

Małgorzata A. Szyszkowska  
Research Center for Philosophy of Music UW  
[m.a.szyszkowska@uw.edu.pl](mailto:m.a.szyszkowska@uw.edu.pl)

## **Notes on Improvisation and Freedom. On Transgressing Self in Musical Performance<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

*In one sphere of human condition to be is to be free. It is the sphere  
of our meeting with music, art, literature...  
(Steiner 1997: 126, 135)*

These notes address the relation between music performance and freedom, or what I take to be freedom under such circumstances. I assume that art and especially music, is either (a) linked to, (b) expressive of or (c) symbolizes freedom. This belief has been pronounced enough time in literature and philosophy and it appears in art forms as well. In film, music videos and theatre art is often portrayed as the very source of freedom. As George Steiner puts it: “a poem, an image, a musical work is a phenomenon of freedom” (Steiner 1997: 124). Schiller has said that “art is a daughter of freedom” (Schiller 1972: 44) and elsewhere that “road to freedom leads through beauty” (Schiller 1972:45). Perhaps it was James Baldwin in his short story “Sunny’s blues” that put in most eloquently, suggesting that music (blues) is the only thing, that may bring freedom to man (Baldwin 2009: 47). Music expresses the most intimate and yet shared aspects of human experience and in this it restores freedom to man. A man is free, when he tells his story, shares his pains and hopes with the community, he is free, when he creates.

I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. (Baldwin 2009: 47)

These notes are about ways, in which one may talk about freedom in music. What it means to be free and how free one may be in music? Finally in these note I would like to shed some lights on a particular belief, namely that during musical performances experienced performers transgress their self. They transcend themselves and during this experience they are no longer this and that performer, musician. They are one with the music, they lose themselves completely in the process of creating and re-creating music through physical, emotional and intellectual efforts.

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## **I.**

Let me start with an assumption that in art freedom is primary. It is the very condition of art, as art has been seen as adding to nature, as creating something that was not present before. As Steiner hints in his writings (Steiner 1997), freedom in art comes mainly from three sources. It is either existential freedom, creative freedom, and the performative and interpretative freedom. The existential freedom in art works comes with the fact that their existence is purely tentative. They wouldn't have appeared at all if it weren't for the artist's creative process. They may or may not be. On the other hand composers and creator are completely free in that they may not create art as well as in what they create. They are free to do what they want, how to compose their music, what instruments or forms to use. Despite stylistic or historical constrains, they are autonomous in their creative process: every step of the way making their choices. Moreover their freedom lies in the very consciousness of choice. They may be pressured in many different ways and see their creation as subjugated to various demands, yet in the very process of creation they are most of the time completely autonomous. It is certainly different with performers. They seem to be bound by many more laws and expectations – indeed they seem to be following a rigid set of patterns of behavior, through which they are attempting to re-create something, which Ingarden calls a social image of the musical work – based on prior performances and recordings (creations) of the given work (Ingarden 1986).

There are, however, situations, which give much more freedom in performative sphere. It is on the one hand improvisation and on the other a moment in performative experience, which relies on transgressing self – as I would like to call it. It appears that great performers are not bound by most of the constrains that limit and regulate music making of others. They are free to change the music they play or to add to it. This performative freedom will concern me the most in what follows.

## **II.**

Hegel wrote that the concept of freedom is most misleading and unclear (Hegel 1991: 140). Freedom appears in philosophy as one of the values or qualities of life, linked primarily to reason or will. In modern philosophy freedom is dependent on choice, the ability to make decisions or the ability to act without hindrance. It has been defined in reference to potentiality and necessity (Haeffner 2006), but most of all in reference to the ability to act without constrain. To be free meant to act without limitations or constrains (Hobbes 1651: XXI). The paradox of freedom, than, is connected with interpreting this dynamics (necessity and potentiality) as suggesting that the more limitations and constrains there are, the less freedom there will be. Consequently, complete

freedom would mean acting without any constraints. Yet such an ideal is clearly impossible to realize. There will always be constraints, either imposed from within or from without. Moreover, would freedom be ever realized, if acting freely was the social paradigm? The important difference seems to lie between Greek concept of freedom as acting according to reason *enkrateia* (Reale 2002: 255) and a later understanding of freedom as connected to will (Haefner 2006:202). In this last understanding being free would mean full realization of one's will. And therefore freedom, as it is most widely interpreted, seems to be an ideal, that is unattainable even if most desirable. A value, everyone longs for. With the exception of Sartre's existential idea of freedom as potentiality of choice, freedom has been seen as the impossible condition of always realizing one's will and desires.

