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PHILIP ALPERSON

On Musical Improvisation

THE NATURE and significance of improvisation in music are not much discussed by philosophers. Such mention as is made of the subject usually takes the form of occasional asides or derisive dismissals. Hanslick comes to mind here as an exemplar of this treatment of musical improvisation. In a book which is at once a caustic polemic against the view that music "has to do" with the emotions and an attempt to advance a thorough-going formalist account of the nature of music, improvisation is seen as a *bête noire* on both counts. It imposes on music an irrelevant and distracting wash of emotion and it results in a musical product typically devoid of beauty.[1]

Musicologists and historians of music, on the other hand, point out that most musical performances in classical Greece appear to have been improvisations[2] and that improvisation has had a steady role to play in the practice of Western music at least as far back as the music of the Church liturgy of the fourth century. In some Western music, such as music of the Baroque era and especially modern jazz, a very high premium has been placed on musical improvisation and some nonWestern musical traditions—certain Indian, Asian, and African traditions, for example—have placed improvisation squarely in the center of their musical activities. As a result, musicologists and music historians have discussed musical improvisation at greater length. But it is not always clear just what is being discussed. Sometimes the activity under discussion seems to be a variety of performance, sometimes a kind of composition, other times a kind of editorial activity which blurs the performance/composition distinction altogether.

In what follows I shall examine certain assumptions which I believe underlie our familiar ways of thinking about musical improvisation. I shall also advance an analysis which I hope will lead to a philosophical understanding of improvisation in music, indicating the essential aesthetic value of this activity. In so doing, perhaps we can begin to understand why musical improvisation has had a place in musical life and why someone of Hanslick's musical disposition might find this fact so deplorable.

I.

We might begin our analysis of improvisation in music by observing that the phrase "musical improvisation," like the more general term "improvisation," can refer to two correlative domains. It can refer to a kind of act, viz., the act of improvising, and it can refer to a kind of product, viz., something improvised. Let us examine the activity of musical improvisation first.

It will probably be agreed by all that improvising music is, in some sense, a spontaneous kind of music-making. In or-

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der to move beyond this beginning, we might examine a few common sense notions about music and its relation to a few of the other arts. In the case of some arts, such as painting or sculpture, we can fairly easily distinguish between the artist, the work of art and the audience. Common sense tells us, for example, that a sculptor, say Michelangelo, produces an object, say the statue "David," which may become available for contemplation by an audience. Even relatively unreflective thought tells us that music differs in important ways from this case. Of course, we can still identify an audience in the case of music, namely the person or group of people who may listen to a piece of music. But are there analogues to the sculptor and sculpture? Of course, we still want to say in the case of music that something is created and made accessible to an audience. But we typically classify music as a "performing art" for reasons which are not hard to find. While the crude material of sculpture (say, marble) can be fashioned into a reasonably stable physical object (the statue, "David") which can persist and remain relatively unchanged for successive viewings, the materials of music are sounds and silence (or tonal sounds and silence, as some would have it), and sounds and silences are transitory. The constant intervention of human agency is required in order to bring a set of musical sounds into existence and thereby make a musical work, conceived as a set of publicly audible sounds, available for the contemplation of listeners. Music, in this sense, must be performed and, in this way, seems to differ from nonperforming arts such as painting or sculpture.

Common sense accordingly distinguishes between two stages of the production of a piece of music. "Composition" is usually taken to refer to that creative act of conceiving of and organizing the parts or elements which make up the pattern or design of the musical whole ("the composition"). Performance, on the other hand, is usually taken to refer to that executory activity by means of which a musical composition is then rendered into a sequence of sounds. Common sense tells us that musical notation, the musical score, provides the main means by which the composition can be transmitted from the composer to performer. We usually think of the performer as executing or complying with a set of instructions encoded more or less completely by the composer, much as a baker might bake a cake according to a recipe created by someone else.

Along these lines, we understand a familiar situation: we hear music performed which we assume was composed previously. This is such a familiar situation, we may call it the "conventional" state of affairs in music. Our common sense understanding of the nature of musical production as a two-stage process enables us to make statements such as, "Last week I heard Casal's performance of Bach's 'Unaccompanied Suites for Cello' " and "Last week I heard two different performances of Bach's 'Unaccompanied Suites for Cello'." In the first case, we mean that we heard a performer execute, more or less faithfully, a set of instructions left by the composer, thereby producing a particular performance of his composition. In the second case, our common sense notions help us to explain how we can hear two performances of the "same" composition. What underlies these reflections is the notion that the two stages of music-making are related temporally and causally—the first, composition, being a cause of what comes second, performance.

