

Columbia University  
Department of Music  
Fall 2004

## THEORIZING IMPROVISATION

**INSTRUCTOR:** Professor George E. Lewis

In the 20th Century, improvisation in the contemporary arts has served as a symbol of new models of social organization that foreground agency, history, memory, identity, personality, freedom, embodiment, cultural difference and self-determination. Particularly in the contemporary arts since 1950, issues concerning the nature and practice of improvisation repeatedly emerge, including the role of improvisation in mediating cross-cultural, transnational and cyberspatial (inter)artistic exchanges that produce new conceptions of identity, history and the body, and how improvisation could emerge as a key element in emerging postcolonial forms of aesthetics and cultural production. Improvisation is viewed by many as facilitating direct intervention in political, social, economic and scientific discourses, promoting an awareness of intercultural and transnational discourses. The practice is often viewed as providing an atmosphere for acknowledgments and articulations of difference that employ expressive means in challenging totalizing narratives that seek to reify notions of the role of creative expression in society. The political implications of improvisative activity include an understanding of how improvisation is framed by both dominant and subaltern peoples.

Given the gradual emergence of a new understanding of improvisation as central to the creative arts in the late 20th and early 21st Century, it is especially paradoxical that until recently, the direct study of improvisation has not been an important part of contemporary theorizing in academic music or art practice. Taking advantage of the recent surge in critical literature that addresses improvisation, this seminar, will explore in depth the rapidly growing body of work that addresses practices, theories, histories, and ethnographies of improvisation. The goal of the seminar is to collectively move, via directed reading and discussion, toward the development of new and interdisciplinary critical discourses on improvisation that allow students to engage with the wide range of issues and topics in the emerging area of improvisation studies.

The seminar will explore how improvisation expresses notions of ethnicity, race, nation, class, and gender, as well as how improvisation fosters socialization, enculturation, cultural formation and community development. Other important topics include the place of improvisation in the traditional media of music, dance, and theatre, as well as in new media, sound art, and performance; human-computer interaction; issues of race, gender, and class; creativity studies and the corporate world; cognitive and psychological analyses; debates on improvisation and indeterminacy in diverse contemporary and experimental music scenes; first-person narratives, ethnographies, and theoretical discourses on improvisation; and scholarly modes of theorizing and documenting improvisation, including jazz studies and ethnomusicological studies; and the relationship

between improvisation and the practice of everyday life.

## **WEEKLY TOPICS AND REQUIRED READINGS:**

### **Week 1: Introduction**

### **Week 2: Artists' personal accounts**

Benoit, Agnes, ed. 1997. *Nouvelles De Danse* 32-33, Automne-Hiver 1997. Conversation between Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton, 14-42; Conversation with Steve Paxton, 44-64; Conversation with Simone Forti, 150-172.

Coulombe, Renee. 2003. *The Tao of Free Improvisation*. *Open Space Magazine*, Issue 5, Fall 2003, 56-69.

Lewis, George E. 2000. *Teaching Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Memoir*. In Zorn, John, ed. 2000. *Arcana: Musicians on Music*. New York: Granary Books, 78-109.

Nachmanovitch, Stephen. 1990. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam. 1-24, 42-55, 102-111.

Rothenberg, David. 2002. *Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1-25, 166-204.

### **Week 3: Sociology and linguistics**

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3-30, 72-95.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, and Grant Jewell Rich. 1997. *Musical Improvisation: A Systems Approach*. In Sawyer, R. Keith. 1997. *Creativity in Performance*. London: Ablex Publishing Group, 43-66.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. *Performances. The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 17-77.

Hall, Edward T. 1992. *Improvisation As An Acquired, Multilevel Process*. *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring-Summer 1992, 223-235.

Silverstein, Michael. 1997. *The Improvisational Performance of Culture in Realtime Discursive Practice*. In Sawyer, R. Keith. 1997. *Creativity in Performance*. London: Ablex Publishing Group, 265-312.

### **Week 4: Psychological approaches**

Pressing, Jeff. 1988. *Improvisation: Methods and Models*. In Sloboda, John A., ed. 1988. *Generative Processes in Music: The Psychology of Performance, Improvisation, and Composition*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 129-178.

