Free Improvisation as Experience: A pragmatic insight into improvisational gesture

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This article presents the possible proximity between the philosophical tradition of pragmatism and the present-day practice of free improvisation, a musical activity that enjoys its ambiguous nature of not being clearly defined, that is, however, of value to examine as a practice in its own rights. It is used in educational and compositional contexts as a tool, as well as being an established independent performance practice, albeit for a relatively small body of audience. The discussion is led through three concepts that are utilised by pragmatists, but which resonate with the concerns of free improvisers: experience, expressive object and gesture. Outlining these key ideas, the article sheds light on John Dewey's and Giovanni Maddalena's thoughts on aesthetics, which provide a perspective for examining these inherent issues of free improvisation. Through a philosophical examination, the article seeks to enlighten the performance processes of the musical phenomenon of free improvisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Free improvisation is a musical practice that is fascinating, multipolar and open to players with a variety of social and cultural backgrounds, but which is relatively inexplicable in terms of its ontology. The characteristics of free improvisation provoke discussion between performers who enjoy making music together, but who may not agree on the concept of what free improvisation actually is. Thus, the nature of free improvisation seems to incite a certain resistance from players to constructing a narrative that could help to identify and to conceptualise their activity. The reasons that motivate musicians to delve into free improvisation are often personal, although recently it has also been progressively incorporated into academic education as an instrumental discipline, thus providing opportunity for (classical) music students to familiarise themselves with this practice that challenges their previous music studies, as improvisation is often excluded from the early stages of music education.

While for performers it is not obligatory to agree upon a unified concept for playing together, it is essential to interrogate the practice in order to enrich the dialogue within an academic and institutional context, as well as within the free improvisation community itself. This article seeks to discuss the performance aspects of present-day free improvisation through an ontological study directed towards three main issues: the experience of performance, the expressive object in an artist's hands and gesture as a concept that is utilised for identifying this practice as a performance tradition. Linking these three concepts with the philosophical tradition of pragmatism is beneficial to an enhancement of the discussion, and to the conceptualisation of our own background of and approach to free improvisation.

2. THOUGHTS REGARDING FREE IMPROVISATION

First, an insight into free improvisation as performance practice is introduced to pave the way to more detailed examination. One of the key characteristics of present-day free improvisation is its disposition as a musical activity with several perspectives; we will consider the distinctions between a few of these, before again considering free improvisation as a whole.

Improviser Derek Bailey describes free improvisation as a non-idiomatic musical practice (Bailey 1993: xii) featuring plentiful modes of stylistic occurrences. He states that, contrary to idiomatic improvisation that 'is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom' (ibid.), free improvisation does not depict knowledge of or technical ability in a specific musical approach, but can consist of elements from various idioms (ibid.). His statement is influenced by an ideological question of spontaneity in free improvisation that is widely theorised by a number of scholars and musicians. It seems that Bailey wanted a practice that was free of references to certain traditions, such as jazz music, which would have bound his approach within a specific style. George Lewis has connected this discussion to a wider sociocultural conflict in which jazz assumes the role of an 'epistemological other' (Lewis 1996: 107), as a consequence of the denial by white American composers and theorists of its influence (e.g., John Cage's well-known critique towards jazz music (ibid.: 98–9)).

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This view is also supported by improviser Tina Krekels: '[i]t is not just that white writers appropriated black culture, they put it into a context of "otherness"' (Krekels 2018: 46). In this light, Bailey's notion acts as a reproducer of the whiteness ideology, although he does not deny jazz music's influence upon himself (Bailey 1993: 48). However, we propose that in the context of present-day free improvisation, non-idiomaticity has acquired new meaning and its use is justified, not because improvisation would emerge from a sort of 'empty page' every time, excluding the player's background, playing style and cultural context, but rather that the free improvisation community is increasingly open to improvisers with radically different backgrounds, thus allowing a wider mix of styles. Despite the insistently non-idiomatic nature of present-day free improvisation, there are some notable cornerstones in its development, which are useful in elucidating its performance aspects while simultaneously explaining the reason for this multiplicity of concepts.

Lewis has discussed how the improvisational act can be analysed by taking into account the historical, cultural and social contexts in which the expression takes place. In discussing the nature of improvisational utterance, he uses the adjectives 'Afrological' and 'Eurological', which denote specific social and cultural environments (Lewis 1996: 93). It is salient that his concepts do not refer to specific ethnic groups but rather to sociocultural factors and to musical belief systems, thus 'accounting for the reality of transcultural and transracial communication among improvisers' (ibid.). Following Lewis, there are two models of improvisation – 'open' and 'free' improvisation – which emerged around the 1960s and have had a considerable impact on the contemporary free improvisation field. Although these two types do not encompass the full richness and diversity of improvisation practices in these years, they do provide an example of the difference in perspectives, as well as key concepts that are relevant for the further discussion.

