Book review

Complexity and musical improvisation

Cobussen, M. (2017). The field of musical improvisation. Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press. Open-access. Retrieved from https://www.lup.nl/product/field-musical-improvisation/

Reviewed by: Erik Jansen, HAN University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands
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Whereas in popular belief improvisation may be viewed as ad hoc or opportunistic action, improvising musicians know better: it requires years of training and thorough preparation to deliver a good or top performance on the spot. Moreover, it is their highly developed proficiency that allows score-performing musicians to subtly solve playing errors without listeners even noticing. Whereas improvisation has received relatively little attention in musicology because of the predominant focus on written scores, more and more scholars are delving into the subject, often from the insider’s perspective of the improvising musicians themselves. What arises is an image of musical improvisation as involving complex creative and social processes that also may inform other domains than musical practice.

The topic of The field of musical improvisation, an open-access monograph by Marcel Cobussen, is musical improvisation as an integrated and complex artistic and creative collection of practices that warrant analysis from both the social sciences and the humanities. The book’s open-access nature allows it to be read from a screen providing clickable examples of musical and video resources illustrating the author’s arguments. Thus, the text can be treated in the typical non-linear and rhizomatic stance that characterises internet browsing. Moreover, the author deliberately presents most chapters as lemmas rather than in a straightforwardly organised line of argument. Thus, Cobussen invites us to improvise through his conceptual field of improvisation rather than taking us by the hand along the way.

Cobussen’s main objective is to “reposition improvisation within the worlds of music and sound, to make unusual connections between music and various scholarly disciplines, to rethink several concrete improvisation practices, and to extend and emphasize the significance of improvisation beyond the domain of music – all this in order to enrich the already existing discourse on musical improvisation” (p. 13). Consequently, he invites the reader to follow philosopher Gilles Deleuze by asking “does it work?” or “does it matter?” instead of “what is it?” as an aesthetic pragmatist account of musical improvisation to thereby bridge the traditional divide between the social sciences and the humanities.

Cobussen’s argument is organised into four parts. Part 1 (entitled “Marking”) deals with the author’s points of departure in thinking about improvisation and legitimising its study as a phenomenon. These are the concepts of complexity and singularity, the former marking the complex entangled and multiple interactions between actants in musical improvisations, and the latter acknowledging the uniqueness of each improvisational performance as grounded in local space and time. Moreover, in Cobussen’s view, improvisation is “better approached through verbs than through nouns” (p. 39) and reflects the concrete practices in which improvising musicians deal with a multitude of environmental influences and channel these into a unique performance.

In Part 2, split into 2 (“Digging”) and 2a (“Capsulizing”), Cobussen discusses a number of concepts and theorists to elucidate the above line of argument, among others actor-network theory by Bruno Latour, rizome and assemblage by Deleuze and Guattari, the non-anthropocentrist ecology of Bateson, and the complexity account by Mitchell Waldrop. Thus, building on these primarily post-modernist thinkers, Cobussen lays the groundwork for his own view, the field of musical improvisation (FMI). Key tenets for FMI are: (1) It is not meant as a reductionist theory in which decontextualized mechanisms explain improvisation, rather as a descriptive and inspiring conceptual account that allows one to better qualitatively and holistically understand the complex dynamics of actual improvisations in lived contexts by showing how (musical and non-musical) elements interact in the situation. (2) It encompasses all music-making rather than improvisation only, as Cobussen considers the processes underlying improvisation to be no different than those for other forms of music-making. (3) It advocates singularity, which Cobussen refers to as each improvisation entailing a unique assemblage of actors, interactions and setting (p. 43). (4) It is not anthropocentric, thus regarding the agency of other situational elements than musicians essential as well. (5) It
is ecological, treating the situation in which improvisation takes place as an ecosystem. (6) It is a complex system, in which elements of the ecosystem engage in complex interactions. And (7) It is radically empirical, in the sense that it regards the improvisation as the result of this process of interactions which is therefore a unique and one-time manifestation of the relations between the actants present in the situation. Thus, although defining improvisation is not his prime intention, Cobussen describes it as: “an emergent, self-organizing, and adaptive structure, growing through constant adjustments and readjustments by the input from musicians (both learned and spontaneous [re]actions) and the environment (both human and non-human), and resulting in a perpetual negotiating between order and disorder, structure and chaos, free and fixed elements, stability and fluidity, etc.” (p. 84). Moreover, Cobussen emphasises that an improvisation has no structural beginning or ending: it just starts and ends in the middle as a jump in and out of the dark, respectively; an intuition which I recognise from my own improvisational practice. How we should understand these tenets, Cobussen states, becomes clear in Part 3.

In Part 3 (“Implementing”) Cobussen presents diverse example cases of performances ranging from classical music to conceptual performances, jazz to DJ-ing in which many types of situational elements are interpreted as local actants in the conceptual framework of FMI. Obviously, this involves human beings. However, he also discusses the role of various other actants, among others: obvious mistakes, such as a broken amplifier, as being productive in shaping a musical improvisation; the possibilities of technology or specialist producer techniques; the (im)possibilities of the physicalities of the musical instrument; interactions of the audience with the performance; and even acoustic properties of the music venue. Consequently, this part presents intriguing and separate case studies in which the conceptual framework of FMI is applied analytically. Therefore, these chapters may be read in any order as independent essays.