Pressing, Jeff. 1998. *Psychological Constraints on Improvisational Expertise and Communication*. In Nettl, Bruno, with Melinda Russell, eds. 1998. *In The Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 47-68.

Sloboda, John. 1985. *Improvisation. The Musical Mind: The Cognitive Psychology of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 138-150.

Sudnow, David. 1978. *Ways Of The Hand: The Organization of Improvised Conduct*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sudnow, David. 1979. *Talk's Body: A Meditation Between Two Keyboards*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 3-44.

### **Week 5: Ethnomusicological approaches**

Blum, Stephen. 1998. *Recognizing Improvisation*. In Nettl, Bruno, with Melinda Russell, eds. *In The Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 27-45.

Monson, Ingrid. 1996. *Saying something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. *Music, Language, and Cultural Styles: Improvisation as Conversation*, 73-96.

Nettl, Bruno. 1974. *Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach*. *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 60, No. 1, January 1974, 1-19.

Nettl, Bruno. 1998. *Introduction: An Art Neglected in Scholarship*. In Nettl, Bruno, with Melinda Russell, eds. *In The Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1-23.

Nooshin, Laudan. 2003. *Improvisation as 'Other': Creativity, Knowledge and Power--The Case of Iranian Classical Music*. *The Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, Vol. 128, No. 2, 2003, 242-296.

Tarasti, Eero. 1994. *From Mastersingers to Bororo Indians: On the Semiosis of Improvisation*. In Fahndrich, Walter. 1994. *Improvisation II: 13 Beiträge*. Winterthur: Amadeus Verlag, 62-81.

### **Week 6: Philosophy, Aesthetics, Critical Theory, Literary Theory**

Alperson, Philip. 1984. On Improvisation. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Autumn, 1984, 17-29.

Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Composition. Noise: The political economy of music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 133-148.

Benson, Bruce Ellis. 2003. *Between Composition and Performance. The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-32.

Corbett, John. 1995. *Ephemera Underscored: Writing Around Free Improvisation*. In Gabbard, Krin, ed. 1995. *Jazz Among The Discourses*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 217-240.

Goehr, Lydia. 1992. *Werktreue: Confirmation and Challenge In Contemporary Movements. The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 243-286.

Greenblatt, Stephen J. 1980. *Improvisation and Power*. In Said, Edward, ed. 1980. *Literature and Society*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 57-99.

Hamilton, Andy. 2000. *The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection*. *British journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 40, No. 1, January 2000, 168-185.

Moten, Fred. 2003. *The Sentimental Avant-Garde*. In *the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 25-84.

Small, Christopher. 1987. *On Improvisation. Music of the Common Tongue*. London: Calder, 281-310.

### **Week 7: Women's Studies**

Green, Lucy. 1997. *Threatening femininity: Women composing/improvising. Music, Gender, Education*. Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 82-115.

Oliveros, Pauline. 2004. *Harmonic Anatomy: Women in Improvisation*. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

Reason Myers, Dana L. 2002. *The Myth of Absence: Representation, Reception, and the Music of Experimental Women Improvisors*. Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of California, San Diego.

Smith, Julie Dawn. 2001. *Diva-Dogs: Sounding Women Improvising*. Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of British Columbia.

Smith, Julie Dawn. 2004. *Playing like a Girl: The Queer Laughter of the Feminist Improvising Group*. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

### **Week 8: Methodologies**

Boal, Augusto. 1992. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*. New York: Routledge.

Oliveros, Pauline. 1984. *Software for people*. Baltimore: Smith Publications.

Teitelbaum, Richard. 1972. *World Band*. *Soundings*, No. 1, 21-31.

Forsythe, William. 1999. *Improvisation Technologies: A Tool For The Critical Dance Eye*. ZKM Digital Arts Edition (CD-ROM).

Sawyer, R. Keith. 2000. *Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Colliingwood,, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity*. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 58, No. 2, Spring 2000, 149-161.

Soules, Marshall. 2004. *Improvising Character: Jazz, the Actor, and Protocols of Improvisation*. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

Stanyek, Jason. 1999. *Articulating Intercultural Free Improvisation: Evan Parker's Synergetics Project*. *Resonance*, Vol. 7, No. 2, August 1999, 44-47.

