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## *Improvisational Listening?*<sup>\*</sup>

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ABSTRACT: Recognized musicians and researchers in the field of music improvisation, like George Lewis and Vijay Iyer, claim that listeners to improvised music improvise as well and, in so doing, they employ the notion of improvisation in the aesthetics of reception, as opposed to its more usual employment in the aesthetics of production. In this paper I aim to discuss if and how should we make sense of this claim. Furthermore, I will try to answer a more general question, that is, whether, and in which sense, we can extend the idea of improvisational listening to every listening, to listening as such, not only to listening to an improvisation.

As a general concept, ‘improvisation’ concerns the way we act by *doing* (performing) or *making* (producing) something ‘on the spur of the moment’. We improvise when our actions are not the disciplined execution of a plan that indicates what we have to do. In the arts, improvisation is a way to create music, poetry, drama etc., in performances that do not follow the precise and detailed indications of works or compositions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bertinetto 2010, 2012c and 2012d (and the bibliography listed there).

However, recognized musicians and researchers in the field of music improvisation, like George Lewis and Vijay Iyer, claim that *listeners* to improvised music *improvise* as well and, in so doing, they employ the notion of improvisation in the aesthetics of reception, as opposed to its more usual employment in the aesthetics of production. In this paper I aim to discuss if and how should we make sense of this claim. Furthermore, I will try to answer a more general question, that is, whether, and in which sense, we can extend the idea of improvisational listening to every listening, to listening as such, not only to listening to an improvisation.

### I.

Lewis (2004) distinguishes two approaches to musical improvisation: ‘Eurological’ and ‘Afrological’. These positions are exemplified respectively by John Cage and Charlie Parker and they concern contrasting conceptions of “real-time music making” (Lewis 2004, 133). The Eurological approach “insists on ephemerality” and regards improvisation as a fully immediate, spontaneous invention in the present moment of something new, “unsullied by reference to the past or foreshadowing of the future” (Lewis 2004, 148). By contrast, the Afrological perspective considers improvisation in terms of re-appropriation, reworking and transformation of received materials, i.e., as drawing on extensive preparation, while nonetheless allowing that “at the same time, each improvisation, taken as a whole, maintains its character as unique and spontaneous.” (Lewis 2004, 148). The correctness of the “Afrological” approach seems to be confirmed by recent studies on improvisational processes (see Berkowitz 2010).<sup>2</sup> In the context of this discussion, Lewis claims that listening, as well as performance, involves improvisation. His point is threefold:

- 1) Listeners can “spontaneously” discover different “layers of meaning” in a recorded improvisation each time they hear it, even if they

<sup>2</sup> These studies show that, even in the case of Western classical music, in order to play (good) music on the spur of the moment, improvisers need to learn, ‘store’ in their long-term memory, and embody in their muscles a large amount of musical materials, forms, techniques, styles, and conventions. In this sense, improvisation is not exclusively tied to the ephemeral present moment: skill and dexterity in improvising are not themselves ‘improvised’, but learned through practice and cultural exposure.

hear it thousands of times. Hence the widespread idea that recorded improvisations are no longer improvisations is wrong, because it “reduces experienced immediacy on the part of both *listeners* [*my italics: A.B.*] and improvisers to an infinitely small now, a Euclidean point, excluding both the past and the future.”

2) “Improvisers are hearing their music at the same time as any potential listener; in this sense, the experience of improviser and listener are similar.”

3) Listeners empathize with the performers and with their symbolic communication. Hence, “it seems clear that the listener also improvises, posing alternative paths, experiencing immediacy as part of the listening experience.” (All from Lewis 2004, 148)

Let’s take a look at these claims.

According to 1), it is wrong to deny that recorded improvisations continue to be improvisations. Their improvised quality reappears when new formal, expressive, symbolic... meanings are discovered in them through repeated hearings. Lewis considers this discovery to be “spontaneous”, because listeners’ perceptual skills may change due to the accumulation of experience(s). If spontaneity is not exclusively attributed to inventions tied inextricably to the instant of their being performed (as the ‘Eurological’ approach would have it), but is understood as the way the experience that is now happening hinges on the legacy of past experiences, carries their ‘weight’ as well as their wisdom, and produces the ‘seeds’ of future experiences (like the ‘Afrological’ approach does), then one may understand why the discover of new meanings while listening to recorded improvisations may be labelled “spontaneous”. Spontaneity does not exclude preparation, but requires it.

