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Transcript and editing by Francesca Metallinou.

Improvisation: Past - Present - Future

So let me begin by telling you how pleased I am to have been asked to give the keynote address for this conference on improvisation and its particular theme: “A bridge over classical and jazz studies”. I`m honored to appear here in the company of such an amazing array of scholars, educators, aficionados and music lovers of improvisation. The range of papers that Dimos Dimitriadis has solicited, is simply astonishing in its breadth and depth and I`m much honored to find myself in such distinguished company.

Rather than speaking about any particular aspect of improvisation and the training in improvisation I would like to take a more holistic, a more comprehensive approach to the subject, including a bit of history, the relationship between improvisation and composition and maybe a few words about some of my occasional concerns regarding the practice of improvisation in our time. But let me begin at the beginning, with the fact that it`s so obvious, that many people: musicians, music lovers, audiences, even some music critics do not comprehend that improvisation, spontaneous, instantaneous creation, extemporization, is much, much older than composition. Improvising with sounds, musical sounds, also with words and ideas, goes way back to the very beginnings of human kind, of human civilization. Was it twenty thousand years ago, fifteen thousand, ten? I don`t know, I wasn`t around at that time. But there can be no question that some time in those very early years about which we know very little, some prehistoric human began to express himself in sounds in some vocal fashion who knows how, essentially in something we might even call singing and once languages were developed in some free spontaneous emission of words, of thoughts, of ideas, and of course something we might be able to describe as some primeval form of music making.

What is certain about those far away times is that there was at first nothing that we could call composition: notated, written down, music. That didn`t come along until the first attempts at some kind of fixing music in a specific, permanent

formation, and that was the era of the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Sumerian, civilizations and soon thereafter in China and in India. But even then, most of what we call making music, music-creation was extemporized, spontaneously invented. Very few fragments of early musical notations have survived, but they give a tiny glimpse, kind of snapshot, of what music-making, chanting, singing - most often in connection with religious or spiritualistic ceremonies with festivities and celebrations - might have been like. And there can be no question that all that music-making was mostly improvised in some form or other. We estimated that on the face of this globe, there are several hundred thousand musical traditions, what we call folklore, ethnic music or vernacular traditions. Musical languages and styles, many of them going back five and six thousand years, many of course also of recent vintage, were and in most cases are still to this day, spontaneously created, some form of improvisation, even if in the last thousand years some of those old traditions have become learned, studied, codified, replicated, but interestingly, in essentially unchanged forms.

Improvisation is a universal art all over the world and is basically, meaning almost always associated with some social functions, human functions, work, celebrations, birth, death, communal activities of all kinds. By contrast, composing - that is creating a new musical work in a specifically fixed, unalterable form - is singularly European in invention, and even then only of the last thousand years. That is how young our Western music is. This kind of composing became possible and durable, through the invention of musical notation: Let us remember that it wasn't until the 14th century that a precise visual notation for music was established. Complex structures such as isorhythmic motets from the 14th and 15th century had to be written down, as they were so complex-polyphonically-that they could not be improvised, so the demand for notation ruled very, very strong. It is also interesting that it is from this medieval period that we have the first examples of written down improvisations, an early melding of composing and improvising. In any case, in those early centuries, classical improvisation became a distinct musical art, separate from folk and ethnic improvisation and also separate from social functions. That form of music became, we call: *Art for arts sake*, art in itself.

Anyway, improvisation continued along with composition for many centuries, until finally improvisation in classical music died out in the 19th century, except interestingly, for organists, especially in France, in Belgium and England that maintained the high art of spontaneous extemporization, flourishing and developing right along with the dramatic stylistic, musical advances in the 19th century right into our own time. I'm thinking of major figures like César Franck, Maurice Duruflé, and of course Olivier Messiaen. But even in Europe, and even as European music developed as a separate non functional art, it was a two way street: improvisation often led the way, influencing the composers, but sometimes it was the other way around,

improvisation following the lead of the composer. The French Troubadours, the German Minnesinger, and the Italian Trovatori were in their own way just as creative as the composers. Wagner wrote a whole opera, the Meistersinger¹ about how music was created and improvised, telling the story of a young man who has to appear before a jury and he has to invent on the spur of the moment a song, the "Prize Lied". So this is a very old tradition where all those troubadours and Minnesingers were mostly improvisers but also poets in many cases. In fact, a good musician of any branch was expected to be an improviser, trained in the art of ornamentation, embellishment and the art of variation and fugal forms.