### **Week 9: Histories and Politics**

Belgrad, Daniel. 1998. *The culture of spontaneity: Improvisation and the arts in postwar America*. Chicago. University of Chicago Press. Introduction, 1-12

Couldry, Nick (1995). *Turning the Musical Table: Improvisation in Britain 1965-1990*, *Rubberneck* no 19, special issue. Basingstoke: Chris Blackford, 3-38

Durant, Alan. 1989. *Improvisation in the Political Economy of Music*. In Norris, Christopher, ed. 1989. *Music and the Politics of Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 252-282

Moore, Robin. 1992. *The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change*. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (June, 1992), 61-84.

Sancho-Velasquez, Angeles. 2001. *The Legacy of Genius: Improvisation, Romantic Imagination, and the Western Musical Canon*. Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

Snow, Michael, ed. 1994. *Music/Sound 1948-1993*. Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario/The Power Plant. Nobuo Kubota, Allan Mattes, and Michael Snow, *A History of the CCMC and of Improvised Music*, 79-112.

Stanyek, Jason. 2004. *Transmissions of an Interculture: Pan-African Jazz and Intercultural Improvisation*. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities In Dialogue*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Sweet, Robert E. 1996. *Music Universe, Music Mind: Revisiting the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York*. Ann Arbor: Arborville Publishing. *World Music*, 121-133.

Willener, Alfred. 1970. *Free Jazz. The Action-Image of Society*. London: Tavistock, 230-260.

### **Week 10: Artists as theorists/historians/polemicists**

Bailey, Derek. 1992. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. London: British Library Sound Archive.

Foster, Susan Leigh. 2002. *Dances That Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. *Genealogies of Improvisation*, 19-68.

Goldstein, Malcolm. 1988. *Sounding the full circle : concerning music improvisation and other related matters*. Sheffield, Vt., U.S.A: M. Goldstein

Nunn, Tom. 1998. *Wisdom of the Impulse: On The Nature of Musical Free Improvisation*. Self-Published. Chapter 2, *Origins of the Practice*, 9-34.

Oliveros, Pauline. 1999. *Quantum Improvisation: The Cybernetic Presence*. Available at: <http://www.deeplisting.org/pauline/writings/quantum.html>

Iyer, Vijay. 2004. *Exploding the Narrative in Jazz Improvisation*. In O'Meally, Robert G., Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin. 2004. *Uptown Conversations: The New Jazz Studies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 393-403.

Porter, Eric. 2002. *Writing "Creative Music": Theorizing the Art and Politics of Improvisation. What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 240-286.

Prevost, Edwin. 1995. AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention. *No Sound Is Innocent: AMM and the Practice of Self-Invention*. Copula/Matchless Recordings 9-29.

Rzewski, Frederic. 2002. Little Bangs: A Nihilist Theory of Improvisation. *Current Musicology* 67-68, 377-386.

Rzewski, Frederic, *Parma Manifesto* (unpublished)

Smith, Leo. 1973. Notes (8 Pieces) *Source, A New World Music: Creative Music*. Kiom Press.

Smith, Leo. 1974. "(M1) American Music." *The Black Perspective in Music*, Fall 1974, 111-116.

### **Week 11: Experimentalisms**

Cage, John. 1961. *Silence*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

Lucier, Alvin, and Douglas Simon. 1980. *Vespers (1969)*. *Chambers: Scores by Alvin Lucier, interviews with the composer by Douglas Simon*. Middletown (CT): Wesleyan University Press, 16-27.

Nyman, Michael. [1974] 1999. *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond*, second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. *Indeterminacy 1960-70: Ichiyanagi, Ashley, Wolff, Cardew, Scratch Orchestra*, 110-138.

Cardew, Cornelius, ed. 1972. *Scratch Music*. London: Latimer New Dimensions.

Lewis, George E. 1996. *Improvised Music Since 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives; Afterword*. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

### **Week 12:**

Thursday, Nov 25 (no class--Thanksgiving)

### **Week 13: Computer interactivity**

Chadabe, Joel. 1997. *Interaction. Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music*. Upper Saddle River, N.J. : Prentice Hall.