The 'open' improvisation developed by the members of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) on Chicago's South Side is an example of an improvisation practice that is indicative of an Afrological perspective. The musicians belonging to that organisation were 'clearly Afrological in perspective as a group, yet influenced individually by a wide range of non-Afrological musics' (Lewis 1996: 111). A collision of ideologies resulted in the development of a 'variety of innovative musical ideas' (ibid.) and in the recognition of AACM as a 'metaphor for the durability of jazz as a whole, even as the artists themselves challenge, both rhetorically and artistically, classicist labels and style-specific categorization' (Radano 1992: 80).

The legacy of the Afrological perspective and AACM's 'open' improvisation practice upon the present-day free improvisation community is diverse. Important aspects include the development of personal voice, individually recognisable playing techniques and '[t]he value that jazz community places on personal responsibility' (Berliner 1994: 59). Even today, these values are important to improvisers, regardless of their musical origin or even their notions of personal responsibility and 'voice' in improvisation. According to Lewis: '[t]his emphasis on personal narrative is a clear sign of the strong influence of the Afrological on improvised music' (Lewis 1996: 111). Bailey, who belongs to the subsequent model of 'free' improvisation, has noted that the development of jazz music reaffirmed performing and creating as a unified expressive act (Bailey 1993: 48). By paving the way for a rediscovery of personal creative agency and responsibility, jazz and the Afrological perspective somewhat encouraged performing musicians to turn away from only presenting music written by composers, towards exploring their own (real-time) creativity: '[b]ebop raised the stakes in the game ... providing models of both individual and collective creativity that were adopted and extended during later periods of improvised music' (Lewis 1996: 95).

The focus on the personal agency and creativity of musicians is one of the cornerstones of today's free improvisation. The playing style can vary from very personal to an approach that seems objective but is chosen on the basis of the performer's personal considerations. Improviser Toshimaru Nakamura has expressed that the no-input mixer gives him freedom through not having full control over the sounds; he observes how the sounds happen within the instrument that he has created (Hopkins 2009). Tentatively, this could be an objective position, as Nakamura does not execute his intentions fully, and it is impossible to reproduce the sounds identically. Therefore, individual effort is reduced by the situation and not so much by the performer's choice, yet does not conflict with the notion of 'personal narrative'. Nakamura's personalisation of his instrument and the subsequent consequences on his range of expressive ability while playing affirm his creative agency as a performer. The more singular approach is common for many interpreters, and it occurs through specific extended playing techniques developed over the years. The performer can thereby be distinguished through their particular use of personalised extended techniques and timbral treatment. Therefore, the 'personal narrative', as a conceptual cornerstone of free improvisation, is seen in the personalisation of

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performers' instruments and also the restrictions that performers apply to themselves in free improvisation.

Another aspect that resonates with the Afrological perspective but has also shaped contemporary free improvisation is the style of 'free jazz' as exemplified by players such as Ornette Coleman, Albert Ayler and Cecil Taylor. Despite the contentiousness of the term 'free jazz' among jazz musicians (Lewis 1996: 114), its development in the late 1950s from jazz music, but also as an 'ideological rejection of former jazz conventions' (Berliner 1994: 122), cannot be denied. While a few current improvisers define themselves within a direct relation to jazz tradition due to their musical and educational background, many more feel comfortable with relating to 'free jazz', as it embodies an ideology of 'freedom' that is of value to improvisers. According to Lewis, free jazz (and free improvisation) 'placed "freedom" back on the musical agenda' as part of both a social and a political movement (Lewis 1996: 114) and also acted as a liberation of the music's performer. Its development at the intersection of jazz, world music traditions and modern classical music gave an important push for the musicians, not only to debate on the topic of 'freedom' but also to explore the timbral possibilities of their instruments in combination with their personal instrumental treatment: according to Berliner, '[s]ince the free jazz movement … some combine traditional vocabulary with a personalized repertory of extended instrumental techniques such as multiphonics' (Berliner 1994: 126). While the term 'free jazz' is often considered together with the Eurological 'free improvisation', the interpretation of the concept of freedom vs control is relatively different within Afrological and Eurological perspectives (Lewis 1996: 114), as are their musical characteristics. Nevertheless, though the direct musical resemblance between 'free jazz' and present-day free improvisation is not always clearly distinguishable, the former's focus on topics such as freedom, control and the exploration of instrumental timbres is an influence on the free improvisation community.

