

Introduction

Introduction

[1] People tell stories. Whether chatting at a tea party, exchanging itineraries, or analyzing soccer games. Through storytelling, people not only reconstruct, but also construct, realities. Not that these are disconnected from the realities that can be perceived through the senses (technologically augmented or not); however, in a narrative, fiction and fact are always already intertwined.

Loosely following historian Hayden White's erudite provocations, I think the same interweaving permeates, *mutatis mutandis*, the social sciences and humanities; both are, to a certain extent, artistic and creative practices. "Facts" need to be constructed, (re)presented, selected, and interconnected during the researching and writing process. Both are concerned with the *making* (*inventio*) rather than with *finding* (of facts). What they have in common with, for example, fiction, is that they creatively redescribe the world so that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold (Kearney 2002: 12).

[2] *The Field of Musical Improvisation* has approximately the same objective: to reposition improvisation within the world 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.

The Field of Musical Improvisation thus tells stories about a specific field of human culture. It presents proposals to have another / an other look at this field by recombining "facts" and connecting them with "fictional" cement. As such, this book intertwines musical events and scholarly disciplines not generally regarded as related to music.

[3] "We choose a performance or recording for study, we decide how to listen to a given passage, and ultimately we determine how to translate our analytical involvement with the music into a compelling narrative to be shared with fellow scholars and musicians," music theorist Paul Steinbeck writes in a short essay in which he exposes the fictional character of music theory and other discourses around music (Steinbeck 2013: n.p.). Regarded this way, *The Field of Musical Improvisation* is a "fiction" too, a carefully constructed story of my (theoretical as well as practical) involvement with improvisation in music, undeniably formed by aesthetic (a narrative strategy), epistemological (an explanatory model), and ethical (an ideological background) choices (White 1978: 69-70). Also, the "facts" that I use do not exist outside the presented discourse but are the results of my storytelling. What counts is, at least partly, an *aesthetic pragmatism* of the arguments: it is not the question "Is it true?" that should guide your reading of this text, but "Does it work?" or "Does it make sense?"

[4] The story I have woven around musical improvisation circles around two keywords: complexity and singularity. First, improvisation is, in my opinion, a complex event in which many *actants*, many actors, factors, and vectors, both human

and non-human, converge and interact. It is this interaction which will take center stage in this study. Second, I think it is not a good idea to write about improvisation *in general*, as it encompasses too many and too diverse practices. As an alternative, I present here a *radical empiricism*, a focus on particular and individual cases. They are not case studies in the strict sense, not examples subsumable under a more general category; instead they (re)present the absolute distinctive character of each improvisation, understood here as the unique composition and interaction of various *actants*. As a consequence, I discuss improvisational qualities from a range of musical genres and movements, thereby also underpinning and supporting my basic assumption that improvisation takes place in all *musicking*.

In short, the contribution of *The Field of Musical Improvisation* to the already existing discourses can be summarized as a critical attitude towards forms of reductionism (focusing on not more than one or a few actants) and generalization (“improvisation is ...”). By focusing on concrete improvisational practices and by confronting them with several complexity theories, I hope to be able to open new ways of thinking about and listening to improvisations, although I am very well aware that so-called “new” stories always already and for a large part consist of other, previously told, narrations.

[5] Although it is my explicit wish that readers choose their own route throughout this book, I have subdivided it into four parts and also propose a kind of hierarchical order. Concerning the latter, each part starts with an introduction, which might serve as a kind of road map to the texts belonging to that section of the book. These texts, however, can be read in any order. In addition, hyperlinks can take you from one part of the book to another, thereby offering suggestions to connect texts that are “physically” separated.

Although it is not strictly necessary to read Part 1 before any of the other parts, the texts belonging to this section are designed as a kind of introduction to the rest of the book. It consists of some prolegomena concerning the (im)possibility of defining improvisation, the context and justification of this study, the basic assumption that improvisation is an inextricable aspect of all music making, and the short description of two musics which inspired me to write this book in the first place.

Part 2 contains discussions of the works of several philosophers and other scholars who, in one way or another, can be related to the concept of complexity. Where possible, I have already connected these texts with concrete musical works in order to make the relation between complexity and improvisation more concrete, more tangible. Part 2 thus contains the primarily theoretical backbone of this study.

Part 3 consists exclusively of analyses (readings, interpretations) of various musics. Here, the two main concepts, complexity and singularity, directly unfold from the description of the improvisations themselves. Expressed differently, it has not been my intention to superimpose these concepts upon the music, but to show how the very specific interactions operative during a concrete musical improvisation necessarily prompt one to consider it as another example of a complex system.

Part 4, finally, investigates and speculates upon the possible contribution of the

outcomes of this study on musical improvisation when expanded into other cultural fields, scholarly disciplines, and everyday activities.

[6] The motivation to compose an e-pub is not induced by a desire to be trendy or to simply deviate from certain rigid academic standards and conventions. Rather, it opens the possibility of providing almost immediate access to the music I discuss. Furthermore, it should be noted that these musical fragments do not function as mere illustrations to make the book look (or sound) more attractive; instead, the music provides arguments and information which is difficult to convey through another medium, e.g. language. In other words, the music forms an inextricable part of the knowledge I want to present here.