Yet this claim remains problematic. Lewis argues that a *recorded* improvisation still is – I would add: potentially – an improvisation, *because* the activity of listening may involve the ‘spontaneous’ discovery of new meanings. As opposed to the live performance of memorized improvisations (for example of well known solos), which, as copies of past improvisations, are “utterly predictable”,<sup>3</sup> Lewis claims, the “recorded versions [of actual, authentic improvisations] often seem to renew themselves when viewed in

<sup>3</sup> It is unclear whether, in saying that live renditions of past improvisations are not

a more expansive temporal context.” (Lewis 2004, 148). Nonetheless, once *recorded*, improvisations cease to be actual performances in process: they are, rather, the *outcomes* of *past* performing activities. Hence, Lewis’ point seems to be true also of the listening of composed music. As my musical experience increases, my capacity to discover meanings in a Beethoven’s Symphony does in fact improve, as a consequence of general improvement in my musical understanding. Each time I listen to it, I (can) listen to it differently, ‘spontaneously’ discovering meanings that are, *at least to me*, new. Therefore, the ‘spontaneity’ of listening seems not to be true exclusively of listening to (recorded) improvisations. Should we infer from this that compositions also become (again?) improvisations thanks to the spontaneity of repeated hearings? Or is Lewis rather saying that the new ‘meanings’ listeners discover in a recorded improvisation are related exclusively to the improvisational quality of the recorded live performance, not its whole value as music? I will return to this point below.

This is not the only way listening may be tied to improvisation, according to Lewis. Listening is also important for improvising music 2). This happens in two main ways.

a) Listening is an indispensable *tool* for learning how to improvise. Like speaking a language, improvising music requires appropriate knowledge. This knowledge does not need to be declarative and propositional (*knowing that*), but must be procedural (*knowing how*). Listening is involved in learning procedural knowledge, which is not only prior to the activity of performing, but is also acquired, transformed and improved *through* and *while* performing.<sup>4</sup>

b) Listening is an important tool for performing an improvisation in real time. In order to play well, improvisers must listen to what they are doing and to what the other musicians are doing.<sup>5</sup> Unless they listen, performers could not act, react, and interact properly. Listening to them-

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improvisations anymore and cannot revive the improvisational quality of the past performances, Lewis means that these renditions are always musically bad or inferior to the original improvisations. It seems to me that in principle a copied solo could be improved by a good interpretation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Berkowitz 2010: 8-9, 68. I leave aside the obvious fact that listening is also required for composing music.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Canonne-Garnier 2011 and 2012; Canonne 2012.

selves and to the other performers, *while* performing, is necessary because improvisers need to evaluate the ongoing performance *while* it is being performed: real-time evaluation is part of the creative process.<sup>6</sup>

As illustrated by 3), Lewis argues also, however, that listeners empathize with the improvising performers. They empathize or sympathize not only with the expressive features of the music, but also with the *real* musicians, due to the fact that they mirror in real time their physical efforts and improvised movements,<sup>7</sup> and, in so doing, they grasp the improvisatory nature (or, maybe, improvisational ‘atmosphere’) of the performance, by means of feeling the ‘improvisational’ quality of their listening. Lewis’s claim seems to be threefold: i) following an improvisation requires perceiving it *as* improvisation; ii) this happens, if listeners mirror the improvisational character of the performance, empathetically feeling the immediacy and spontaneity of *their* perception; iii) their perception is improvisational, because it is an activity of “posing alternative paths”, that are not previously planned, but take shape while listening.

To sum up: according to 1) listening can restore the improvisational quality of a recorded improvisation, because it ‘spontaneously’ discovers “new layers of meanings”; in 2) listening is identified as an indispensable *tool*

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bertinetto 2012a. Feedback loops of reciprocal influences occur between evaluation and performance as well as between the significance of the music now being played and that which was just (previously) played. As suggested to me by trumpet player, improviser and composer Mirio Cosottini, this does not rule out that, in certain cases of free improvisation, performers can focus attention on their own sound, breaking the connection with the other performers, in order to get a good individual performance level, while loosing control on the global result of the group improvisation.