From a more ethical perspective, in the fourth and final part (“Exceeding”), Cobussen takes the argument of FMI a step further towards inquiry on the consequences and importance of improvisation “for one’s being-in-the-world” (p. 175). By applying the conceptual insights on musical improvisation to themes such as play, politics and management, he sketches the broader significance of his endeavour from which a picture emerges of improvisation as a highly sophisticated and profoundly complex form of behaviour allowing human beings to be who they want to be in an ever complexifying world. Improvisation is “not only one complex system among many others, but also a way of approaching and coping with complexity, a practice necessary to engage with complex situations, a response to instabilities” (p. 182).

The book succeeds at making a broader case for improvisation as a positive (i.e., intentional and productive) form of behaviour, rather than a way of coping with deficiency. Particularly, Cobussen convincingly shows how improvising musicians make deliberate use of the ecological affordances (Gibson, 1979) of the social and physical contexts in which they perform and that this entails a way to deal with perspective and with relational meaning. As Deleuze emphasises: a concept’s meaning is grounded in a network of relations to other concepts, and what ultimately counts, is what effect it has on these other concepts or things (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004/1976). In other words, it is productive in terms of its effects on other things or concepts. Tracing the route of such relational effects by charting them as Deleuzian social assemblages, appears to approximate the intuition of the improviser. The analogy presented or at least suggested by Cobussen is well thought out: isn’t the way a musician finds her way through an improvisation a micro-world representation of how we as human beings live our lives dealing with all kinds of influential factors along the way? Notably, several researchers studying social practices at different levels of aggregation in a similar way (see Fox & Alldred, 2016) have indeed argued that the only sensible (and humanly possible) way to deal with high complexity of the social environment is to improvise (Boutellier, 2013). However, they mostly do not tell us in much detail how we should do that, which is, given the ever-increasing complexity of the social environments we live in (Castells, 2000; van Ewijk, 2014), a very jarring open-ended question. For instance, social workers in the Netherlands have to deal with increasingly complex professional networks in the systems world, as well as having to support their clients in getting to grips with their complexifying life-worlds. Thus, creating insight into how people deal with complexity and complex tasks while they are in the middle of it, is a daunting but worthwhile and necessary task.

This book is a contemporary account of musical improvisation, in line with current trends in diverse scientific fields appreciating and embracing the complexity of reality rather than reducing and colonising it to precise discipline-specific but intuitively unsatisfying models and theories. Examples of such more integral approaches are: the capabilities approach in ethics and wellbeing studies (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999), new materialist sociology (Fox & Alldred, 2016; Latour, 2015) and complexity theory (Byrne & Callaghan, 2014). What connects these approaches is that they all try to comprehend complexity of the world in a way that is cross-disciplinary and often also pluralistic. Thereby, they try to bridge disciplinary divides for the purpose of understanding rather than digging trenches on the borders of one’s own domain. What stands out here is that Cobussen shows what we can learn about being in the world by studying musical improvisation. For example, he does not refrain from asking ethical questions such as how improvisational agency relates to human freedom and thereby essentially transports the FMI into the larger debate on the values of the arts for human wellbeing.
Some points of critique on Cobussen’s approach originate from the fact that, because he deliberately mixes “fact” and “fiction” into a plausible account (p. 13), it tends to suffer similar issues as with much post-modernist thinking. Post-modernist accounts often seem to suggest that a proposed conceptual repertoire can epistemically reconstruct any aspect of reality, thereby immunising it against criticism if the methodology used is insufficiently clarified and the boundaries of the theory unspecified. If logic of the analysis remains too implicit, it becomes difficult to validate or falsify the claims empirically. This grooms in the chapters of Part 3, which a cynical reader may summarise as: anything you can think of can be part of the improvisation. It is also reflected by the notion that FMI is not presented as a traditional theory (p. 81), but as a narrative with a system of concepts to help understand musical improvisations as complex and singular phenomena, i.e., an account. As Cobussen clearly claims his work to be more than plausible fiction, it would be productive to provide more concrete leads for empirical scrutiny.

To do so would, in my view, require at least two things. First, a more formal description of the analysis procedure is needed. Although the case descriptions of improvisational artists are compelling, selection of the case examples suggests confirmation bias rather than a balanced systematic selection. What methodology is used or should the reader use to make her own analyses of the field of musical improvisation? This may shed light on possible counter-examples and help determine the theoretical boundaries of FMI.

Second, it requires a strategy for empirical verification. A possible approach utilizes narrative analyses of insiders’ accounts or systematic case descriptions involving video-stimulated reflections of improvising musicians to assist in determining whether the phenomenological reasoning of Cobussen matches the lived experiences of the improvisers themselves. Such an approach could benefit FMI to transfer from a plausible and inspiring account to an (preliminary) explanatory theory on improvisational behaviour. This could substantially corroborate the author’s claim that knowledge on musical improvisation could benefit society in broader terms. In the author’s defence, however, it is also up to others to articulate counter-arguments and the issues raised here do not fundamentally undermine the overall appeal of the key messages of FMI.

In my view, Cobussen has succeeded in his main objective. I find this book an inspiring example of how the study of music and musical behaviour can inform us of how to improvise, may deal with a complex and liquid (social) reality. According to Zygmunt Bauman (2007) this is one of the major existential challenges in current times, entailing a considerable risk for the marginal many to lag behind in or sink through the bottom of what can be considered a stable and decent living. Therefore, if, as Cobussen claims with this book, engaging in musical improvisation teaches one to exercise freedom and autonomy in a world full of complexity, this provides a strong argument for fostering music education in schools for all.

Notes
1. The concept of “actant” stems from actor-network theory (Latour, 2015) and refers to the joint category of humans or non-human actors that are considered to exert any form of agency in social practices, the latter of which are considered fundamentally relational in nature. Thus, it is a typically non-anthropocentric way of denoting influential elements.

Peer review
Andrew Goldman, Columbia University.

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