

**Inside the sound:
a path to improvisation with no borders**

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Abstract:

Starting from the idea of a path to create a prolific environment to the practice of the music improvisation, we suggest strategies that put in dialogue different idiomatic territories. The path we propose will go from known idioms, such as blues and jazz, then hybrid territories, like modal improvisation in asymmetric meters, culminating on free improvisation. On that approach we will propose a gradual deconstruction process, detaching the musician from conduct rules and pre-established systems, in order to transcend the notion of territory and find the freedom to create and interact through a deep dive into the sound.

Keywords: improvisation, territories, deconstruction, reduced listening

1. About improvisation

Within the minds and bodies of musicians, there is sound that is born and bred, enculturated and entrained, awaiting the opportune occasion that will permit its release in expressive improvisation. (Campbell in Solis, Nettl 2009:119)

We consider improvisation an important activity to any musician. However, we could question whether the musician who goes into an undergraduate music course knows **what is improvisation** and how he could develop this creative process.

We believe that the concept of improvisation could be better understood if

improvisation is approached in a broad and diversified way, using all the resources and procedures available. In the practice and study of improvisation we believe that a possible strategy is going through some idiomatic territories¹, besides proposing improvisation in multi-territory contexts. We have prepared the proposal for this article based on an experience with undergraduate students of USP/São Paulo, where our goal is to elaborate a path that culminates at free improvisation.

At this practice, we could explore any aspect of the sound, establishing a free passage between different music territories. However, how could we bring consistency to the practice of the free improvisation? What makes it efficient? There are some important requirements to this practice: the desire to create/interact and the intense listening: a reduced² listening, directed to the sound as a raw material of the music.

Obviously, we cannot start from nowhere. The idioms, techniques, and all the systems are present in everyone's biography. However, to the free improvisation practice we need to deconstruct all the idioms, techniques and traditional systems in order to create a common territory to those “conversations”. We need to create new techniques and rethink the idea of the instrument, based on the idea that the sound comes first to the music. The idioms where the practice of the improvisation occurs (like the jazz, the blues, the flamenco, the Indian music, the rock, etc.) are built as safe territories with their rules of conduct, their materials of expression and their borders. We could consider those materials as part of the abstract side of the idioms such as – modes, scales, rhythmic and formal patterns, etc. – as much as the concrete variables that happens at the becoming of a performance, including all the variables that could happen related to the instability of an expressive and creative environment.

Thinking on the pedagogical aspect, we have created conditions to an improvisation process that could go beyond the borders of any idiom and could install an open environment that allows any instrumental interaction, in a “transterritorial” approach.

2. Where to go? Elaborating the path

¹ We will consider “territory” and “idiom” as those elements that represent and delimit a musical identity. Gilles Deleuze primarily extended this concept to all arts and cultures at *Thousand Plateaus* vol.4.

² According to Pierre Schaeffer’s definition, the reduced listening is the one that is abstracted from their producing sources and their *musical meanings*, to be only focused in the raw sound object, out of any context.

Our proposal consists in starting from the rhythm-melodic figures that we find extensively on the idiomatic gestures and gradually start to deconstruct them in interactive environments. We will consider the fact that there are many musicians strongly attached to their idioms and they will need a preparation to get to the free improvisation by transcending the borders of the territories. This path tends to go from the note to the sound, from the abstract to concrete, from the game with rules to the game without them, from the idiomatic to the free improvisation. This path will be based on a process that involves transformation, continuous variation and development, getting to the point of going beyond the gesture and figural³ dimension of any pre-established idiom. Our goal is focused on finding a path that will allow us to dive into the real essence of the music: the sound and its energetic dynamism.

3. A path to the study of improvisation

In a first moment is important to have in mind the adequacy of the improvisation to the idiomatic features of each territory, considering cultural and historical aspects as much as typical musical gestures of each of those idioms to then extract what is essential on each of those idioms (the sound), expanding structural concepts beyond of their territories.

3.1. Blues Improvisation

Our soundscapes were revitalized by the blues tonality, which found rich depository mining the cracks between the notes of our western scales. New modes of music expression were made possible by the blues way of phrasing, the crisp bite of its distinctive harmonies, and its penetrating melodies.

(Gioia 2008:2)

³ According to the proposal of the composer B. Ferneyhough, at the *figural* thought the musician handles primarily with figures. Those could be organized in rhythmic melodic patterns that can be reduced to numerical proportions between intervals and durations. The *gestural* thought refers to something *greater* than the figure. That is related to the *gestaltic* perception. The gestures are almost always contextualized in a determined music stile, idiom or any extra-musical reference. Thereby the gesture will configure its meaning in a specific territory. We can then identify a typical gesture from the waltz, the jazz, the samba, etc. Finally we have the *textural* thought, that leads us to the **general configuration** of a sound flow, characterized by rhythmic and melodic figurations, harmonic-intervallic organization, register, dynamics, density, spacing, and timber, among other characters of the sound behavior.

With its origins in the songs of the slaves who worked the cotton fields of the southern United States, the early blues dealt with daily issues, without necessarily telling a story, but rather reflect a state of mind. By having a simple structure, the blues was a supportive environment for musicians to seek new forms of expression to develop improvisation. The Blues brought new materials of expression, influencing the music making throughout the world.