This common sense account of music as involving the two stages of composition and performance linked by a notation is in some ways similar to the more sophisticated view advanced by Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art.* According to Goodman, music is a two-stage art since "the composer's work is done when he has written the score, even though the performances are the end-products." Moreover, on Goodman's view, music is an "allographic" rather than an "autographic" art. An art is autographic "if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better,

if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine." Painting and sculpture are therefore autographic arts since the distinction between original and forgery rests on establishing that the object in question is "the product of the artist's hand." An art is allographic if and only if it is nonautographic. Music is allographic at the first stage, since musical notation is such that a musical score, like a literary text, is defined by a certain combination of characters, a "correct spelling," which, Goodman says, is "the sole requirement for a genuine instance of a work"; any sequence of characters which satisfies the condition of "sameness of spelling" is a "genuine instance" of a score rather than a forgery. Music is allographic at the second stage since "the constitutive properties demanded of a performance of the symphony are those prescribed in the score." There is thus a "theoretically decisive test for compliance" of the performance with the score and "a performance, whatever its interpretative fidelity and independent merit, has or has not all the constitutive properties of a given work, and is or is not strictly a performance of that work, according as it does or does not pass this test . . . the notion of a performance that is a forgery of the work is quite empty."[3]

The distinction between the compositional and performative stages of conventional music-making also allows for two familiar conceptions of that spontaneous activity of music-making we call "musical improvisation," both of which have some currency. First, we can think of the activity of improvisation as a species of composition, a conception which we find implicit in definitions such as this: "Improvise *v.t.* to compose (verse, music, etc.) on the spur of the moment."[4] Alternatively, we might classify musical improvisation as essentially a kind of performance, as we find being done in this definition of "improvisation": "The art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches or memory."[5]

But, as is often the case with common sense notions, there is more here than meets the ear. For one thing, the distinction between composition and performance is not as tidy as the common sense account makes it seem. There is good reason to say that the composer is already, in an important sense, his or her own executor or performer. This is obviously so in the familiar case where a composer sits at a piano, imagining various musical formulations, actually playing (performing) this or that formulation at the keyboard. In a case such as this, the process of composing a piece of music explicitly involves the process of performing it: the composer thinks, plays a little, writes on music paper and, at the end of this interplay between imaginal construction and the production of publicly audible music, the composer (presumably) decides that the composition is finished. But that the compositional process necessarily involves performance can be seen more clearly in the case of those composers who do not actually produce publicly audible music as they compose. There are, of course, many accounts of composers (such as Mozart and Verdi) who are able to compose very complex music in their heads, so to speak, without the necessity of producing publicly audible sounds. Yet even here we can identify a performance, namely the imaginal construction of musical formulations in the "mind's ear" of the composer. It may be that such mental performances do not provide the richness of detail of a publicly audible performance, either in terms of the fulsomeness of sounding qualities or in terms of the completeness of musical design[6] (though performances which result in publicly audible sounds vary in these respects as well). The point remains, however, that even in cases where no publicly audible music is produced, musical performance plays an important role in musical composition insofar as the creation of a musical composition involves the rendering of a musical conception in some sounding form. If "composition" is taken to mean that the composer has "in mind" some reasonably full conception of the sounding form of his or her work, then a mental sounding image, produced either solely in

inward hearing or as a result of publicly audible sound, would seem to be logically necessary to musical composition. One might argue for a less inclusive notion of musical composition according to which composition need involve only the conception of an abstract design or pattern. On such a view, an imaginal "performance" would not be a logical necessity. But such a conception of musical composition seems at odds with the intuition that composition includes some awareness of the elemental qualities of music (as well as their relations). In any case, inward performances would seem to be functionally necessary for the composition of most music.[7]

Conversely, the activity of performance seems necessarily to involve composition. A musical performance, whether public or in one's head, always involves formative decisions about how a piece shall sound, i.e., decisions about the form or composition of the piece. Of course, it is true that the composer may, by means of a musical score, provide instructions about the essential shape and texture of a piece, but standard musical notation leaves unspecified many decisions about tempo, phrasing, emphasis and timbre that ultimately determine how a piece shall sound.[8]

It would seem, then, that the common sense distinction between composition and performance begins to blur. Composition and performance are clearly interdependent rather than mutually exclusive activities. If we return, then, to our first two common sense notions of what musical improvisation is, that is, a species of composition or a species of performance, respectively, and we interpret these ways of understanding musical improvisation narrowly as construing musical improvisation as either composition or performance, one to the exclusion of the other, we are surely to be led astray.

Having said that, however, we must not be too hard on the composition/performance distinction. Clearly there are narrower senses in which it is quite reasonable to speak of either the compositional aspect of music production or the performative aspect. Textbooks on harmony, for example, typically address the former whereas "methods" (instructional manuals for instrumentalists) typically address the latter. I shall therefore continue this narrower usage of these terms in appropriate contexts. What needs to be said in the present context is that, insofar as improvisation is a kind of music-making and to the extent that the composition/performance distinction is useful, improvisation must involve composition and performance to some extent.

In this context, one might inquire into the relative importance of compositional and performative aspects in musical improvisation, but no firm determination can be given here thanks to the wide range of activities which commonly fall under the rubric of improvisation. In principle, one might improvise on any musical feature or set of features and in more or less radical ways. And in practice, musical improvisation does indeed range from minor variations of tempo and embellishments of familiar phrases or melodies (in which case the compositional component would not seem to loom large) to complex and extended developments of an original idea such as the fugal improvisations widely attributed to Bach and Beethoven (in which case composition would seem to be more evident). Improvised cadenzas and basso continuo presumably fall somewhere in between.[9] The relative prominence of compositional and performative poles is also influenced by the exigencies of ensemble improvisation.