<sup>7</sup> Some theories of musical expression claim that recognition of the expressive character of a musical passage is dependent on the listeners’ experience of the emotion expressed. Jerrold Levinson and Jenefer Robinson argue that we recognize the emotional qualities of music because we attribute them, mostly unconsciously, to fictional “musical *personae*” and we empathize or sympathize with those *personae* (or feel antipathy toward them). Nonetheless they do not rule out the possibility that, even in the case of performances of composed music, listeners can empathize with the real performers. Cf. Levinson 1990, 1996, 2006a; Robinson 2005; Bertinetto 2011, 2012b (126-136). Some neuroscientists explain empathy, and its role in music and in the arts, by reference to the theory of “mirror neurons”. This theory is nonetheless still under scientific scrutiny and none of my arguments depend on its acceptance; I shall, thus, not discuss or defend it here.

for appreciating improvisational music; in 3) listening *to an improvisation* is understood as improvisational, because it reflects the improvisational quality of the performance. Now, while 2) does not matter directly for the supposed improvisational nature of listening, 3) means that listening *to a live improvisational performance* is improvisation(al), if it empathizes with the improvisational quality of the performance, while 1) claims that listening is improvisational, because it can discover new meanings of recorded improvisational music. Yet I see no reason to restrict this claim to listening to an improvisation; it appears to be true of listening as such: listening can indeed discover new meanings (whatever this could mean) not only in recorded improvisations, but also in recorded compositions. Moreover, following this train of thought, one can speculate about whether this ability to listen ‘improvisationally’ is not grounded upon the more general capacity to form, in real time, a grasp of the forms and the meanings of music heard: thus, not only listening to an improvisation, but listening as such would be understood as improvisation(al). How viable is this idea?

## 2.

In order to answer this question, I now turn to Iyer’s view of the issue, which runs as follows.

1) Like Lewis, Iyer thinks that listeners empathize not only with expressive music, but with *real* musicians as well, because listeners mirror musicians’ actions and physical expressions. This happens, according to him, not only in the case of improvised music, but in every musical performance. He argues, that “[...] the act of listening to music [and especially to its rhythmic qualities] involves the same mental processes that generate bodily motion” (Iyer 2004b, 396), that is, the mental process that would generate the movements executed by the performers while playing. It is in any case characteristic of improvisational music-making that listeners, by putting themselves “in the place of the music” – as, according to Levinson, can happen when listening to every kind of music<sup>8</sup> –, simulate the impro-

<sup>8</sup> Levinson (2006a, 83) argues for a similar claim concerning music in general. He claims that “the gestures we are correct to hear in a passage of music, and on which depends our estimation of its emotional expressiveness, are *partly* determined by what we

visational quality of the music and feel, if not consciously, at least bodily/affectively, the temporal coincidence between the production of music and its perception.

2) In other words, listeners share “a sense of time” with improvising performers: “the sense that the improviser is working, creating, generating musical material, in the same time in which we are co-performing as listeners.” (Iyer 2004a, 162; cf. 2004b, 401). In fact, Iyer argues (2004a, 161), listening to music is different from reading a book, because the amount of time required for the experience of the perceived object – if it is a book – does not matter, while listening happens, and must happen, in the same time period as the perceived performance.<sup>9</sup> (This is clear, Iyer continues, also in the case of dance, in which “rhythmic bodily activity physicalizes the sense of shared time” and which in this way “could be viewed as embodied listening”.) Owing to listeners’ closeness to the performers, by means of which the affective and bodily nature of their musical experience is enhanced, Iyer argues that listeners feel not only the active production of music “on the spot”, empathizing with their actions. They feel also the *active, performative* character of listening, that it should adapt itself, in an improvisational way, to the improvisational quality of the performance. This happens, for example, if listeners are read to change in real time expectations, aesthetic attitudes, and even criteria of evaluation. (I will come back to this point below).

3) In other words, Iyer thinks that, as we listen empathetically to a live improvised performance, we perceive or feel our activity of listening

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take performers of the passage to *literally* be doing in producing it.” In other words, even in the case when we do not see the performers playing, the expressive qualities of music drive us to imagine the actions performed by musicians in order to produce the sounds. Moreover, Levinson argues that it is not absurd to suppose that, “faced with a passage of music that strikes us as behaving or gesturing in such and such fashion in virtue of its musical movement, its underlying performing actions, and other aspects of its sonic appearance”, “by some sort of simulation procedure”, “even subconsciously”, we can “try to imagine ourselves in the place of the music [... and...] assume as our own the musical gestures we hear the passage to be suffused with, as a consequence of which we find ourselves feeling, in imagination, such and such emotion, and so in that way come to know what the music expresses.” (Levinson 2006a, 87-88).

<sup>9</sup> Anyway, one could argue, listeners can stop the record player, the same way readers can close a book.



(or the listening experience as an activity). Listeners feel, as it were, the active nature of perception. Following Alva Noë (2000), Iyer rejects the empiricist notion of perception as passive registration of external stimuli, and understands perceptual experience as embodied, plastic, self-adapting and exploratory activity i.e. as “the real-time interaction with the structure of one’s environment” (Iyer 2004a, 164);<sup>10</sup> according to Iyer, perception is active because it shapes what it apprehends.