Improviser Evan Parker, who along with Bailey belongs to the 'free' improvisation model, states that the central contradiction of improvised music lies in the relationship between freedom and control. In essence, the more control a performer has over their material, the freer they become in working with that material in improvisation (Payne-Frank and Macfarlane 2017). John Edwards has also commented that the free improviser has the full responsibility for the performance, as they are not only the one determining the rules but also the one stepping beyond these (ibid.). Discussion of rules is more dominant in Eurological improvisation; in Afrological improvisation '[t]he Eurological discourse concerning "rules" for the improvisation is almost entirely absent' (Lewis 1996: 114). Afrological improvisation has tended more towards assuming that for freedom to be achieved one needs some form of discipline or background system to lean on, as well as concentrating on players' individual work and playing techniques: 'freedom in Afrological improvisation is perceived as being possible only through discipline' (ibid.). The discussion of 'freedom' has received justifiable critique from feminist improvisers: '[Bailey's] diverse analysis misses a deeper understanding of sociopolitical spaces and leaves out women completely' (Krekels 2018: 6); 'male improvisers established free improvisation during a time of feminist activism' (ibid.: 108); and '[t]he opportunity for freedom … for women improvisers was strangely absent from the discourse and practices of both free jazz and free improvisation' (Smith 2001: 114). Thus 'freedom', as another conceptual cornerstone of free improvisation, has to be questioned and challenged and needs thorough examination within a specific context.

'Free' improvisation, exemplified by performers such as Joëlle Léandre, Irene Schweizer and Barry Guy, emerged – according to Lewis – not as a critique towards jazz music (and improvisation), but rather from attempts to define and reflect on a 'European … native model of improvising' (Lewis 1996: 112) that could respond to historical and cultural location as well as to diversity among players. Although 'free' improvisation has been described in academic literature mainly within an all-male context, in reality this model emerged as a consequence of diverse approaches by different social groups. One salient group is the Feminist Improvising Group (FIG), founded in 1977 for 'an open and changing pool of women musicians that would bring a wide range of approaches to improvisation, varied experience to technical facility, and stylistic diversity to spontaneous performances' (Smith 2001: 119). It could be argued that FIG made significant innovations in improvisation performances when they 'performed domestic chores, peeled onions and sprayed perfume [on the stage]' (ibid.: 120), thus considerably expanding the notion of musical improvisation.

It is no coincidence that in today's free improvisation community, the term includes not only those musicians who directly relate to the original second model described previously but also the majority of present-day improvisers. The reason for this is probably the attempt by the performers of this model to democratise and liberate the practice of improvisation: to establish its non-idiomatic occurrence and its openness to players with a variety of cultural and social backgrounds. Bailey has discussed that improvisation 'exists because it meets the creative appetite that is a natural part of a performing musician' (Bailey 1993: 142)

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and therefore needs no justification in terms of musical style or who can perform it. He also notes that 'in practice the difference between free improvisation and idiomatic improvisation is not a fundamental one' (ibid.), which means that a contemporary free improviser could play noise, free or flamenco and also jazz or classical music, and all of it at the same concert, while still being called a free improviser (with certain stylistic tendencies).

Through the constant search for more freedom and new means of expression, the free improvisation community at present consists of even more models than the ones described here. Lewis notes that '[i]n recent years … the emergence of musicians who do not claim roots in either European or American forms has further served to identify improvised music's transcultural nature' (Lewis 1996: 113). It is perhaps more useful nowadays to refer to 'city-scenes' – for example New York, Berlin, Sydney, Tokyo or Tallinn – that a specific free improviser comes from or in which they are currently active, rather than trying to describe the playing style, regardless of the fact that the respective city-scene may itself consist of performers with radically different backgrounds. Alternatively, another way for free improvisers to contextualise their activity is to use terms that relate within a certain discourse; for example, 'timbre-based free improvisation', 'reductionism' or 'power play'.

In that light, it seems reasonable to think of free improvisation practice as a collection of multiple individual acts that is not bound to a singular demarcation or theory but is by its nature a very diverse and all-encompassing activity (Cobussen 2017: 43), or as a 'very tightly-meshed network of different contributions' (Krekels 2018: 1). Typically theory does not play a significant role in the performance of a compelling set for an audience, and therefore, '[i]t might be claimed that improvisation is best pursued through its practice' (Bailey 1993: 142). Bailey finds this applicable for all improvisation traditions and refers to this as the 'practice of practice' (ibid.: x–xi); nevertheless, this 'practice of practice' is most clearly manifested in free improvised music, as its mechanisms are not defined by systematic or strictly traditional paradigms or idioms. The practice of improvising is therefore significantly determined by the particular player and their specific workflow.