These reflections suggest a third conception of musical improvisation: we might understand improvisation in music as an activity of spontaneous music-making in which the improviser somehow practices simultaneously the interdependent functions of composition and performance in both the broad and narrow senses of these terms. I take this to be the thrust of the definition of improvisation which we find in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music*: "Improvisation: the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers,

or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between."[10] By focusing on the more comprehensive notion of the "creation of a musical work," this way of thinking about improvisational activity bridges the distinction between composition and performance and is thus in line with the broad senses of these terms. To the extent that we might want to use these terms in their narrower senses, the definition leaves open the question of their relative importance, thus encompassing the broad range of activities traditionally regarded as musical improvisations. Moreover, this definition characterizes improvisation as an activity in which the normal temporal relation between composition and performance (in their narrower senses) is collapsed. The definition thus does justice to what many would want to say about musical improvisation, that, unlike the conventional situation in which we hear music performed which we assume was composed previously, improvisation strikes us as a case in which one individual, simultaneously composer and performer, spontaneously creates a musical work.

However, difficulties remain with this definition. As it stands, it seems to be ambiguous as to the distinction, made earlier, between music which exists for us as a sequence of publicly audible sounds and music which exists for us as a sequence of imaginal sounds. In principle, we might contend, one might improvise a musical work either for a public or in the privacy of one's mind. Now, it might be replied that the above definition ranges over both cases insofar as the definition's distinction between "a musical work" and "the final form of a musical work" implies a reference to both public and private musical works. But there are two problems with this reply. First, it is not clear what the phrase "the final form of a musical work" adds to the phrase "a musical work" in the context of the definition. How can one create "a musical work . . . as it is being performed" without creating at the same time "the final form of [the] musical work?" Conversely, can one create "the final form of a musical work . . . as it is being performed" without creating at the same time "[the] musical work?"[11] A performed work exhibits its final form. Perhaps the phrase "the final form of [the] musical work" is best excised. In any case, by far the most common understanding of the term "musical improvisation" refers to the production of publicly accessible sounds (just as the conventional musical situation is normally thought to involve the public performance of a piece) and a definition of musical improvisation should reflect this.

But these considerations rest on a more fundamental problem: the definition leaves unanalyzed the term "musical work." What exactly is the relation between a musical improvisation and a musical "work"? In what sense, if any, can a musical improvisation be a work of art? With these questions, we return to an observation made at the outset of our inquiry, that the phrase "musical improvisation" can refer to a kind of activity and, correlatively, to a product of that activity. We must now turn our attention to the latter concern.

II.

An improviser improvising for a public clearly produces something, but what is it that is produced? One answer to this question is evident: an improviser produces a sequential structure of sounds. Thus, when we speak, for example, of Coleman Hawkins's famous improvisation of "Body and Soul," we mean the particular sounding structure which he produced on October 11, 1939.

Obviously, we can attend to the design of an improvised sounding structure and hope to discover the same kind of formal unity and regional qualities which we would hope to find manifest in any conventional musical work. We can also appreciate the creative use of musical material drawn from a musical tradition. This point is sometimes lost sight of, perhaps because the evident spontaneity of improvisation encourages the impression that something is being created out of nothing.

The truth, of course, is that even the freest improviser, far from creating *ex nihilo,* improvises against some sort of musical context. In fact, learning to improvise is often, in large part, learning to master that tradition. Jazz musicians, for example, frequently begin to learn to improvise by listenening to and copying, from recordings or live performances, other players' musical phrases (or even whole solos), many of which have long ago attained the status of formulae;[12] in this way they develop a personal repertoire of phrases. Jazz players also learn to assimilate musical "rules" such as those concerning the appropriateness of certain scalar patterns to certain harmonic progressions, either explicitly, through a study of "music theory" or, less methodically, by developing an "ear" for the accepted idioms which the rules describe. One also learns the larger musical forms in the jazz tradition, the most common of which follows a familiar pattern: a tune (usually 32 measures with an A-B-B-A structure or a twelve-bar blues) is played through once or twice with the melody clearly stated; the harmonic and rhythmic background of the composition is repeated indefinitely during which time individual players are free to improvise solos within these frameworks; and a recapitulation of the first section completes the form. Beyond this (and ideally) improvisers learn to use this knowledge and skill in the construction of well-wrought solos. A player may take a melodic unit or phrase as a point of departure for musical transformations or he or she may begin with a phrase not obviously derivative of the original composition. The development of an improvisation proceeds by means of transformational operations manifest in conventional music and, in jazz, improvisations are criticized according to much the same criteria of internal purposiveness which may be applied to conventional music: intelligible development, internal unity, coherence, originality, ingenuity, etc., the artful employment of prevailing idioms and the emergence of an individual style.[13]

These observations about the status of jazz improvisations as musical constructions do raise an important critical question about musical improvisation, however. It might be contended that, as complex musical structures, musical improvisation typically pales in comparison with the conventional situation where a composer produces a composition antecedently to its public performance. At a recent meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, for example, Denis Dutton asserted that he did not think it likely that there would ever exist a single jazz improvisation which would compare favorably (or even remotely) with the structural complexity of any of Beethoven's late quartets.