4) Moreover, improvisation and perceptual experience have an “essential identity” (Iyer 2004a, 169). Judging in light of the context of the rest of Iyer’s paper, I take it that what he means by this (inaccurate) expression is, roughly put, the following. Improvisation and perception share important structural features. They are both activities learned through repeated practice; both perceivers and improvisers are *situated* in the environment where their activity takes place *now*, they explore it and interact in real time *with* and *in* it, “contributing to and altering this environment” (Iyer 2004a, 165).<sup>11</sup>

5) Putting together these claims – 1) the empathetic character of musical listening, especially to improvisations 2) the performativity of listening to an improvisation, which 4) reflexively shows the active character of 3) perception, including all forms of listening, as activity – Iyer concludes that by listening to an improvisation, listeners experience their listening perception reflexively as ‘at work,’ indeed as a kind of improvising performance that takes place during, and in the same place as, the invention and performance of its ‘object’ (cf. Iyer 2004a, 167). Listeners of improvised music engage with their own perception reflexively. They are aware of it as an activity that mirrors the improvisational quality of the performance. In this way, this quality of the performance is also properly perceived. Hence, if artworks that reflectively display the exploratory and active character of perception are ‘experimental’ – because through them

<sup>10</sup> The theory, presented especially in Noë 2004, is partly a re-working of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception. Clarke 2005 applies this view of perception as embodied activity directly to the experience of listening.

<sup>11</sup> Actually nearly everything human beings do can be explained in this way. Hence, one could claim, this way of speaking does not explain anything. However, I think that Iyer aims precisely to show the continuity between music (and in general in art) and everyday human experience, a continuity which improvisation makes particularly clear.

we not only are aware of the object of perception, but also, through being aware of it, experience our own process of perception in a self-reflexive way (Iyer 2004a, 164) –, then improvisations are genuinely experimental. They are, we can elaborate, “playful experiments” (cf. Nachmanovitch 1990, 47), because they are performed in front of an audience, following rules that can be transformed through the course of its realization, depending upon its situational context, and thereby expressing a kind of dialectic interaction between freedom and constraint.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the aural perception of an improvisation is likewise experimental and playful. Listeners play, as it were, with their experience of the performance, while they are witnessing it; they experiment with the perceptual possibilities opened up by the improvised music, by forming sounds as music as they are produced, i.e. in real time, and while imagining possible ways in which the performance might develop, and seeing if these possibilities are realized or not (and how) in the course of performance. Improvising musicians play under a particular risk of failure, because they put themselves in the position of having to act in and react to the (more or less) unforeseen situations that they themselves are producing. Listeners too play with the risk of failure in the game of construction and transformation of expectations they enact in their perception. Obviously enough, the ‘failure’ of the listener has only minor significance for the music performed in comparison with the ‘failure’ of the musicians. A faulty reaction to the music played can influence the course of an improvisation, however, because the game of actions and reactions involve musicians *and* audience. If the audience do not empathize with the performance’s improvisatory nature, the whole ‘game’ can fail or take the wrong path. Not only that: whether a performance succeeds or not depends often upon the evaluating acknowledgment of the audience. Hence, if listeners are not in the position to participate in the play by acting and reacting properly, this can bring about the failure of the performance.<sup>13</sup>

6) In this sense, I think, Iyer claims that “the virtuosic improviser is

<sup>12</sup> On the relation between improvisation and experiment see Bertinetto 2012a. I have no space to discuss the link between “play” and improvisation here, however.

<sup>13</sup> In other words, I am suggesting that improvisatory performances are, in most cases, not only a play among musicians, presented to the audience, but, to different degrees, a play *between* performers and audience.

always listening; the virtuosic listener is always improvising.” (Iyer 2004a, 169). Not every improviser is always listening, but only ‘good’ ones, i.e. only improvisers who ‘know how’ to improvise. The same goes for listeners: listeners can improvise if they are cultivated, if they ‘know how’ to act as listeners. Listeners can actively perceive the music improvised, playfully interacting with it, if – and to the extent to which – they know, or are able to grasp, what is happening. The skill of ‘playing with the music’, i.e. of grasping its significance while it is being invented in the course of performance, depends upon the performers’ and the listeners’ experience and knowledge of musical traditions, instrumental techniques, performing conventions, musicians’ personal styles and artistic personalities, etc.