However, as free improvisation performance is a social pursuit and always full of exceptionalities, even the most personal techniques are influenced by the performance environment. Marcel Cobussen has referred to Gregory Bateson's 'ecology of mind', which is useful for representing improvisational expressions. According to Cobussen, the concert can be seen as a system of constant motion that is defined by never-ending differentiation shaped by an environment. Every performance is a singular event, as something in the situation has always changed and creation could thereby be considered an ecological process (Cobussen 2017: 58). Therefore, the practice shapes, and is itself shaped by, a dynamic flux and personal struggle between the subjectivity and objectivity of both the musician and the environment, which determines the limits of the player's decision-making within a particular performance.

3. 'AN EXPERIENCE': THE MOMENT OF PLAYING

John Dewey's ideas on experience give the first key to elucidating the artistic practice of improvisation. The Deweyan concept of 'an experience', as laid out in his work *Art as Experience* (1934) has a particular structure; not all experiences that one has throughout life can form the Deweyan experience. 'An experience' is a whole, fulfilled and satisfying action: 'we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment' (Dewey 1934: 36). Actions do not cease due to being fulfilled, but 'because of extraneous interruptions or of inner lethargy' (ibid.) – hence the stopped actions do not form 'an experience'. According to Dewey, 'a piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; … writing a book, … is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency' (Dewey 1934: 37). Even though art works are considered to be important examples of 'an experience' because of their ultimate aesthetic quality (Leddy 2020), so too can a purely practical action constitute 'an experience' that 'involve[s] meaning growing towards a consummation' (ibid.) and contains aesthetic quality.

Dewey's ideas help identify free improvisation performance as a process in which the performer's creative agency both develops and is received by the audience within performance – that is, only within the act of *making* music, here and now. Dewey's 'an experience' is developed further from his original concept, as for him 'in "an experience" every part flows freely into what follows' (Leddy 2020) and 'an experience has a unity that gives it its name' (Dewey 1934: 38), but in the case of free improvisation performance, individual actions are often interrupted by sudden changes and improvisation as a whole is experienced as a fragmented motion of discrete actions. However, this motion ends with the satisfaction of the players as 'the game is played to its conclusions' (Leddy 2020). We therefore argue that there is a sense of 'unity'; even if the artistic production period is characterised by interruptions, the result is perceived as fulfilment and playing contains aesthetic pleasure. In

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this light, the inherent fragmentations of individual actions actually characterise the 'unity' of 'an experience' in free improvisation; thus, 'an experience' can be considered as an extemporaneous artwork.

'Free improvisation as an experience' becomes justified when recognised not as an internally result-oriented musical form but as an activity of *making* music through which one receives aesthetic pleasure. The denominator *making* suggests that the result occurs only amid the playing and cannot be easily separated from its production processes, thus supporting Dewey's thesis that artistic products should not be received separately from the artistic action and the environment in which the object was produced. Even though free improvisation can be recorded and, accordingly, the result alienated from the production, one could argue that it would then lose its functionality. Stephen Davies has noted that '[a]n improvisation could be taped or written down, and thereby might always be repeated, but that seems incidental to its appeal' (Davies 2001: 14). Thus, the creation process of extemporaneous music cannot be repeated, nor is it received like a 'model to be copied' (ibid.), either by performers or listeners. This is supported by percussionist Eddie Prévost, who argues that 'nothing is more dead than yesterday's improvisation. … As [Cornelius] Cardew noted, at least one feature of an improvisation is absent in a recording: that is, its *transience*' (quoted in Peters 2009: 37). However, one could argue that improvisation has an inherent inability to multiply (through repetition) in time such that it would not lose its ephemeral nature. Gary Peters has argued that 'any concept of improvisation worth considering must acknowledge the primary importance of *timing*, the decisive *now* so vigorously promoted by improvisers and yet so often confused with the ecstatic immediacy of 'being in the moment' (Peters 2009: 165). Hence the importance of temporality manifests not only in its representation of the improviser's mindset while performing but also has an essential role in the production of real-time creative performances.