Now, of course, the history of Western music is replete with examples of musicians such as Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Buxtehude, Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven, all of whom were well known for their ability to improvise complex musical pieces. Still, one sees the force of this critical reservation: such accomplishments are few and far between. Indeed, one would be surprised if this were not the case. The composer can develop a composition gradually with the help of musical notation and time for reflection. He or she can edit and make corrections in the score. Composers can write for many different instruments and coordinate their individual parts. It is hardly surprising that, with the development of a sophisticated graphic notation, Western instrumental music has been able to rise to heights of extraordinary complexity.[14] On the other hand, individual improvisers, creating works spontaneously, cannot avail themselves of the luxuries and benefits of musical notation. And even the most accomplished keyboard players have only ten fingers. Of course, groups can (and do) improvise—witness the polyphonic improvisations of New Orleans jazz—but, as the number of designing intelligences increases, the greater is the difficulty in coordinating all the parts; the twin dangers of cacophony and opacity lurk around the corner. One might well conclude then, that, regarded as compositions or sounding structures, the musical

product of the improviser usually, if not always, falls short of the architectonic (and especially polyphonic) possibilities of conventional Western music. The same holds true for the improvised music of South India. The overall form of a piece of Carnatic improvised music can be quite complex, involving the statement and an intricate pattern of development and transformation of one or more melodic lines, as, for example, in the *Kriti,* "Raghuvamsa," the form of which is:

Pallavi: $aaaab^1ab^1ab^2$
ab^2a extended

Anupallavi: $c^1c^2c^2c^3c^3c^4c^4c^2$
$dde^1e^1e^2ab^2a$ extended

Charanam: $f^1f^1f^2f^3f^3$ plus
entire *anupallavi.*[15]

Carnatic improvisations also involve rhythmic patterns which strike the Western ear as extremely complex. Still, it remains the case that these improvisations are monophonic, the improvisations being carried out on the *vina,* violin or voice with percussion accompaniment. And it is the architectonic limitations of improvised music which is at odds with Hanslick's notion of the beautiful in music[16] and which accounts for his out-of-hand dismissal of the subject.

But more confronts us in a musical improvisation than a coherent structure of sound. A musical improvisation is also an action, a fact which is reflected in the ambiguity of the term "improvisation" noted earlier: an improvisation may be something made or it may be something done. In the latter sense, the action of creating a musical work as it is being performed becomes an object of contemplation. We are thus driven back in our examination of the product of musical improvisation to features of the activity of musical improvisation.

As we have seen, the activity of musical improvisation normally involves the public performance of a musical work and, to a certain extent, musical improvisations can be appreciated for some of the same values as can the action of musical performances in the conventional musical situation. In particular, one can appreciate the improviser's sensitivity, lyricism and general virtuosity as an instrumentalist or vocalist which we associate with the narrower sense of musical performance. One can also appreciate those compositional skills which are made manifest in musical performance. Musical improvisation does add, however, to the conventional musical performance situation a greater element of risk which stems from the fact that the activity of improvisation is simultaneously an act of musical composition and an act of musical performance. The composer in the conventional situation can correct his or her mistakes before the composition becomes public. No one else need know. The performer in the conventional situation is in a little more dangerous position: his or her mistakes will be heard, but one can at least rehearse a piece indefinitely, making only minor interpretative decisions at the moment of performance.[17] The improviser is in the most precarious position of all, at least in those cases where he or she engages in a substantial amount of spontaneous composition in a performance. Of course the risk of the improviser is not quite the same as the risk of the tightrope walker (except perhaps in the unfortunate case of a very bad improvisation done before an unruly audience). It is rather the risk involved in creating a musical work anew as it is being performed.

The creation of a musical work as it is being performed calls upon a corresponding set of listening habits different from that which comes into play in listening to conventional music. Most informed jazz listeners, for example, cognizant of the exigencies of musical improvisation, will accept irregularities in intonation, attack, timbre, rhythm, etc., which they would count as substantial deficiencies in conventional performances. Francis Sparshott has described this critical attitude toward improvisations well: "When the musician improvises, we make allowances for fluffs, interruptions, squawks, and all sorts of distracting concomitants that we assume to be no part of the performance. But we also allow for his forgetting what

he was doing, trying to do two things at once, changing his mind about where he is going, starting more hares than he can chase at once, picking up where he thought he had left off but resuming what was not quite there in the first place, discovering and pursuing tendencies in what he has done that would have taken a rather different form if he had thought of them at the time, and so on. These are all part of his performance tied together in a single web of intention, a single aesthetic object, though an inconsistent one."[18] In this regard, we attend to a musical improvisation much in the way that we attend to another's talk: we listen past the "mistakes" and attend to the actual development of a work.[19] More broadly still, we might say that musical improvisation brings to light a feature of human action in general in a world recalcitrant to human will. There is, of course, a sense in which every action is an improvised action, but the connection I wish to make here is rather closer to an observation make by Stanley Cavell:

> . . . human actions move precariously from desire and intention into the world, and one's course of action will meet dangers or distractions which, apart from courage and temperance, will thwart their realization. A world in which you could get what you want merely by wishing would not only contain no beggars, but no human activity. The success of an action is threatened in other familiar ways: by the lack of preparation or foresight; by the failure of the most convenient resources, natural or social, for implementing the action (a weapon, a bridge, a shelter, an extra pair of hands); and by a lack of knowledge about the best course to take, or way to proceed. To survive the former threats will require ingenuity and resourcefulness, the capacity for improvisation; to overcome the last will demand the willingness and capacity to take and to seize chances.[20]

The point of these observations is not to tout the derring-do of the improviser, but rather, by focusing on these aspects of improvisational activity and our mode of attention to it, to suggest that the aesthetic object of musical improvisation can be, and, by experienced listeners, typically is, understood in terms of a kind of action, the particular shaping activity of the improviser who creates for us a musical utterance unmediated by another human being.[21] It is as if the improviser's audience gains privileged access to the composer's mind at the moment of musical creation.