In reference to art freedom has been seen as the ability to create a new reality or as changing of the existing things into something new. Arthur C. Danto talks about art as a transfiguration of some kind – transfiguration of the commonplace (Danto 1974). Yet, even if freedom in art would be defined as implementing change or making a choice, would artists see themselves as free? Perhaps freedom should be viewed as an ability to transgress barriers and defy limitations, instead. People, who choose to ignore the imposed or assumed limitations seem indeed free. As they consider action, which seem best or most desirable despite the corresponding difficulty or constraints, they execute their freedom. Shouldn't we say, then, that the more constraints or limitations are there, the greater is the freedom. Yet, the logic behind this is treacherous, as with all the limitations and constraints, what would the freedom mean if not a constant battle?

### **III.**

Artists were almost always portrayed as free in their creative efforts. Just like art has been seen as the phenomenon of freedom (Steiner 1997:124). Of the three aspects of freedom, mentioned earlier, I would like to focus on the third – the performative freedom. In the context of stage performance freedom may be seen as the ratio between a free creative impulse and the imposed order or structure. The performers or creators of music follow their creative impulses but they are also constrained by the stylistic and formal requirements. This may be more or less strongly felt but it seems that in music, as much as in other arts, artists have to comply with very many constraints. Performers are in even more difficult situation. They need to comply with the stylistic, formal and material expectations from the public. In performances of classical music these expectations seem very clear and unforgiving. The listeners know exactly what they want to hear and they expect precision, elevation and expressive passionate execution but at the same time they expect the work of art they know and love without any changes. The more “free” performers are

sometimes rejected because of their “unfaithful” attitude. Those and others various constrains in performance make it particularly difficult to see this sphere as free. Yet, even in classical music performances there are many aspects of freedom. The difficulty lies in assessing the amount of freedom. Perhaps, it would be better to see freedom as the relation between idea (or form) and convention (or norm). Art defies habit, want and convention. Artists impose their own order and create forms that are in conflict with the already existing ones. “Order is not imposed from without” – says Dewey – “but it is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions between that energies born to one another” (Dewey 1980: 14). The change is their imperative, at least in the beginning. Every work of art seems to invent a new language, which its viewers must learn to speak to be able to appreciate it (Gadamer 2001: 64). The artists – one might say – invent art all over again with each work. Still, when one thinks about the ways, in which music performance is regulated – not necessarily with laws, but certainly with various established rules, the performative freedom seems rather scarce. Everywhere but in improvisation, it seems.

#### IV.

*Improvisation is probably the most liberating thing that I do*

Gabriela Montero<sup>2</sup>

Improvisation, either as a mode of creation in music or as a special type of musical performance, seems to be based on freedom. Some philosophers suggest that improvisation would provide a better focal point for a musical paradigm than composition – dominating in most theories of musical aesthetics (Scruton 1997: 439). However, in most common music concert practice of today improvisation is rarely present. The practice of artistic classical music not only theoretically refers to but in fact relies on exact re-production in performance of the once created musical work. In contrast to that, improvised music, often chaotic or random, prides itself on changing the music, finding the music in something that wasn't [seen as] music at all. In improvisation there seem not to be a pre-established musical work, to which a performance must be headed. In contrast to that, improvisation deconstructs the work, using its elements as building blocks. It may be fluid, ragged and sometimes unfinished. It is also spontaneous, relaxed and created in response to environment. For some people improvisation is the most natural way of music making. They usually add to existing music, replace one note with the other (or several more), sing in response to some action or feeling. In some musical styles (traditional, blues grass, blues, jazz and many others that come to mind) music is always moving and never stays the same. A songwriter and performer Darrell Scott wrote a song “Long time gone”, which has been performed by other country singers as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriela Montero <http://www.gabrielamontero.com/recordings> (accessed on 29.12.2018).

The song appeared on the record *Real time* (2000)<sup>3</sup>. There are several recordings of that song from different occasions available for listening on youtube and every one of those versions sung by Darrell Scott (and Tim O'Brian) is significantly different<sup>4</sup>. But these are small and partial improvisations. There are however ways of making music, which is more substantially based on improvisation. Perhaps, one might think of two major sources or two types of improvisation. For the most part improvisation is either (1) done in response to environment, created in dialogue with other musicians (e.g. during jam sessions) or the audience itself, or (2) it may be created as self-reliant musical structure composed "out of nothing" (musicians like Keith Jarrett or Bobby McFerrin could provide an example here<sup>5</sup>). These two ways of improvising overlap and may happen in different quantities to different musicians. The difference may seem rather simple, as one kind is based on inner while the other on outside inspiration. Yet it shows the difference in creating music, in assuming one's role as creator. The creator, who relies on outer sounds and creates inspired by other sounds, makes music in participation. His idea of music making is based on sharing, participation and often times on dialogue. The other kind – at least in the beginning – is based on expression, it is driven from personal experience and the music is built in relative isolation. The first kind of improvisation (let's call it shared or structured) happens most often in jazz or traditional music. Generally speaking in jazz music improvisation constitutes a bases for performance or at least its indispensable part. Freedom allowed for during jazz performance is significantly greater in than in other genres of music as well (Levinson 2013: 35). In another sense, jazz music is still more similar to what music used to be – performative and socially engaged (Scruton 1997: 439). During jam sessions music runs on dialogues, relying on different voices, on crossing paths with other performers, relying in turn on standard music material or common harmonic structures. In jazz performances musicians are feeding off each other and creating music while listening to their music environment. One might expect a certain tension between the actual freedom and the pre-established patterns and musical paths, but on the whole jazz music as much as most of the folk and traditional music is based on participation, and thus is not only created as improvisation but relies on *participatory discrepancies*, active emotional sharing and engaging, identifying and clashing (Keil 1987: 275). As Charles Keil explains quoting Barfield and Durkheim participation...