Now, how does time function in free improvisation? Tim Smithers (1996) has developed the concept of 'in-time' versus 'over-time', which offers a good conception for comprehending time in this musical practice. The artistic production period in 'over-time' processes can be extended as long as one wishes without causing degradation to its aesthetic value. In contrast, in the case of 'in-time' conceptions – such as improvisation – the time is shorter than would be necessary even to *think* about the next action. In consequence, time and practice are connected and limited by each other. Vijay Iyer explains that 'in-time' processes have an active time sensibility that contributes to the creation (Iyer 2008: 275) and 'in fact [time] contributes to the overall structure [of the process]' (Iyer 1998: 36). 'Over-time' processes are performed in time, but in this case temporality does not play a significant role in creativity as the timespan spent for the production period can be extended or compressed as needed.

The symbiosis of time and practice of 'in-time' processes is not necessarily particular to free improvisation; it is in fact innate to most human activities, interacting with and depending on the environment. Even though these activities are mainly of a mechanical nature, such as riding a bicycle or walking in the street, they do not necessarily lose their extemporaneous attitude. Vincent Colapietro has elaborated on this: '[t]hey are, at the very least, unrehearsed responses, that is, improvised or extemporaneous ones. … Even a frequently repeated expression … can be variously inflected and by the truly courteous person *is* situationally modulated' (Colapietro 2013). This indicates that an improvisational attitude is manifested in everyday activities, and the artistic version of improvisation can be seen as just a practical extension of these. Nevertheless, this does not exclude aesthetic quality: '[i]n order to *understand* the esthetic in its ultimate and approved form, one must begin with it in the raw' (Dewey 1934: 3); for example, in the raw experiences of a person performing everyday actions and scenes. The ultimate form of aesthetics manifests in artistic objects, and according to Dewey many aesthetic theories have contributed to the artworks's isolation 'from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience' (Dewey 1934: 1). Thus the dualism of the aesthetic reception of the result, and the artistic production period that is alienated from the former: '[w]hen artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them … Art is remitted to a separate realm … [The] task is to restore continuity between refined and intensified forms of experience … and the everyday events' (ibid.: 2). Arguably, free improvisation can reflect that continuity, as on the one hand the alienated result is not possible due to the symbiosis of time and practice, and on the other hand it constitutes in itself the attitude of commonplace activities. Consequently, when understanding aesthetics in this broader sense, it is clear that – in essence – practical activities can have aesthetic quality, and so too free improvisation's closeness to commonplace activities would not degrade its aesthetic value.

For free improvisation, the 'practicality' is one central reason to execute any action. Most performers would remark that the sound they produced was the most reasonable fit in the context; that they would not *think about*, but rather *make* the sound that fits

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the sonic environment, because of the restricted time frame for any action. This practical knowledge is followed by intense practising and improvising experience, so that it becomes a kinaesthetic rather than an intellectual quality. Yet, at the moment of performance, the individual merit transforms into a collaborative arc of one significance followed by another. This *making* would thereby not be just a mechanical efficiency, as there would be a sort of inherent urge to finish the (improvisational) action successfully as an outcome of a process. 'Between the poles of aimlessness and mechanical efficiency, there lie those courses of action in which through successive deeds there runs a sense of growing meaning conserved and accumulating toward an end that is felt as accomplishment of a process' (Dewey 1934: 40). Accordingly, the consummation of the experience is of interest, because to persevere and finish the process provides meaning and satisfaction.

4. THE EXPRESSIVE OBJECT: THE PERFORMER AND THEIR TOOLS

'The expressive object' is another of Dewey's concepts. For him, 'the expressive object' represents an artistic object that signifies both an action and its result: 'if the two meanings are separated, the object is viewed in isolation from the operation which produced it, and therefore apart from an individual live creature' (Dewey 1934: 85). In the context of free improvisation, it is the material in hand – the instrument, electronics, or any objects – together with the real-time aesthetic production. It is the medium through which the musician expresses but also the expression itself; hence the medium is not separable from the real-time action or from the improvisation's 'product'. Within the creation, the medium influences the artist and through continuous interaction both the subject and object change; hence 'the expressive object' of free improvisation consists of the tools, the personal interaction with the tools and the improvisational expression during the concert being in a continuous feedback-loop relationship. In this sense, free improvisation provides an excellent example of Dewey's concept, because of its real-time nature, which fulfils Dewey's requirement of viewing the action and its result together; thus '[e]xpression as personal act and as objective result are organically connected with each other' (ibid.: 86).