We have choose the Blues as a departure point from the fact that we can – on its more simplified harmonic form – use the configuration of only one scale for the exercise of the improvisation. At this first environment the participant musician improvises individually while the group provides the rhythm/harmonic foundation to this improvisation. At this type of environment the predominant thought is related to the figural aspect of the sound. We will pay attention to the peculiarities of the action of each musician in relationship with the specific qualities of each instrument, considering also the gesture and the typical melodic figures of the blues. At this first stage we emphasize that we will not delve into the gestural issues of the blues, considering that gestural elements such as the swing and the musical flow on the figures of the blues are aspects that involve a deeper immersion in that idiom to be internalized.

3.2.Improvisation on jazz standards

At the same time, the combined operations from interpretation to improvisation have the potential to carry musicians more than halfway to creating a new song within the framework of another melody. Such situations underscore the extent to which pieces serve jazz musicians not simply as ends in themselves but as vehicles for invention. (Berliner 1994:71)

Despite the predominance of melodic/harmonic thoughts for improvisation, there are timbre issues that were also explored in jazz, where musicians like the pianist Thelonious Monk, the saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Chet Baker, have created unique timbre relations with their instruments. The jazz idiom consists in a territory where improvisation is fluid and is always moving through musicians who constantly renew their expressive materials. Thinking about those aspects of jazz we will go to our second module of improvisation.

Considering that our acting territory was previously lined on the horizontal

dimension at the blues improvisation, now we begin to emphasize also the harmonic/vertical thoughts, using more variations on harmonic and scale configurations.

We then will begin to explore the figural character as much as the gesture that we found in the jazz idiom. Even in this highly standardized environment, reasoned on notes and figures, we will get the attention to the timber dimension that emerges on a specific way at the gesture of the jazz. At this module the improvisation is also proposed as an individual exercise on a rhythmic/harmonic foundation, in a similar process to the blues.

3.3 Modal improvisation in asymmetric meters

In non-Western music we can find very complex structures, such as the *tala*⁴ of Indian music, the rich timbre of the Javanese gamelan orchestra, African polyrhythms and a variety of scalar configurations out of the tonal system. These more complex structures are directly related to aspects affecting timbre, texture and rhythm. Since this is a broad territory, we will use only certain materials that we consider adequate to build our improvisation path, starting from modal melodic configurations, rhythmic ostinatos and asymmetric meters in order to create a hybrid environment. At this step we will start to work on the interface of some territories, trying to achieve a gradual detachment from the idiomatic territories by creating conditions to go beyond them. This module will emphasize aspects more connected to the sound properties as timber and texture. From now on the improvisation will be proposed collectively.

3.4. “Free improvisation” with Brazilian rhythms

Just as in blues and jazz, the Brazilian popular music has one of its roots in African music and the rhythmic aspect has been well developed and branched until the present day. Born of that influence we have rhythms such as samba, choro, xote, frevo, maracatu and baião, being that some of these rhythms are part of cultural identity in certain regions of the country as frevo and baião in the Northeast, for example. Considering the diverse rhythm aspects brought from the Brazilian culture, we will explore this aspect to bring a new connection to improvisation and rhythm,

⁴ In India the main formal structure is called *raga* and this is based on a rhythmic cycle called *tala*.

establishing another hybrid territory.

This will be our first proposal that comes closer to free improvisation in the way we understand it. Now we will suggest the improvisation on a rhythmic context, with pre-recorded bases of Brazilian rhythms, using percussion instruments without any harmonic or melodic frames. In spite of the predominance of the rhythm figural thought, the musicians can experience the sound in its various aspects. The rhythmic base – even though maintaining an idiomatic bond to the performance – is opened enough to serve as a source for a wide range of figural, gestural and textural games.

3.5. Free Improvisation

The British guitarist Derek Bailey, one of the representatives of the migration of the environments of free-jazz improvisation to free improvisation, mentions the difficulty of defining what free improvisation is. Bailey points out that one aspect that makes so hard such definition is the fact that at this practice, musicians with very different backgrounds and with totally different musical attitudes are placed in the same environment. Regardless of its definition, however, it is possible to verify that in the free improvisation environment there is a great enhancement of the process rather than an outcome itself. In this type of practice the musician can explore multiple aspects of sound and establish a free passage between the different musical territories. To the end of our path to improvisation, at this module prevail the sound and all their possibilities. The activities will be undertaken collectively, in duos and also individually. If necessary, scripts also will be used to improvise. But in principle the musicians do not have any external media unless the listening, the interaction and the relationship with their instruments. On this final step the musician explores all aspects of the sound through the reduced listening and the communication established on the collective improvisation. All the covered territories will be at the biography of each performer, but our intention is that this path would be a parameter of construction and deconstruction. Our goal will be the sound and how it acts on creative processes. At this last stage we will be attentive to all the elements that propel any improvisation process: the desire, the listening, the interaction and the creative power.

4. Final considerations

On our proposal to a path to an improvisation with no borders we know that it would be possible to deepen any of those steps, or even create new modules that combine those same elements in another contexts. But our principal aim was to build a structured and consistent path that culminated in a favorable environment for an improvisation without borders, open to any creative process and based on the sound and its energetic dynamism. We hope to bring a substantial contribution to the study of the improvisation, which we will be delighted to present and discuss.

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