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<sup>3</sup> Darrell Scott, Tim O'Brian, „Long time gone”, *Real time*, Howdy Skies Records (2000)

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lzuOvPfi0Y> (accessed on 12.02.2019) or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojwxlgDcEec> (accessed on 12.02.2019) and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWB\\_cPVUv5o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWB_cPVUv5o) (accessed on 12.02.2019). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ0Ra\\_ubK10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQ0Ra_ubK10) (accessed on 12.02.2019).

<sup>5</sup> *Keith Jarrett The Köln Concert* ECM/1975 or listen on <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x80ek9> (accessed on 25.02.2019).

...begins by being an activity, and essentially a communal or social activity. It takes place in rites and initiation ceremonies resulting in 'collective mental states of extreme emotional intensity' (Keil 1987: 276).

In music, that moves, the change is not only assumed or expected, but it is crucial and primary. Music builds on participation and not on expectation. Music is felt and taken in and not just appreciated and assessed. The form or structure of music – as therefore also melody – are not the most important. The most important may be rhythm, the type of beat or something else entirely – like the humor or irony in some improvised, folk songs.

## V.

Performance of music is full of contrasting aspects and clashing elements. It demands commitment and freedom at the same time; it establishes wide open communication while retaining certain amount of privacy and autonomy. Musical concert may be similar to a sport event in many ways even though it is expected to be lyrical and subtle instead (Said 1974: 3). Musicians are fully aware of the audience watching – musicians often invite people to watch their performance and direct their attention to those guests but at the same time they build around them a wall, which is impenetrable to anybody else and behind which they may feel safe and sheltered from outer influences. We need to understand that the goal of music performance is not just a perfect rendition of the musical work but something else entirely. Their goal is to provide an [unforgettable] experience and communal event. If music performance is no longer a communal participatory occasion it used to be in many societies a hundred years ago, it nevertheless provides an occasion for communal and participatory experience. The performers, as much as they are often presented as mediators bringing forth the particular music and composer's style, aim at engaging with the audience or excelling in providing a moving spectacle. No solo artist, however humble, will be invisible or unrecognizable on the concert stage. Their goal is precisely to dominate the stage and lead their performance. In jazz and rock music this happens primarily through the interpretation of the work of music, offering a different and novel reading of the music.

Perhaps acknowledging the differences between the types of music performance and between the amount of freedom allowed for during a music performance, we might talk about three specific types of freedom understood as choosing the novel rather than traditional, choosing individual rather than customary way of performing music and allowing to change path rather than following the path of others in interpreting music: (1) crossing over the rules of the correct interpretation/performance – ignoring the right note, challenging the right sound, the right way of performing (e.g.: "taking liberties" in melodic, rhythmic or tonal aspects of music in classical as

well as other music performances); (2) establishing new rules and changing the performance practices during performance seen as participatory occasion (e.g.: being “out of tune” and “out of time” according to Charles Keil, creating a communal occasion based on dialogue) – as in jazz, folk or blues improvisations; (3) creating music in performance that seems to be created “out of nothing”, coming from private, individual, inner inspiration – as in “free” improvisation. This last type of freedom, the free improvisation is perhaps the most interesting and the most unique in today’s world. It is also very different from the second type of freedom, which is based on and derived from traditional tribal music, retained in jazz or blues traditions (Keil 1987). In free improvisations such as the performances by Keith Jarrett or Vijay Iyer, there is very little contact with the audience. Musicians seem to be completely focused on themselves and their music, creating and engaged in a process that is essentially private, individual and closed off. Their relation to the environment – if any – is on and off. They seem not to be paying any attention to the audience, as they are focused on and completely absorbed in the musical creative process. Perhaps it would be more accurate to think of this as partial isolation, but certainly it is a very different type of creation, one that relies on deep absorption in one’s inner world.