Seen in this light, the critic who dismisses musical improvisation as a pale imitation of conventional music-making is guilty of a kind of category mistake. The exact nature of this mistake can be made clearer if we return to the matter of the ontological status of a musical work. Let us look at the conventional music situation first. As we have seen, there is a familiar way of speaking about musical works of art according to which we say that we can identify different performances of the same work of art. This way of speaking rests on the implicit assumption that the term "work" refers to the musical structure or design which is largely captured in the composer's score, that is, to the musical composition. Performers present instances of the musical work. Performances, then, like improvisations, can be contemplated in at least two ways: they can be regarded as instantiations of (the composer's) work and they can be regarded as acts of skill by the performer. We might attend to Chopin's work, "Polonaise in F-Sharp Minor," for example, in a public performance by Malcolm Frager or in a public performance by Vladimir Horowitz. Both performances may be taken as equivalent, even in the face of obvious musical differences (phrasing, tempo, dynamics, etc.) insofar as each is regarded as a presentation (or "rendition") of the same (compositional) work. Or we may attend to the action itself. We attend a Horowitz performance to hear him perform. Shall we call his action a work of art? To do so would invite confusion with the compositional work of art, of course, but it is clear that one can attend primarily to his virtuosity. Of course, the picture is more complicated than I have allowed because these two ways of contemplating a conventional musical performance often overlap. We often compare conventional musical performances as actions, for example, not only according to differences in time and space

but also by appeal to the same specifically musical features to which we appeal in comparing different instantiations of the same work.

We may clarify these relations which obtain in conventional music-making by appealing to terminology employed in Joseph Margolis's version of the type/token distinction.[22] Speaking of the arts generally, Margolis uses the term "type" to signify "abstract particulars of a kind that can be instantiated."[23] Normally, what the artist makes using the materials of his or her craft is an instance of the art-type, i.e., a token-of-a-type. We may thus distinguish between a particular (token) work an artist has made and the particular (type) work which is therein generated and we may note, among other things, that types and tokens are not separable and cannot exist separately from one another but that types and tokens are individuated as particulars. A sculptor might make a wood sculpture, for example, which would be a unique token instance of a type work or he or she might make several tokens of the same type, as is often the case with bronze sculptures. We may take aesthetic interest in the art-type created by the artist, but it is only by virtue of token instances of a type that we can do this. Further, because we often wish to identify a particular (type) work through tokens which exhibit varying aesthetically interesting properties (as in the case of copies, manuscripts, and recitations of "the same" poem), Margolis, amending a notion of Stevenson along Kantian lines, introduces the concept of a "megatype," such that "two tokens belong to the same megatype if and only if they approximately share some design from the range of alternative, and even contrary, designs that may be imputed to each; or, if the designs of both, however different, can be defensibly imputed to some token of the megatype signified by an art notation."[24] In cases where we wish to refer to the megatype through a particular token, we may call that instance the "prime instance," as for example, when we refer to a poem through a critical manuscript. But typically in literature, we refer to the megatype (rather than a particular token) as "the" poem. In the case of painting, on the other hand, we typically take the megatype painting as it is actually instantiated in the prime instance to be "the" work.

Having said this, we might suppose the case of conventional music to be more akin to the case of painting than that of literature inasmuch as pieces of music are not generally thought to be translatable in the sense that poems, say, can be translated from one natural language to another. We might therefore expect that a musical work be typically identified through a prime instance, i.e., a particular performance. Some critics do, in fact, speak of a "definitive" performance of a work. But, as Margolis points out, closer inspection reveals that we usually regard the case of music to be closer to that of poetry: "our individuation of a piece of music, as of a poem, presupposes an antecedent, well-defined, well-ordered fund of materials. Because a music score is a notation, a sign of a work of art and not a work of art itself, and because our admiration for the composer refers (normally) to his *arrangement* of antecedently defined and ordered notes . . . any token performance of the megatype composition noted in the score will serve as an acceptable instance of the music."[25] Even the designation of a particular performance as "definitive" is made, one suspects, with respect to the score. What we have in the case of conventional music is a "prime notation for possible tokens."[26]

Following Margolis's terminology, then, we may say that we may regard individual musical performances as token instances of the work which is understood to be a megatype signified by a prime notation, in which case we are looking through the performance, so to speak, to the (compositional) work instantiated in it. A performance is a means of access to the (compositional) work. We may, however, also attend to individual performances as "interpretations" of a work, i.e., as "comments" on the work. Here we focus on the interpretative action of the performer, an action clearly derivative of the (compo-

sitional) work, but exhibiting (one hopes) the qualities of originality, expressiveness and vocal or instrumental virtuosity, etc., which we look for in musical performances considered as action.[27]

