

WHAT IS MUSICAL IMPROVISATION?

Everybody knows the names of famous composers such as Mozart or Beethoven and also that what a composer does is invent music and write it down. Once written down, the music exists in the form of a text which makes possible a theoretically infinite number of performances.

Many people would find it hard to say what exactly improvisation is, yet improvisation is another kind of composition. In improvisation, the music we think of is not consigned to paper but arrives immediately in finished sound. We compose directly into sound, and we make the music up as we go along, in a combined act of composition and performance. Most of us are musical improvisers. Whenever anybody whistles or hums in new ways according to their own fancy, improvisation in musical melody arises. Improvisation in rhythm is found whenever someone drums freely with their fingers on a table. The mere fact of having a body seems to be enough to turn humans into improvising musicians. Improvisation is everybody's possession, a totally non-exclusive form of music-making, music existing at the point of its universality. Strange, then, that improvisation should ever seem remote.

'Improvisation' refers not just to a process of musical creativity. The object created is also called 'an improvisation'. (The same ambiguity inhabits the word 'composition' which can mean both a process and a product.) What is 'an improvisation' like? Although an improvisation does not have to take any particular form, there is one shape it often likes to adopt. An improvisation may often make use of outside ideas, as when the improviser 'improvises on' or recalls a pre-existing tune or motif. This technique can give special unity to an improvisation, by anchoring it in some element which is heard again and again. Listeners enjoy recognising such pre-existing elements and hearing how the improviser constantly adapts them to new contexts.

Although improvisations can obviously be sound-recorded, and even transcribed into notation afterwards, normally they disappear at the moment they are produced. An improvisation is something which happens once. This gives improvisation a special relationship to the passage of time, and improvisation has sometimes been called 'real-time composition'. It has been argued whether improvisation speaks of the present moment, or about the past or about the future, or about the flow of time, but all would agree that improvisation is the form of composition which makes the strongest statement about impermanence. Like time, it flows away into the past.

Life itself is improvised. When we wake up in the morning, part of the 'musical score' of our day may already have been written but much more has to be made up in the process of living. This places musical improvisation in a peculiarly close felt relationship to life itself. Whereas a composed piece sometimes feels like an object at one remove from life, or something which sets up an alternative world, it is less easy for an improvisation to give this impression. Improvisation thus has a head start in reaching us with a unique kind of immediacy. We are likely to feel we are living in tandem with the music - though of course there are conventionally composed pieces which do this for us as well.

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