## **VI.**

There is another aspect of freedom in performance, to which I would like to turn now. It is a unique and special moment in performance, through which even the most rigid and rule obeying performers gain freedom. There are those moments during performance when musicians seem to forget all about themselves. They become the music they perform and in this they transgress their self. They lose themselves in the music, one might say. One may remember the way Schopenhauer talks about aesthetic experience (any aesthetic experience) as capable of making an experiencing subject forget all about himself: he “forgets even his individuality, his will and only continues to exist as the pure subject, a clear mirror of the object ...both have become one, because the whole consciousness is filled with and occupied with one single sensuous picture...” (Carritt 1931:138). Obviously, not every performance of music will result in such an experience. Yet, it seems that the best performers and the best performances often rely on such a thing. One way of explaining this is that in performative experience musicians are focused on their performative tasks to such an extent that they seem to forget who they are. Their individuality, their moods and needs become irrelevant. The performance becomes all the reality they face. This experience of forgetting yourself, may also be seen as the experience of transgressing the self. Their subjective needs and individual concerns are forgotten. During performance artists follow the piece of music they perform but amidst the following and conforming to performative rules, a process of self-

discovery and artistic growing appears. The artist is allowing herself to discover herself – as an artist, as a performer – and finally also to transgress all that is keeping her attached to regular ways, to comfortable behavior, the subjectivity, the self. They need to raise above their subjective concerns. They are able to forget about themselves in creating music.

The process I have in mind – transgressing self as the result of total immersion in the creating and performing music – also signifies the ability to abandon the ego and allow for overshadowing self with focusing on music or the community, which speaks through it. On the one hand such a moment in performance is expected, as all the other elements of interpretation and performance are in place. The overwhelming requirements of performance often leave an artist out of breath and out of mind for a moment, relying on the bodily memory, on exercise. But on the other hand, this is something very different. The performers, need to find within themselves a place of peace and concentration, a place where they are most themselves, most relaxed, most efficient in their actions. And through all of this a moment of true inspiration may be found; a moment of change; of transgression.

In *Art as Experience* John Dewey discusses the fact that well-known performers are more likely than unexperienced ones to deviate from musical score and sing “out tune”, even though most of the audiences will never guess it is so (Dewey 1980: 101), which corresponds with the type (1). They are more likely “to take liberties” in their performances. “Small differences in the absolute pitch of notes are of no great consequence for the musical work” – says Ingarden (Ingarden 1986: 22). From a very different perspective, Charles Keil discusses the way, in which all engaging music allows for crossing the line between the “in tune” and “in sync” and “out of tune” and “out of sync”, where great music must be more than correct, more than “in tune”. Where the greatness of performance, in fact, demands creating a performative experience that is based on engaging and communicating and ignoring the right notes/cords and rhythmical patterns – type (2). But the last type of freedom in performance, the type (3) relies on something else. It allows for losing oneself, transgressing oneself in the moment, in the experience – where this moment of transgression is perhaps the most important element of the performative experience. And yet, the experience remains fully subsumed into the “right” music interpretation. The experience of transgressing self, therefore, is a moment, in which the performing musician forgets herself but in the name of music, she will again be herself in the most meaningful sense of the phrase.

One might argue that such a moment is present not only in those performances of classical music, but all other improvisational performances where the element of self, or subjective experience behind performance is crucial and yet, even in this type of music, in one of those moments, a



performer may be able to lose himself, forgetting her ways and ignoring all subjective impulses to follow the music, the development path.

## **Conclusion**

The talk of freedom sets forth a path to an ideal, a way of conduct that is impossible to follow but held in highest esteem, nonetheless. An abstract idea of freedom either as value, an idea, a standard and finally a regulative idea, has been firmly established in the thinking of man. But in many theories there have been attempts to change the simplistic ideal of freedom and acknowledge various subtle ways, in which men may appear free to themselves. One such way is found in artistic activities and the art works it produces. Musical improvisation and music as a moving art or a process provides an abundance of examples of such freedom. The performance of music – a great performance – often requires more than playing the music and even more than playing it well or perfectly even – it requires moving an audience and changing the rules of performance along the way. During such great performances, audience are not aware that something has changed or that the music has not been rendered perfectly accurate, on the contrary, they are certain that the music has been played so well, that even the composer couldn't have done a better job. They have an experience and that what the music was for in the first place. Yet performers apply their freedom to chaining the music, to changing the tempi or rhythm. They temper with the assumed perfect version of the work to move the audience, the shake their consciousness. The other way of realizing freedom during music performance, is even more daring perhaps. In many of such “great” performances, artists achieve such freedom in the process of performing as to completely abandon themselves. This situation, which could be seen as transgressing self, happens to many gifted performers. I shall firmly stand by a claim that such a freedom is not only significant but truly revealing. It shows man capable of forgetting who he is and relinquishing all the wanting and willfulness in herself, in a process of creation and artistic development that happens during performance.

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