The ontology of musical improvisation is rather different, however. Of course, like the conventional situation, the improviser does produce a particular structure of sounds embodying a design. We might thus be tempted to say that the improviser, like the performer, produces a token instance of a megatype. But, insofar as a musical improvisation is the spontaneous creation of a musical work as it is being performed, it would seem peculiar to speak of musical improvisation as the creation of a megatype which admits of a number of instantiations: there is only one instance in the case of a musical improvisation, ignoring the implausible case that there might be independently produced two sounding structures alike in all musically relevant ways. For the same reason we would be mistaken to regard the musical improvisations as one of many possible "interpretations," as we may regard conventional musical performances. Interpretation, a prime feature of conventional musical performance, may be safely said to be absent from an improvisation: it makes no sense to characterize an improvisation as an interpretation or to praise it as a good interpretation of a previously existing work since no such work exists.[28] Moreover, musical improvisation differs from both ways of regarding conventional musical performances in virtue of its particular spontaneity. Because one creates a work as it is being performed, there is no prime notation by means of which we would be able to identify either a megatype or bona fide instances of the megatype. Nor is musical improvisation even like the case in conventional music where we have a prime instance performance and no score. In such a case, Margolis contends, "we would ordinarily be inclined to construct a prime score from it and prefer it even to the performance of the composer himself.[29] And so we might. But we would do so only insofar as the focus of our attention is on the design of the musical composition, which, I have argued, is not solely or even primarily the case with respect to musical improvisation.[30] If anything, musical improvisation seems ontologically closer to the creation of a wood sculpture—the unique token instance of the type—rather than to a conventional musical performance.

Some qualifications are in order here, however. There are senses in which improvisations can be said to be caught on the wing, so to speak, made permanent and repeatable. Musicians have probably "borrowed" improvised phrases from each other since the beginning of music-making and this helps to preserve particular improvised structures (or at least parts of them). Musical notation has also provided a means for transcribing and preserving at least the basic outlines of particular musical improvisations. Particular improvisations can also be sedimented by means of player-piano rolls, magnetic tape, phonograph records, etc., a list which will no doubt continue to grow with the development of new technologies. As we have seen, these means of preserving particular improvisations have an important role to play in the setting of a musical tradition and in providing a repetoire from which improvisers can draw. However, such cases would stand to the original as copies of paintings stand to their originals, i.e., as tokens of a megatype, only if one thinks of improvisations as musical structures or designs (which happen to have been improvised). Nor would it be accurate to regard a copy of an improvisation as a token instance of an improvisation considered as an action. Strictly speaking, what we have is a record of a (unique) action. In such cases, though, these artifacts can and often do function as recordings from which we read off, as it were, the original action. This is an interesting case, ontologically, since, unlike the relationship between a painting and its copies, the object of our attention is not an artifact but the creation of one and, unlike the relationship between a conventional dance and performances of it, we are not confronted with

an "interpretation" of a previously existing work. However, whether we attend to a live improvisation or to a recording of one, we may still focus more on the creating of a work of art than, more narrowly, on the work created. Since our focus will in both cases be on the expression of human design or intention (as evinced in a work or in an action), we will likely choose to employ the same critical terms: brilliant, inventive, boring, derivative, subtle, elegant, tired, etc. But the relevant critical standards for musical improvisations should derive, not from what has been composed or from what has been performed, but rather from what has proven to be possible within the demands and constraints of improvisatory musical activity, the creation of a musical work as it is being performed.

This emphasis on the productive activity of musical improvisation may seem peculiar to one who thinks of music in terms of a certain kind of product, viz., a potential or actual structure of sounds, or in terms of a text which provides more or less complete instructions for the production of such a structure. And this understanding of music is, of course, a prominent (if not predominant) view. But its ascendancy in Western thought about music is relatively recent. Carl Dahlhaus argues that the conception of music as exemplified in works extends back only to the sixteenth century and Listenius's emphasis on the musical text. In any case, this line of thought hardly exhausts our ways of thinking about the aesthetic object in the case of music. As Dahlhaus points out, conceptions of music as an activity or as an "energetic art," to use Herder's term, have also figured prominently in the aesthetics of music.[31] And, as I have indicated, most of us are quite willing to contemplate musical performances as actions at least some of the time. And, more fundamentally, it might be, as Sparshott has argued at length, that our notions of what a fine art is, what a work of art is, what an artist is and what art is derive ultimately from a classical line of reflection on the notion of *technē* and the relation of intelligence to action,[32] and that criticism in the arts takes as its object performance in a broad sense: something done or made when considered simply as the outcome of the doing or making of that very thing.[33] It is well beyond the scope of this paper to investigate this possibility. But if some such view be allowed, it is clear that, far from deviating from some "conventional" set of practices, musical improvisation will be seen to exhibit a fundamental continuity with artistic theory and practice.

[1] *See* Eduard Hanslick, *The Beautiful in Music* (Indianapolis, 1957), pp. 76-77 and 124.

