

Improvisation

Bruno Nettl, Rob C. Wegman, Imogene Horsley, Michael Collins, Stewart A. Carter, Greer Garden, Robert E. Seletsky, Robert D. Levin, Will Crutchfield, John Rink, Paul Griffiths, and Barry Kernfeld

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.13738>

Published in print: 20 January 2001

Published online: 2001

Updated in this version

updated, 3 September 2014

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. To some extent every performance involves elements of improvisation, although its degree varies according to period and place, and to some extent every improvisation rests on a series of conventions or implicit rules. The term 'extemporization' is used more or less interchangeably with 'improvisation'. By its very nature – in that improvisation is essentially evanescent – it is one of the subjects least amenable to historical research.

I. Concepts and practices

Bruno Nettl

In virtually all musical cultures there is music that is improvised. Societies differ, however, in several ways: the degree to which improvisation is distinguished from pre-composition; the nature and extent of the musical material which improvisers use as a point of departure or inspiration; the kinds and amounts of preparation required of improvisers, either in their musical training or in relation to individual performances; the relationship of written to oral transmission; and the relative social and musical value assigned to improvisations, compositions, and the musicians who practise them. For further discussion of specific traditions see entries on individual countries.

1. Concepts.

The term 'improvisation', in suggesting a failure to plan ahead or making do with whatever means are available, may have negative implications. However, in many of the world's musical cultures the ability to improvise is often highly valued. In societies such as those of the Middle East and North India the improvised portions of a performance carry the most prestige.

The relationship between pre-composition and improvisation may be intricate. In Karnatak music the formal techniques of both composed songs and improvisations include repetition, variation, melodic sequences, and returns to the point of departure. Similarly, in 19th-century European organ improvisation one purpose was to produce well-crafted fugues that might not be distinguishable from the composed canon. Elsewhere

composition and improvisation represent opposite ends of the musical spectrum, as in 19th-century piano music where the concept of improvisation, in composed genres such as impromptu and fantasia, was drawn upon to explain or justify departure from formal norms.

One of the typical components of improvisation is that of risk: that is, the need to make musical decisions on the spur of the moment, or moving into unexplored musical territory with the knowledge that some form of melodic, harmonic, or ensemble closure will be required. While risk is always present, its character varies greatly. In the improvisation of a fugue the difficulty is in adhering to the predetermined form; in the *kalpana svara* of Karnatak music it is the juxtaposition of rhythmic patterns that depart from but return to the *tāla*; in Iranian music it is the maintenance of a balance between quoting memorized material and moving too far beyond it; in South Slavonic epics it is in keeping to a textual line structure while alternating memorized themes with commentary. In most instances audiences evaluate improvisations by their balancing of obligatory features against imaginative departures from them. They also appreciate exceptional virtuosity, either technical or intellectual.

Even in societies in which improvisation is not recognized it may play a role in the conception of music. Some Amerindian music is said to be created in a moment of ecstasy, with a suddenness analogous to improvisation. This is the case in songs learnt in visions or dreams by Amerindian peoples of the North American Plains who say that in the dream the song was sung to them by an animal guardian spirit only once. The visionary, however, rehearses the song before singing it for other humans. In Plains culture this way of composing is contrasted with another, in which someone may sing through the songs they know and will consciously combine sections to create a new work.

The concept of improvisation has also been dealt with variously in the history of Western musical scholarship. In the study of Western music history improvisation has principally attracted scholars interested in historically informed performing practice and was associated with the early music movement of the second half of the 20th century. Earlier it interested music educators who used it to enhance music learning, and it has continued to play a role in music education in Europe and North America. Nevertheless, before the 1970s the field of musicology tended to treat improvisation as a 'craft', in contrast to the 'art' of composition. Case studies of improvisation began in ethnomusicology in the 1960s, concentrating on three repertoires: jazz, Indian art music, and Iranian music. To a substantial extent approaches to the study of improvisation in other cultures have been informed by the types of studies suggested by these three repertoires. However, since the mid-1970s the distinctions between improvisation and other forms of music-making have been investigated in research that deals with concepts of risk, competence, dealing with unexpected situations, and making positive use of mistakes.

2. Improvisation in musical cultures.

The improvising musician may play a special role in a culture's conceptualization of musicianship. In Western culture the musics that are most dependent on improvisation, such as jazz, have traditionally been regarded as inferior to art music, in which pre-composition is considered paramount. The conception of musics that live in oral traditions as something composed with the use of improvisatory techniques separates them from the higher-standing works that use notation.

