do so with often radically different agendas and methodologies. Both authors are interested in the emerging artwork, although Landgraf describes an autopoietic process to which the artist must be attentive while Peters just as often cautions the artist from surrendering to "the demands of the work to be a work" (11).

Peters is interested in rethinking freedom in terms of memory rather than hope, what he terms a re-novation model. He describes improvisation as a predicament for the performer, a "tragic task" to preserve "the beginning of art without destroying the freedom of this origin through the creation of an artwork conceived as an end" (3). Landgraf appears more centered on an ideal listener. He highlights the sense of "presence" created by performance, its ability to surround the psychic and nervous systems, and the complex of possible irritations it can elicit within the observer.

Landgraf and Peters seem equally unconcerned with what the musicians themselves have to offer. Peters describes them, on the whole, as heirs to a modernist aesthetic or ideology. And to follow Landgraf into social systems theory is to insist that there is no need to investigate the thoughts of individual improvisers to get at the systemic dynamics of musical communication, especially since thoughts and descriptions of improvisation after the fact are as susceptible as any other human utterance to bias, faulty memory, and misinterpretation. Of the two, Peters' work may appeal most to philosophers of music and to practicing musicians. Landgraf's work has the potential, however, to speak across even more disciplines, including of course German studies and art history, but also in the truly transdisciplinary way pioneered by research in cybernetics and systems theory.

Neither text is an easy read. Many passages in *Improvisation as Art* require significant reflection and reengagement, filled as they often are with novel terminology and multiple layers of reference and recursion. At times the general fit between Landgraf's explorations in German aesthetics and neocybernetics is not always apparent, although his particular strength is arguably in finding evidence of a system's orientation in early German Romanticism. One can feel amidst these grand conceptual moves as if important cultural differences in how improvisation is produced and perceived fall to the wayside. But the intellectual journey is well worth taking. Landgraf's work offers a nuanced understanding of how and from where we inherited many "modern" notions about art, agency, and creativity that inform much contemporary improvisation, even as it provides a compelling case for how improvisation and its vision of an open future determined the social horizon of modernity itself.

Personally, I have always been fascinated by the paradoxes that seem to surround improvisation, not the least of which is its extraordinariness and its ordinariness in our lives. Contradictions can offer surprising explanatory power. But Landgraf reminds us that paradoxes, dichotomies, and contradictions should not be stopping points. They are generators of movement. They can produce aporias in which misconceptions are revealed and stripped away. They encourage the emergence of something new and inventive. *Improvisation as Art* does just that. It serves as an innovative example of how the field of improvisation studies might move past its humanist inheritance and work its way out of its binary rut.

Works Cited

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