The particular instrumental treatment through which the material itself is an exploratory object is one of the crucial characteristics of free improvisation. Guitarist Keith Rowe has explained that he experiences the guitar like a white canvas that can be explored and expanded, and that through this constant evolution and search, the instrument becomes an artwork in itself (Hopkins 2009). Evan Parker has described his perspective with the notion of 'biofeedback', which represents a similar instrument-origin attitude. For Parker, the instrument has a sort of intention, which responds to the efforts of the player: 'by hearing the way it's feeding back to you, you learn to control it better. … The instrument … seems to be … giving you additional information. … [B]ut every so often … you lose control, but in that moment you are given an opportunity to learn something else that the instrument can do' (ibid.). Improvising, in this sense, is constant balancing between and searching for the differences – something new can happen through an unconscious action upon the device, through a momentary loss of kinaesthetic self-control, that has advanced in practising. Through this kind of 'feedback-loop relationship', the instrument is not just a mechanical tool that is being used for (extramusical) expression, but an expression itself that is constantly developed by the musician taking into account the very characteristics and 'intention' of that object. In essence, the instrument can be regarded as an inherent part of a subject or as an 'active object', as animate.

The kinaesthetic quality and the feedback construction acquire different kinds of meanings with an electroacoustic setup, as the relationship between action and its cause is not clearly identifiable. However, we can argue that the tools are treated similarly to the role of personal creative agency and the constant searching for differences, which also describes players with electronics. Ikue Mori has expressed this view, adjusting the drum machine to her needs as well as discovering sounds that are not 'meant to be played on that machine': 'if you don't think about drums, and just make a tune with all triangles or cymbals and treat it with processors and effects, they are not at all sounds like drum samples. … I wanted to make [the drum machine] sound broken' (Mori 2009).

Considering this specific creative instrumental treatment, one could say that free improvisation practice consists of various discrete actions, which embody a personalised vocabulary of playing techniques and musical expressions. The improviser has to be ready to change course to any new direction, based on the unforeseen situation. This requires an extensive vocabulary to be available at any moment. Dewey writes: '[I]solation of the act of expressing from the expressiveness possessed by the object leads to the notion that expression is merely a process of discharging personal emotion …. The juice expressed by the wine press is what it is because of a prior act, and it is something new and distinctive' (Dewey 1934: 85). Thus, the extensive vocabulary of improvisation means to 'ex-press' the meaning from the active object as well as from previous experiences, until they become part of the artist's emotional, individual and physical state – 'ex-pression' symbolising here the metaphorical

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extrusion of meaning from the instrument. Therefore, this vocabulary could also be referred to as a 'collection of discrete gestures', using Robert S. Hatten's definition of gesture as 'any energetic shaping through time that may be interpreted as significant' (quoted in Gritten and King 2011: 1), hence a physical action that is meaningful.

This construction reflects on how improvisation connects theory with practice. Vilém Flusser has described a 'dialectical ideology' that is a sort of forced dualism between mind and body, idea and practice, reality and value. He states that the destiny of a human's hands never to meet, never to be the same, because of the symmetrical construction of the body, is the cause of this somewhat bipolar perspective on the world (Flusser 2014: 43). Nevertheless, metaphorically speaking, the hands' actions also constitute in themselves the possibility to overcome that split: 'let us call the left hand that of "practice", the right hand that of "theory", and let us say that the movement the hands make as they try to meet is the effort to ground theory in practice and to support practice theoretically. A movement that changes the object so that it becomes what it should be' (ibid.: 38). To 'ex-press', to develop a discrete gestural vocabulary, is to push the 'expressive object' into the "fourth dimension" . . . : [into] the dimension of values [and meaning]' (ibid.). In the context of performance, every unique sound fits into its proper place, being a valuable addition to the whole.

5. THE CONTINUOUS GESTURE

Cobussen has expressed a differential attitude towards improvisation: 'each improvisation will offer different perspectives on concepts such as creativity, freedom, risk, etc.; each improvisation will yield a different network of (most prominent) agents and interactions; each improvisation will relate differently to previous improvisations; each improvisation creates a new story within given constraints' (Cobussen 2017: 32). As improvisation, as such, exists in all musicking and the denominator *free* represents the absence of any preliminary structural or harmonic agreement, understanding cannot be achieved by a strict definition that covers all aspects of that performance practice, though it could arguably be discussed through philosophical interrogation.

Giovanni Maddalena has proposed a new paradigm for reasoning: his concept of 'complete gesture' represents the completely synthetic pattern of judgement that complements the analytic philosophy of creating strict definitions. He argues that '[analytic philosophy] seems now stuck in scholasticism, full of definitions detached from experimental reality. . . . Definitions rarely provide an exact fit: they are always too loose or too tight. A definition is a useful tool but not the only one, and certainly not one capable of grasping the reality' (Maddalena 2015: 44). Expanding upon this, free improvisation is undeniably a case in which a definition would always be too restrictive and therefore could not reflect on all the inherent tensions that this musical practice consists of, negating the 'experimental reality' of free improvisation. We could go even further by stating that it would also be inaccurate to identify free improvisation with a stylistic musicalism, as that would mean connecting this musical practice with an idiom or with some certain way of thinking, which would not be beneficial for characterising that practice. Acknowledging that free improvisation could also be viewed somewhat from a post-modernist spectrum, the following will propose that 'gesture' as a pragmatist's term could be useful in framing that musical activity.