By contrast, in West Asian societies improvised music (and music that gives the impression of being improvised) has been the ideal. These cultures associate it with the concept of freedom, with the ability of a musician to make his or her own decisions and with the absence of restriction such as metre. The respect for individual decision-making is extended to evaluating musicians, thus, for example, privileging the learned amateur who needs only to follow his or her own inspiration over the professional who is obliged to perform when and as directed. Improvised genres are regarded as central and composed ones as peripheral. Non-metric genres, which are always improvised, have the highest prestige.

Karnatak musicians are judged both on their knowledge of the repertory of composed songs and by their ability to improvise particularly the unmetred *ālāpanam*. However, it is the performance of *rāgam–tānam–pallavi*, the South Indian genre that relies most on improvisation, that is considered the greatest test of a musician's skill. According to Ki Mantle Hood (1964), in the group improvisations of Javanese gamelan, the performers on those instruments that hold the ensemble together (and thus depart from the model) as well as those that move most from the model, are the most highly esteemed.

Although some degree of improvisation may be said to be present in all musical performance, improvisation should be spoken of only when performances based on a model differ substantially or when a society distinguishes explicitly between the performance of a pre-composed piece and an improvisation on the basis of something given. Thus the many versions of an English folksong can be said to result from a personal interpretation of a local tradition passed on by a particular individual, rather like improvisation. Yet folksingers seemed traditionally to talk more about personal versions than improvisation. The concept of improvisation is readily accepted by the practitioners of West Asian music, although some musicians appear to memorize their improvisations and to perform these personal variants consistently. Japanese musicians ordinarily maintain that there is no improvisation in Japanese music. However, performances of the same piece of *shakuhachi* music may differ greatly in length and form, and to some extent in content.

Determining the presence or absence of improvisation in a particular culture depends to a great extent on the culture's own taxonomy of music-making and on its assessing of the relationship between what is memorized or given and the performance. The prominence of improvisation varies greatly from culture to culture. For example, it characterizes the dominant genres in the musical cultures of South and West Asia, of Indonesia, and of Africa, whereas in certain other societies it typifies individual, and perhaps exceptional, genres: jazz in the West, *sanjo* in Korea, the Philippine *kulintang* ensemble, and sections of the Cantonese opera from China.

3. Models or points of departure.

A common feature of improvised music is a point of departure used as the basis of performance. No improvised performance is totally without stylistic or compositional basis. The number and kinds of obligatory features (referred to here as the 'model') vary by culture and genre.

The most prominent model may be that of mode or a modal system. As a model these can be found in South, Central, and West Asia, in North Africa and, in a somewhat different form, in Indonesia. In South Asia the predominant model is *rāga*. The definition of *rāga* is a subject of much discussion and dispute among South Asian musicians: it may, however, be described as a collection of pitches in a hierarchical relationship, from

which are produced sets of typical, and often obligatory, melodic practices, motifs, and ornaments. *Rāga* are the basis of both improvised and pre-composed genres in Hindustani and Karnatak music. In performance each item (either improvised or pre-composed) is ordinarily based on only one *rāga*. However, improvisations based on a series of *rāga*, with an emphasis on the elegant transition from one to the next, are occasionally heard.

In West Asian musics, improvisations are based on concepts similar to those of *rāga*, albeit with significant differences. Known as *maqām* in Arabic traditions, *makam* in Turkey, *mugam* in Azerbaijan, *makom* in Uzbek culture, and *gushe* in Iranian music, the West Asian modes are less complex and subject to fewer explicit requirements than *rāga*, and they are, in each culture, fewer in number. In contrast to performances of *rāga*, a West Asian performance makes use of several modes, moving from a principal one to secondary ones and back again.

In the gamelan music of Indonesia a fundamental melody is varied in a different way by each instrument in the ensemble. There is relatively little improvisation in Balinese gamelan, but it is more definitively present in Javanese gamelan music, in a strictly controlled form, as the model comprises the mentioned skeletal melody, of a *pathet* ('mode'), and, for each improvising instrument, a specific pace and density.

