

Book Review

Prinzip Improvisation

Christopher Dell

Walther König, Köln, 2002.

[Kunstwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Band 22]

ISBN: 3883756059

268 pages

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In *Prinzip Improvisation* [The Improvisation Principle], the gifted German jazz vibraphonist Christopher Dell (b.1965) trades his mallets for a pen. The medium with which he expresses his thoughts may be radically different but the artistic intent behind the creative act remains the same - Dell takes up the art of writing in much the same way that he performs music, privileging improvised and fluid forms over composed and static structures. The intellectual stance underlying Dell's book is clearly stated by the author himself: "This book is not a scientific work in the strict sense; it is rather an improvisation on improvisation, an attempt on an attempt"¹ (My translation). Thus, the reader who is looking for a linear theory of improvisation, that is to say to a theory employing the traditional cause and effect style of explanation, might be disappointed.

Instead, Dell favours an open ended, praxis-oriented model in which the reader may choose his or her own way of reading the book. Dell's essay is structured as a set of independent small chapters or sections, each focused on a particular concept or a key term related to improvisation. When such a term occurs in the text, it is written in bold type character. Like a hypertext link, the reader can play an active role, choosing to either read it immediately or to save it for later. In other words, the reader is free to read the book in the traditional way in a continuous and linear flow from cover to cover, or as a kind of hypertext, by freely moving from one subject or theme to the next. Readers thus have the option of improvising their own path through the book which serves as a kind of model or template for improvisation in written form.

A well-informed reader will recognize numerous postmodern buzzwords and themes throughout *Prinzip Improvisation* including the concepts of hybridity, fluidity, praxis versus theory, the nature of language, orality versus literacy, dialogue, and so on. One of the main difficulties in Dell's essay stems from the problem of trying to describe complex musical processes in language. I see the book's structure and Dell's unique style of argumentation as an attempt to grapple with this very problem. Dell implicitly suggests that any theory of improvisation (in music or any other art form) must initially assess the nature of language itself. "I'd like to bring out language itself as the source of improvisational thinking and doing"² he writes (9). In addressing the philosophical question of the nature of language, Dell draws on Jacques Derrida's theory of language amongst others. It would have been illuminating to see Dell engage in a philosophical dialogue with Bernard Stiegler, a student of Derrida and the current director of the IRCAM (*Institut de recherche et de coordination acoustique/musique*). I would have also been interested in seeing Dell engage with Hugo von Hoffmannsthal's theory of language in *Ein Brief* or George

Steiner's philosophical considerations on the nature of language as outlined in *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?*

Dell strives to give his book a philosophical orientation and, in many ways, he succeeds in this. However, there is, in my view, something of a contradiction between the book's title (which translates as *The Improvisation Principle*) and the form in which Dell has presented his ideas. The book's open-ended, improvisatory structure belies the notion of a single "principle" governing improvisation. The term "principle" suggests to my mind a fixed or predetermined mode of action that is quite antithetical to improvisative activity of any sort. In the final analysis, Dell doesn't really provide a simple definition or "principle" of improvisation at all. Instead, he presents a range of issues surrounding improvisation in an innovative and thought provoking manner. To its credit, *Prinzip Improvisation* encourages multiple and sustained readings. In much the same way that a recording of improvised music invites multiple listening experiences, *Prinzip Improvisation* enables the reader to improvise right along with its author as we follow different pathways through his text.

Notes

¹ "So ist dieses Buch auch keine wissenschaftliche Arbeit im engeren Sinne, vielmehr eine Improvisation über Improvisation, ein Versuch über den Versuch" (8).

² "Ich möchte die Sprache selbst als Quelle des improvisatorischen Denkens und Handelns erschließen" (9).

Works Cited

George Steiner, George. *Real Presences: is there anything in what we say?* London: Farber, 1989.

von Hofmannsthal, Hugo. *Brief des Lord Chandos an Francis Bacon*, Darmstadt: Agora, 1925.