Maddalena identifies gesture as 'any performed act with a beginning and an end that carries meaning (from *gero* = I bear, I carry on)' (Maddalena 2015: 69). He argues that people comprehend a phenomenon when it transforms into a habit of action, not when it is identified with a definition (ibid.: 70). From a bodily movement, Maddalena goes forward in stating that a 'complete gesture' is an entity with phenomenological and semiotic properties. The phenomenological aspects are a pure idea (firstness), a physical act that involves reaction (secondness) and a generality (thirdness). The semiotic properties are: an expression of different possibilities of forms and feelings (icon), an actual indication of a singular object (index) and a general law (symbol) (ibid.: 71). For the gesture to be complete, it has to have an equal (dense) blending of semiotic and phenomenological elements. Maddalena states that, for example, artistic performances are clearly models of the 'complete gesture': 'A gesture is not just one action among many others. It is the expression of meaning embodied in one person at a singular moment, and it tends to become a habit for the person and eventually for the generalized person, the people, or the tradition' (Maddalena 2015: 72). Thus, 'complete gesture' embodies in itself 'an experience' of a singular person but simultaneously connects a group of people through its generality of tradition. As the 'complete gesture' has a particular structure, it is clear that a number of incomplete gestures exist; a list of possible options consists, on a phenomenological level, of *ideation*, *reaction*, *abstraction*, *exhibition*, *projection*, and *schematisation*, and on a semiotic scale, *imagination*, *indication*, *conceptualisation*, *information, modelling* and *repetition* (ibid.: 77–8). These notions refer to gestures in which one or two elements are weak or missing and which thus cannot provide a dense blending between all the elements. For example, *projection* happens without an actual physical execution, and the gesture remains incomplete, thus not able to present an identity.

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Considering the structure of 'complete gesture' and Maddalena's claim that artistic performances are examples of his concept, could free improvisation provide a relevant model for understanding it? As a performance practice, it does have specific rituals, symbolising certain expectations. However, free improvisation does not remain merely an informatory event for the audience or for the performers; the creative act occurs between both of these parties and therefore acts as a singular event. Vijay Iyer describes the experience of a performance with Cecil Taylor:

> The musicians were engaging in a performative ritual of 'constructing' the performing environment; this act drew attention to this environment's constructedness, and incorporated the environment into the performance itself. Effectively for the audience, it was unclear at what point in space or time the performance had begun; it was somehow fused with the concert-hall environment itself. (Iyer 2008: 283)

This description outlines a definite character of free improvisation concerts. The beginning of the sounds is not defined – it starts somewhere, at the right moment. The same applies to the ending: it happens when it ought to happen, without any seemingly significant indication. In this, the ritual which, for example, is very prominent in classical music traditions, is not so remarkable in improvisation performances. Yet, despite being relatively undefined, the beginning and end are the most explicit markings of any improvisation. Everything in between is a creative struggle through and with an environment of many variables. The spectator, in this case, is engaged actively in listening to musical material that is unknown and unrepeatable and that therefore requires closer attention. Prévost has suggested that listening to free improvisation is a creative experience (Payne-Frank and Macfarlane 2017); the audience therefore has a specific role to play, along with attaining new knowledge. To a certain extent, it would be possible to define Iyer's setting as a complete gesture on a semiotic level: 'creative because of possible forms and feelings, singular and unrepeatable in its individuality, and recognisable for its unity and conformity to an established pattern that gesture itself tends to realise' (Maddalena 2015: 71). Likewise it can be regarded as a 'complete gesture' on a phenomenological level: being at the same time singular for a person, communicating meaning through the physical action of performers (and audience), and a communal experience.