Dourish, Paul. 1999. *Embodied Interaction: Exploring the Foundations of a New Approach to HCI*. Unpublished article, Xerox Palo Alto Research Center. Available at:

<http://www.dourish.com/embodied/embodied99.pdf>

Dourish, Paul. 2004. What We Talk About When We Talk About Context. Available at: <http://www.ics.uci.edu/~jpd/publications/2004/PUC2004-context.pdf>

Ishizaki, Suguru. 2003. *Improvisational Design*. Cambridge: MIT Press. Foundations, 15-32; The Model of Improvisational Design, 33-49

Jenik, Adriene. 2001. Desktop Theater: Keyboard Catharsis and the Masking of Roundhead. *The Drama Review* 45:3, Fall 2001, 95-111.

La Farge, Antoinette. 1992. A World Exhilarating And Wrong: Theatrical Improvisation On The Internet. *Leonardo* 28:1, 415-422.

Lewis, George E. 2000. Too Many Notes: Computers, Complexity and Culture in *Voyager*. *Leonardo Music Journal* 10, 33-39.

Lewis, George. 1999. Interacting With Latter-Day Musical Automata. *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 18, Part 3, 99-112.

Lewis, George E. 2004. Living With Creative Machines: An Improvisor Reflects. In Knauer, Wolfram, ed. 2004. *Improvisieren...Darmstadter Beiträge zur Jazzforschung*, Band 8 (manuscript version). Hofheim: Wolke-Verlag. Forthcoming,

Reason, Dana. 2004. Navigable Structures and Transforming Mirrors: Improvisation and Interactivity. In Fischlin, Daniel, and Ajay Heble, eds. 2004. *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press.

## **Week 14: Conclusion**

### **Resources**

Anderson, Iain. 2002. Jazz Outside the Marketplace: Free Improvisation and Nonprofit Sponsorship of the Arts, 1965-1980. *American Music*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Summer 2002.

Braxton, Anthony. 1986. *Tri-Axium writings*. Dartmouth: Synthesis/Frog Peak

Brown, David P. 2001. Sonorous Urbanism: Sonic Implications of the AACM. In Barton, Craig E., ed. 2001. *Sites Of Memory: Perspectives On Architecture And Race*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 135-145.

Carles, Philippe, and Jean-Louis Comolli. [1971] 2000. *Free Jazz/Black Power*. Paris: Gallimard.



- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Dean, Roger T. 2003. *Hyperimprovisation: Computer-interactive Sound Improvisation*. Middleton, Wis.: A-R Editions.
- De La Motte, Diether. 1979. *Improvisation in der Neuen Musik*. In Brinkmann, Reinhold, ed. 1979. *Improvisation und neue Musik: Acht Kongressreferate*. Mainz: Schott, 42-54.
- Deliege, Celestin. 1971. *Indetermination et Improvisation*. *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (December, 1971), 155-191.
- Dourish, Paul. 2001. *Where The Action is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Foss, Lukas. 1962. *Improvisation versus Composition*. *The Musical Times*, Vol. 103, No. 1436, October 1962, 684-685.
- Hartman, Charles O. 1991. "David Antin: Culturology." In *Jazz Text: Voice and improvisation in poetry, jazz, song*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press, 76-94.
- Heble, Ajay. 2000. *Landing On The Wrong Note: jazz, Dissonance, and Critical Practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Hood, Walter. 1999. *Urban Diaries: Improvisation in West Oakland, California*. In Chase, John Margaret Crawford, and John Kaliski, eds. *Everyday Urbanism*. New York : Monacelli Press.
- Hood, Walter J., Jr. & Melissa Erickson. 2001. *Storing Memories in the Yard: Remaking Poplar Street, the Shifting Black Cultural Landscape*.
- hooks, bell. 1995. *Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition. Let's get it on: The politics of black performance*. Seattle: Bay Press.
- Iyer, Vijay S. 1998. *Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics*. Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, available online at <http://www.cnmat.berkeley.edu/~vijay/>. *Music Cognition and Embodiment*, 30-70
- Jencks, Charles. 1973. *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books.
- Kao, John. 1996. *Jamming: The Art and Discipline of Business Creativity*. New York: HarperBusiness. *jamming and the Management of Creativity*, 29-41

König, Wolfgang. 1977. Vinko Globokar: Komposition und Improvisation.  
Wiesbaden: Breitkopf and Härtel.

Stanyek, Jason. 2004. Diasporic Improvisation and the Articulation of Intercultural Music. Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of California, San Diego.

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