Ultimately, classical music brought forth some of the greatest improvisers of all time: Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Handel and, of course, Beethoven. But it was also those same great composers who caused the demise of improvisation, primarily because their music became ever more specific with the help of an ever more precise and refined musical notation and because they couldn't tolerate the increasingly excessive ornamentations, interpolated cadenzas and extreme liberties that soloists, especially singers were taking with their music. These composers began to write out in exact notation the ornaments and the embellishment practices of the Baroque and early classical period. They said: *'I will now write out the ornamentation that I want and you will now have to sing or play them as I have written them'*.

So improvisation in classical music went into virtual eclipse for nearly a hundred years, except for the organists, until when in the early part of the 20th century, guess what, jazz brought improvisation back to life. It is ironic, that the return of improvisation brought about almost accidentally, by the black people, by black musicians. 'How so?' you might say, 'Why do you say that?' Well, the vast majority of black musicians and jazz was in the very beginnings a black music, the vast majority of black musicians of the late 19th and early 20th century were not musically trained, they were usually self taught, on their instruments, as they could not go to a white music school, a conservatory, a university, anything like that, and consequently they could not read or write music.

Even when I started in jazz seventy years ago, so many of the black musicians that I worked with, or got to know, many of them already world famous, could not read music or if so, only minimally, the simplest kind of writing, anything complex, they would give up. That of course changed rather quickly, and by now all jazz musicians read and write. In the early 20th century those pioneer jazz musicians like Johnson, Freddie Kep even Louis Armstrong at first, could not play the black ragtime music that is the music that came before jazz. Ragtime music by Scott Joplin was fully written out, like classical music you had to play it exactly like written and there was

¹ Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

no improvisation in it, ever. But those early jazz musicians who heard Joplin's music or the other great ragtime composers, they could sort of pick up on the melodies and the harmonies because they had fantastic ears, but they couldn't do it exactly like as a classical musician could do it. They would take a piece like the Maple Leaf Rag and they would play it as they heard it - cause they say they couldn't read it – and as they heard it, they would play it more loosely and eventually so loose, so embellished, that it became improvisation. You will not hear that from many people but that is how jazz became jazz out of ragtime and how jazz had to be improvised because they could not read the music. It is in that humble way, which is deeply related to racial discrimination, that improvisation sneaked back into music and we know how much great improvisation has occurred over the last ninety years of jazz, I don't think I have to talk about that.

Improvisation did not come back in the classical music until the 1950s and has since then gradually become a new growing musical development. I say again improvisation is of course also composing; it is instantaneous composing created in milliseconds. Improvisation can take many different forms, it can be filling out a part in a piece that is not fully notated it can be a melodic or rhythmic ornamentation of a given part, it can be the creation of a whole new piece, either for a single soloist or for a larger ensemble (collective improvisation). It can be based and built upon an existing composition for example on a famous tune such as "I got rhythm" or just on the harmonic changes of such a song. It also can be a re-composition as for example even in the classical field, when Ferruccio Busoni would take the works of Johann Sebastian Bach and improvise a new work, extending and elaborating on Bach's original music and then sometimes he would write out his improvisation and he would print and publish it.

I have spoken thus far about European-based improvisation, which would by the way include jazz because jazz is the blending of European vernacular and African musical traditions. There are of course other genres of improvisation, some of very ancient origin and more or less unchanged over the centuries or millennia. I'm speaking of non-Western, various Asian and middle-eastern traditions, most of which are governed by very strict rules of musical structures, ranging from absolutely obligatory rules, optional rules, and forbidden rules. [...] For example, in some Indian music you cannot approach a certain note from the top, you have to approach it from the bottom and with a glissando, and that makes this music of course incredibly demanding and challenging. Those improvising traditions are practiced and maintained not by amateurs or music lovers, but by professionals, by masters, who begin their training in music at a very early age, even as young as two years. But anyway, back to our own time and classical improvisation: One of the more interesting and prevalent improvising concepts of our time is alien to us: music making based on chance procedures as in John Cages music some times, or in

partially directed ensemble improvisations as in many works, like Theodore Antoniou. Aleatory is very young, it was developed primarily in the early 1950s in the two major contemporary music festivals in Germany, in Darmstadt and Donaueschingen, especially effectively by Karlheinz Stockhausen and later Tōru Takemitsu and of course since then many, many others. I stated earlier that improvisation is a form of composing which is created instantaneously and instinctively, on the spur of the moment. What this means to me among other things, is that for improvisation to be worthy of having been created, worthy to be listened to, it must aspire to the highest standards of creation, it must aspire to become a composition, hopefully a great composition, and that of course is not easy.