The difficulty occurs with the *making* of free improvisation. This means that Maddalena's first requirement is somewhat problematic: the idea emerges only while playing, which proposes that the requirement of firstness, as well as the semiotic icon, could be to a certain extent redundant. When Maddalena analyses literature as an example of 'complete gesture' he describes how Vassily Grossman had 'an experience' when fighting at Stalingrad that was then a motivation for a writer to compose his novel and also to comprehend the respective experience. Maddalena states that such experiences 'for which there is no previous pattern of understanding … [are] in technical terms vague and need comprehension' (Maddalena 2015: 122), that Grossman 'has to give an iconic-indexical-symbolic form to the object (the experience) he wants to represent [and comprehend]' (ibid.) and that '"giving form" happens on both a phenomenological and a semiotic level' (ibid.). This sort of representational relationship of 'giving form' does not exist in free improvisation since – as already discussed – 'an experience' happens during playing, during the actual activity, and the expression is closely connected to the tools in the artists' hands. Nevertheless, Maddalena emphasises strongly the importance of physical action that makes the idea existent and also develops and modifies the initial 'vague' idea (Maddalena 2015: 123). Since in improvisation the idea emerges together with the action in a sort of feedback loop, it could point towards complete amalgamation between firstness and secondness.

Maddalena's third requirement, that of generality, is also somewhat problematic. Although he describes that 'every social gathering has its own rites' (ibid.: 73), it has proven difficult to conceptualise the rituals and generality of free improvisation performances. Drawing from Iyer's description, it is common for free improvisation to appear in settings in which it is unclear when the performance starts, or sometimes even who the performers are. While comprehending the general rituals is not (often) problematic at traditional concert venues, it poses difficulties, for example, in art galleries, where free improvisation often happens, or in the case of 'guerilla' improvisation that by its definition requires 'taking over uncommon places'. Another difficulty with thirdness arises when thinking of free improvisation practice as a collection of singular acts; thus every singular act establishes the tradition separately for every specific moment. In that respect, returning back to the transient nature of free improvisation, we argue that free improvisation's tradition and general law manifests in that it is always being created in the moment of the performance.

In other words, the firstness of 'pure idea' and 'icon', as well as the thirdness of 'generality', both appear to be merged into the secondness of 'reaction' and the 'actual indication of singular object' of the index. Free improvisation could therefore be determined as an 'incomplete-complete gesture', with all three aspects (firstness, secondness and thirdness) appearing simultaneously during one real-time act; thus it provides the densest blending of semiotic and phenomenological aspects, though arguably not in the way that Maddalena requires.

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6. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the performance processes of free improvisation through an ontological study addressing three key concepts elaborated by pragmatists: 'an experience', 'the expressive object', and 'gesture'. The pragmatists' concepts of aesthetics have proven to be useful for illustrating free improvisation, a musical practice that has been challenging to elucidate because of its multipolarity, with different traditions and communities pulling in different directions.

Dewey's 'an experience' was employed to describe free improvisation concerts in which the aesthetic experience and production process occur simultaneously during the act of the performance. His concept was developed further, as for Dewey, the 'consummation' and 'unity' are the primary conditions for 'an experience', but free improvisation performance is rather characterised by a fragmented motion of discrete actions. However, we argued that this motion can still be 'an experience' when improvising results in aesthetic pleasure and fulfilment. Furthermore, in the case of free improvisation, 'an experience' and creative production occur at the same time, as interrelated phenomena; as improvising is an 'in-time' process, 'an experience' occurs during playing, simultaneously affecting the process itself. Thus, the concept of 'free improvisation as an experience' was used to describe improvisational actions – practical activities with aesthetic quality. In that respect, free improvisation as performance practice manifests Dewey's thesis that products of artistic practice should not be isolated from their production processes and environment, but should be seen as a continuity between commonplace activities and experiences and 'aesthetic in its ultimate form' (Dewey 1934: 3).

Similarly, Dewey's concept of 'the expressive object' was used in order to describe free improvisation's 'product'. Being simultaneously the active medium as well as the very expression, it is able to signify both an action and its result, which are in a continuous feedback-loop relationship. Thus, in free improvisation, acting with the tool is necessary for meaning to be created because of the personalised tool and the interaction between the real-time expression and the 'active object'.

Giovanni Maddalena's 'complete gesture' is of service in discussing the nature of free improvisation. Because of its real-time occurrence and its appearance in various settings, it does not meet Maddalena's concept in its strictest sense, as it cannot 'give form' to an initial motivating experience. However, as per Maddalena, the second requirement, the physical action, renders the first requirement (pure idea) existent, and we argue that the real-time occurrence of free improvisation can then be seen as the tradition, which serves as the third requirement, generality. Maddalena's condition of dense blending between the three phenomenological and semiotic levels – pure idea (firstness), reaction (secondness) and generality (thirdness), as well as symbol, index and icon – is thus met and manifested in free improvisation. Thus, we propose that free improvisation can be described as an 'incomplete-complete gesture', that is developed somewhat further from Maddalena's concept; this 'incomplete-complete gesture' could release free improvisation from definitions that are always too strict and often fail to describe the musical practice adequately.

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