[2] *See,* for example, Donald J. Grout, *A History of Western Music,* 3rd ed., with Claude Palisca (New York, 1980), p. 5. For further examples of the role of improvisation in Western music, *see* pp. 43, 79-80, 84-5, 222, 228-30 and 281-85.

[3] *See* Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1968), pp. 114-18, *passim.* Goodman is clearly at odds with the common sense understanding of music with his notorious insistence that "the most miserable performance without actual mistakes does count as such an instance, while the most brilliant performance with a single wrong note does not" (p. 186).

[4] "Improvise," def. 2, *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language,* Unabridged Edition (New York, 1967), p. 717.

[5] *Harvard Dictionary of Music,* 2nd Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Cambridge, 1972), p. 404.

[6] That there exists a faculty of imaginal hearing analogous to the "mind's eye" which allows us to imagine visual images can be confirmed by imagining a tune in one's head. For a discussion of the qualitative features of such mental performances, *see* Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York, 1953), pp. 135-39.

[7] Cf. Paul Hindemith, *A Composer's World* (New York, 1961), pp. 18-19.

[8] Verbal dynamic and tempo markings, indications for cadenzas and figured bass are but a few examples of the ambiguity of musical notation which requires interpretation on the part of a performer. For this reason, music does not possess a thoroughgoing notational system, a point which Goodman admits but dismisses on the grounds that musical notation "comes as near to meeting the theoretical requirements for notationality as might reasonably be expected of any traditional system in constant actual use, and that the excisions and revisions needed to correct any infractions are rather plain and local" (Goodman, p. 186). But it is not likely that a suitable notation could be devised which would determine the execution of many musical practices such as, for example, rapid trills. For more detailed discussions of the limitations of standard musical notation in the context of Goodman's requirements for notational-

ity, *see* Benjamin Boretz, "Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art* From a Musical Point of View," *The Journal of Philosophy,* 67, no. 16 (1970), 540-52; Paul Ziff, "Goodman's Languages of Art," *The Philosophical Review,* 80 (1971), 509-15; William E. Webster, "Music is Not a 'Notational System'," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* XXIX, no.4 (1971), 489-97; and Joseph Margolis, *Art and Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, 1980), pp. 65-70.

I might also mention in this connection that in this paper I am concerned with bona fide cases of musical improvisation rather than works of conventional music which seem to have been composed in such a way as to convey a *sense* that the performer is improvising, as Edward Cone believes Beethoven's introduction to the Finale of Sonata Op. 106, for example, to be *(See* Edward Cone, *The Composer's Voice* [Berkeley, 1974], p. 130) or as certain sixteenth century pieces in an "improvisatory style" seem to be. Musical features which allegedly contribute to the "improvisatory style" include embellishments of melodic lines, freely varying rhythm, the play of running passages and "peculiar chromaticism," according to one music historian. *(See* Grout, pp. 281-85.) Bukofzer characterizes the music of Handel as "improvisatory" in light of "sweeping melodic lines, designed in bold strokes as if painted with a thick brush in fresco manner" (Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* [New York, 1947], p. 347).

[9] Ethnomusicological research has unearthed a wide range of examples of musical improvisation in nonWestern music. *See,* for example, Bruno Nettl, "Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach," *The Musical Quarterly,* 60, no. 1 (1974), especially the description of the different degrees of freedom allotted to the improviser of Javanese gamelan music, p. 7.

It might also be added here that improvisations can serve important compositional functions, as was the case in much music of the Baroque era. As Charles Rosen writes, "The musical ornamentation of the first half of the eighteenth century was an essential element in the achievement of continuity: the decoration not only covered the underlying musical structure but kept it always flowing. The High Baroque in music had a horror of the void, and the *agréments* fill what empty space there was." Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York, 1972), pp. 107-8.

[10] "Improvisation," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music,* Vol. 9 (Washington, 1980), p. 31.

[11] I am viewing the improvised work atomistically, for the moment, without regard to preceding or subsequent works. In this sense the form of a work is its "final form."

[12] This is one of the sources of musical quotation and humor in jazz improvisation.

[13] For a more detailed account of the "tacit dimension" of knowledge and skill involved in musical improvisation as seen in one person's efforts to learn to improvise in jazz, *see* David Sudnow, *Ways of the Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), especially pp. 1-34. For a recent analysis of the contributions of Polanyi, Dennett and others, especially as they pertain to the notions of "practicing" and "artistic skill," *see* V.A. Howard, *Artistry: The Work of Artists* (Indianapolis, 1982), Chapter 6. *See also* Langer on the role of "muscular imagination" in musical composition and performance, especially pp. 140-41. For a discussion of the role of models in the creation of nonWestern musical improvisations, *see* Nettl, pp. 11-17.

[14] Cf. Walter Wiora, *The Four Ages of Music* (New York, 1965), pp. 130-35.

[15] I am indebted to Bruno Nettl for this example.

[16] *See* Hanslick, p. 47.

[17] An interesting borderline case is that of Glenn Gould who in 1964 quit the concert stage for the recording studio. For the last 18 years of his life, Gould produced recordings which were the result of enormous amounts of tape editing rather than the simple recording of a single, continuous performance. *See* Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind* (Toronto, 1978), especially Chapter 8, entitled, appropriately enough, "Creative Cheating."