I also want to say that, improvising is not better than composing and composing is not better than improvisation, but they are just two different approaches to musical creation, both potentially capable of achieving the highest artistic and spiritual attainments of human kind. I say this as a cautionary remark because I have often heard the mere act of improvisation lauded as something superior to composition. This was the case in jazz for many years and decades, where jazz critics in the 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and even some jazz historians today, were only interested in the improvised aspects of jazz, and not the composition on which the improvisation was based. That was never referred to. If you read old issues of *Downbeat* magazine and *Metronome*, it's always about the improvisation and even the great Duke Ellington who wrote 2000 fantastic compositions he was kind of neglected and ignored and misunderstood because he was a real composer but he also improvised of course and he had his musicians improvise. Anyway, composition was diminished, and of course, I as a composer was also very upset by that, but it has changed now, thank god, a little bit, as this is a very unbalanced view of music: of improvisation and of course of composition.

An improvisation to be worthy to have been occurred must make a musical artistic statement, it must present musical ideas, it must present something that is memorable, and it must be presented in a coherent, logical, interesting form. It should not just be a virtuoso technical display, a collection of clichés, of formulas. It must be something original, something striking, and as I said before, something memorable. It was already in the 15th century that a Flemish organist by the name of Adam Ileborgh, wrote in one of his tablature manuals that the intent and the high art of the improvisation was at that time was considered to be:

A) Technical virtuosity, so that the player can instantly express on his instrument any musical idea that comes into his or her head.

B) Idiomatic originality, some degree of originality

C) Rhythmic freedom and invention thematic construction and development.

That is still very good advice today, six centuries later. I know that to achieve such artistic heights is not all that easy, is not given to anyone. We apply those same criteria to composition and so we must apply those same high criteria to improvisation. For both ways of creating music there must be obviously a given talent, a disposition to composing or improvising and I have observed over a long life that not everyone or anyone can be an improvising musician. Some people are destined, by talent and environment, to become great improvisers. Many others are not gifted in that way and cannot congenitally, do it. There's nothing with that, it's not a sin, it's the way some human beings are made. They just cannot improvise, they have to create at a slower or more deliberate pace, they have to write it out, and they have to see it in a notated form. Again, one way is not better than the other, it is a very personal choice, thank god that we have both.

As for the future of the many forms of improvisation, I cannot make any hard and fast predictions, but I can imagine that somebody or some group will venture for example into the realm of microtone systems, its already happening but I believe it will happen more and more. I also can imagine that some group will take off where Harry Partch left off many years ago, he created a whole universe of instruments in a 42 tone scale, not a 12 tone, a 42 tone, and created some of the best music ever heard. Somebody has to do that, not that the given instruments that we have saxophone, trumpet, piano, or whatever are not good, but this is another way of exploring the future.

I will end my talk with some music. I have for more than 50 years been especially interested in, and fascinated by ensemble improvisation and have used also aleatoric, improvisational procedures of many kinds, many different kinds, in my own compositions. But I have also produced already a long time ago, in 1984, a recording, from my record company, called GM Recordings, of ensemble improvisations. I would like to play for you two brief excerpts from two different recordings. One performed by an eight-person ensemble of three percussionists, three bassists, one trumpet and one saxophone. The other is a septet of guitar, vibraphone, oboe, clarinet and bass, very interesting, different sonorities in one ensemble. In both examples, nothing was given, nothing was planned, nothing was predetermined, it is a fine example of how the musicians listened to each other, picked up on each others' ideas, fed on each other, combined with each player's vivid imagination and the ability to develop an idea or a succession of ideas. The septet piece starts with a beautiful chord on the guitar, that's all you hear then there's some silence and one player takes from that chord some kind of inspiration at that moment. That second player did not know what he was going to do, but the way the guitarist Michael Bolschwing started with his beautiful atonal chord, that gave an idea and then the third musician came from that and on it went. At first it's very simple but then it gradually develops linearly, horizontally, polyphonically, at

times harmonically, homophonically and the interrelationship between the seven players and the way they reach out to each other is quite astonishing and I think, very beautiful.

Audio excerpt from 1984 recording (GM Recordings)

You can hear that it is neither jazz nor classical, it's an absolutely perfect blending of the two, which is what I dreamed about when I created Third Stream idea. I wish I could have written that, that's a good composition! Now the other piece, I'll tell you what this other piece is. I told you that the other recording I made in 1984 was with three bassists, three percussionists and two horns and in the middle of the session, near an intermission coming up, these guys, there were no girls I'm sorry, decided to just have some fun and they put down their instruments and they just sang, yelled, screamed, everything and it was a fun moment in the middle of the session. Unfortunately the tape ran out and so we only have a minute and a half, but when you hear it... It's what you can do even with vocal sounds.

Audio excerpt from 1984 recording (GM Recordings) with improvisational vocal sounds.

And so...it even makes some sense. It's like sitting in a very loud restaurant! Thank you very much, thank you.

Transcript and editing by Francesca Metallinou.