The numerous musics of sub-Saharan African societies exhibit a great variety of improvisational practices. Prominent among them, in all parts of the continent, is the use of improvised variation. In this a vocal or instrumental soloist repeats a short phrase many times, varying it slightly each time but maintaining a consistent length and rhythmic framework. Similarly, a call-and-response form may consist of a refrain that alternates with a soloist's variations of a theme. The model for improvisation may also include a set of styles through which the improviser should pass, devoting an unspecified amount of time to each. Percussion ensembles in West Africa may consist of a number of performers, each of whom presents a single repeated rhythmic pattern, while an improvising master drummer selects from these patterns, juxtaposing and interweaving them, using them as the models. The xylophone orchestras of the Chopi of Mozambique and South Africa include the improvisation of simultaneous variations of a theme, in a somewhat similar fashion to the gamelan.

Jazz musicians use a variety of sources for improvisation. 'Standards', a repertory of popular songs, often from Broadway musicals or tunes composed specifically by or for jazz musicians, provide not only melodic material but also the (chord) 'changes', underlying harmonic progressions which form the basis for improvisations. Ordinarily a small band will play the 'head' (tune) in unison before the musicians take it in turns to improvise on it. Recorded solos by other musicians, memorized and sometimes transcribed, may also serve as models for improvisation. A further technique is the inclusion of quotations from other pieces or solos in the improvisation.

European traditional music displays a variety of improvisational techniques. The South Slavonic tradition of epic singing consists of combinations of themes and motifs dealing with the historical deeds of military and royal figures. These are juxtaposed with a small number of melodic lines (and their numerous variations) and with melodic motifs performed solo on an accompanying instrument, the one-string, bowed *gusle*. The model for improvisation includes textual and musical content, but also stylistic elements. A line of text must consist

of ten syllables, with a word boundary between the fourth and fifth. These materials, passed on orally, are then manipulated and varied to provide a performance (sometimes lasting several days) that is improvised but also predictable.

A further example comes from Genoa. There, groups of four to six sailors sing in ensembles in which each member assumes a stylistic and musically functional role, e.g. *la donna* (a falsetto obbligato) or *la guitarra* (a vocal imitation of strumming a guitar), the entire structure using simple chord progressions for guidance. It has been argued that most European traditional music repertoires consist of tune families, each a body of variants of one parent tune that has been developed through oral transmission with some improvisatory behaviour; explicit improvisation is not common. When it does occur it is found predominantly in southern, eastern, and Celtic regions of Europe, and more in instrumental than in vocal music.

By comparison with non-Western and vernacular music, Western art music, in which improvisation plays a small role, uses a number of contrasting models. For example, forms such as fugue and specific themes were and still are occasionally the basis for improvisation by keyboard players. Themes from a concerto movement were the basis for classical cadenza improvisation. The rules and options for the use of a vocabulary of ornaments formed the model in Baroque and early Classical music. In contrast, some of the music of the second half of the 20th century has used non-specific models. A general style or sound provided guidance in improvisatory ensembles. A set of directions for volume and frequency served as the model for John Cage's *Imaginary Landscape no.4* for 12 radios. Here the actual sounds are 'improvised' by the natural and cultural environment.

Related to the question of model is the issue of learning improvisation, in which, too, societies differ greatly. South Indian musicians learn a series of exercises intended to help them juxtapose rhythmic and melodic structures with the melodic grammar of *rāga*. Iranian musicians are told that memorization of the *radif*, a repertory of 250–300 short pieces, will automatically teach them the techniques of improvisation. Jazz musicians have a variety of learning techniques, including the notation and memorizing of outstanding solos.

4. A sampling of genres.

The genres that follow are characterized by being from art music repertoires and are contrasted by the relative prominence of the model, the density of the obligatory features, and what is added creatively by the performer.

The genre of *ālāp*, *jor*, *jhālā*, *gat*, as played by North Indian instrumentalists like Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar Khan, and Bismillah Khan, is the first genre considered here. A full performance of a *rāga* consists of two sections. In the first, *ālāp*, *jor*, *jhālā*, the performer explores the *rāga* without pre-composed material as a model. The first subdivision, *ālāp*, presents the constituent parts of the *rāga* without a metrical structure, in what might be termed 'free rhythm'. It brings in the characteristic motifs of the *rāga*, moves from the low tonic to the octave and beyond and eventually descends again. The second, *jor*, introduces a non-metrical pulse, and the third, *jhālā*, greatly increases the tempo. The second main section, *gat*, introduces the *tālā* (rhythmic cycle) and the accompanying *tablā*. The *gat* proper is a short composition which, once stated,