[18] Francis Sparshott, *The Theory of the Arts* (Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 255.

[19] On the affinity between improvising and speaking, *see* Sparshott, p. 609, n. 40. For a rather more impressionistic discussion, *see* David Sudnow, *Talk's Body* (New York, 1979), in which Sudnow also presses into service analogies with typing, sport, handwriting, and dance.

[20] Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1976), pp. 198-99.

[21] Attention to the action of the improviser can also be witnessed in the phenomenon of the jazz "cutting" session in which individual improvisers attempt to surpass the achievements of their rivals. The similarity of these competitions to certain athletic contests should not surprise us. Any time we are confronted with two or more actions of the same kind, we are likely to compare their success. In the case of such musical jousting matches, however, our attention is likely to shift from aesthetic concerns with the particular shaping activity of the improvisers to the determination of "who wins," the criteria for which not infrequently turn out to center around instrumental technique (or even sheer stamina) rather than musical creation. Or again, as in athletic contests, one can achieve a win-by-default, as Bach did when the French organist Marchand failed to show for an improvising contest in Dresden in 1717 (accounts of which can be found in Hans David and Arthur Mendel, eds., *The Bach Reader* [New York, 1966]). I am indebted to an anonymous referee of this journal for bringing this incident to my attention.

[22] I am here adopting a rough outline of Margolis's view though I do not intend to be faithful to his account at every point. For a detailed discussion of the strategies behind Margolis's model as well as the relation between it and the views of Peirce, Stevenson, Goodman, Wolterstorff and others, *see* Margolis, Chapters 2-4.

[23] Margolis, p. 18.

[24] Ibid., p. 54.

[25] Ibid., p. 59. Cf. Hanslick, who speaks of the "fact" that "from a philosophical point of view a com-

position is the finished work of art, irrespective of its performance . . ." (Hanslick, p. 75).

[26] Margolis, p. 60.

[27] For further discussion of relations among the concepts of musical performance, critical interpretation of music and critical interpretation of literature, *see* Margolis, pp. 59-64 and 116-20. For another discussion of the concept of musical performance, *see* Thomas Carson Mark, "Philosophy of Piano-Playing: Reflections on the Concept of Performance," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 41, no. 3 (1981), 299-324.

[28] This distinction is nicely reflected in the fact that jazz musicians generally understand the term "improvisation" to refer specifically to the improvised choruses rather than to the whole musical work from first note(s) to last. Jazz performances usually involve two sorts of activity: conventional performance of a musical composition, i.e., an interpretation or recognizable statement of a composition, and an improvisation. My concern in this paper has been with musical improvisation per se, though this, as indicated earlier, admits of a wide range of sophistication and variation.

[29] Margolis, p. 60.

[30] Though musical improvisation does, of course, involve composition, as I have argued earlier. That improvisation does not involve composition is a position taken by Nicholas Wolterstorff in his admirable book, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford, 1980). Wolterstorff's claim that "to improvise is not to compose" is based on his understanding of composition as the bringing about of a norm-kind, i.e., the selecting of properties of sounds for the purpose of their serving as criteria for judging correctness of occurrence (pp. 56-58 and 62-63). Wolterstorff argues as follows:

> Suppose that someone has improvised on the organ. And suppose that he then goes home and scores a work of such a sort that his improvisation, judged by the requirements for correctness specified in the score, is at all points correct. In spite of that, the composer did not compose his work *in* performing his improvisation. In all likelihood, he did not even compose it *while* improvising. For in all likelihood he did not, during his improvising, finish selecting that particular set of requirements for correctness of occurrence to be found in his score. Suppose, for example, that at a certain point in his improvisation he introduced a bit of rubato, with full consciousness of doing so. In so doing he has not yet decided whether to select rubato at that point as required for correctness of occurrence. One cannot uniquely extract a work from a performance (p. 64).

It seems to me, however, that introducing a bit of rubato "with full consciousness of doing so" is precisely deciding to select a bit of rubato at that point as a requirement for correctness of occurrence. It may be that one cannot uniquely extract a work from a performance, but that fact introduces doubts about the extent of the listener's knowledge about the intended work rather than doubts about the possibility that a work had been composed. Again, it is true that in conventional music, the composer "normally indicates for the rest of us what his work is like" (p. 67), the score serving as the indicator of the set of properties selected as required for correctness of occurrence: the composer "selects by signifying" (p. 68). And it is true that in the case of improvisation, a score is not available to the public. But it does not follow from this that no determination of properties was made by the improviser. Decisions about the selection of musical properties are matters of a composer's intentions. "Selecting properties is," as Wolterstorff acknowledges, "something that one can do in one's head" (p. 68).

[31] *See* Carl Dalhaus, *Esthetics of Music*, William W. Austin, trans. (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 9-11.

[32] Sparshott, p. 10. The entire book constitutes such an argument, but *see* especially Chapter II.

[33] F.E. Sparshott, *The Concept of Criticism* (Oxford, 1967), especially Chapters 9, 11, 16 and 24. On the relation between art and action, *see also* Wolterstorff, cited above.

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