7) Moreover, Iyer argues that through informed-constructive improvisational listening, sounds can be shaped and perceived as musical at any time. This could sound like an attempt to explain the “musicality” of Cage’s *4 33*<sup>14</sup>. Yet Iyer adds that “the listener is empowered to *constitute* music, self-consciously and actively, from *guided* sensory input.” (Iyer 2004a, 169; the italicized “*guided*” is mine, A.B.). Iyer means that the informed listener, guided by his/her experience or by the intentions of other persons (other listeners, or other performers) can perceive even “the rawest sonic materials” as “beautiful music”: “[...] music need not be understood simply as the execution of pre-ordained gestures, and [...] can be viewed as a *process of inquiry*, a *path of action*, an exploratory, in-time sonorous exploration/construction of the world — a description that sounds a lot like Noë’s description of perceptual experience”. (Iyer 2004a, 161). Therefore, improvisation requires the capacity, both of performers and of audience, to listen to sound as music, to form sound as music.

So far, so good. Yet there continue to be some problems. In particular, it is not clear exactly in what sense listening *to an improvisation* is improvisational. For example, on this view, how can we distinguish listening to an improvisation from listening to a composition? Moreover, can we empathize with the improvisational quality of a musical performance, by way of feeling the improvisational quality of our listening, and therefore perceive the music as improvised, without previously knowing that the music

<sup>14</sup> Following Davies 2003, in Bertinetto 2012b (33-43) and, more extensively, in Bertinetto 2012e I have argued, however, that Cages *4’33*” is not music, although it is an artwork.

is improvised from other sources? In which sense(s) can listening be understood as performative? Last but not least, in Iyer's as well in Lewis's papers, there seems to be room for the idea that listening as such is or can be improvisational: according to Iyer, because listening can explore the musical potential of every sound; according to Lewis, because listening can discover new meanings in music (for Lewis, in recorded improvisation, but we saw that this can be true of music in general): yet, is it really correct to define listening, as such, as improvisation(al), and, if so, what do we gain from this way of speaking?

In order to answer these questions, I will briefly present a well-known theory of musical listening that may help.

### 3.

According to a widespread view of musical listening, musical perception has an organizational and active character. While hearing, listeners actively produce the meanings of sounds, create relationships between them, and organize them as music. In this sense, listening is not passive, but active reception: a process in which listeners shape and organize the sounds they hear insofar as they can understand its (formal, expressive, symbolic...) meanings.<sup>15</sup>

The minimal requirement for listening to sounds as music is the listener's power to establish relations between musical sounds. This happens if sound stimuli have the power to generate, suspend, prolong, or violate listeners' *expectations*.<sup>16</sup> For expectations to arise and perish, the listeners'

<sup>15</sup> In order to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding, I note that I am not concerned here with the different theories of musical understanding currently under discussion in the scholarly literature, but only with a widely-shared view about the minimal condition for musical listening.

<sup>16</sup> This view, worked out by Leonard Meyer and Eugene Narmour, is famously called the "implication-realization model". Following Titchener & Broyles 1973, Negretto distinguishes between *expectations* and *anticipations*. Expectation "is a mental state of suspense about what is going on, during which a range of probable events are expected to happen." The events are expected as probable, but they remain indefinite and undetermined possibilities. Anticipation is the representational prediction of "a specific event in the future" and "may thus be understood as a 'quasi-perception' of that future event" (Negretto 2010, 17/18). "In the case of expectation, I, as a music listener, feel that some-

approach to sounds must be guided by exposure to the proper musical style and by knowledge acquired through past, and continuously altered by new, musical experiences. Owing to this knowledge (which does not need to be declarative and propositional, but can remain unconscious and procedural; cf. Davies 2007, 40), while they are following the moment-by-moment progression of the music, listeners *know how* to connect what they have heard before, which is still resounding in their short term memory, with what they are now hearing, and to generate expectations concerning what is about to come. This capacity to grasp musical flow by means of shaping and connecting sounds while perceiving them is influenced by cultural and performing contexts and intentions and can fail, if listeners have no expectations and/or cannot perceive sound connections and shapes (say, because they are not attuned to the style in question). To sum up, the minimal condition of musical listening is that listeners can, even unconsciously, focus on individual musical parts and, as their expectations are satisfied or frustrated, connect them with the immediately preceding and succeeding parts, shaping musical units as the music is unfolding in real time.<sup>17</sup>

Obviously, music that develops in an unexpected way may trigger the

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thing has to happen and so I prepare myself to react to it, but I am not sure what the 'something' is. In relation to anticipation, on the other hand, I prepare myself for specific events." (Negretto 2010, 121). Obviously, in the case of improvisation anticipations play a minor role than expectations. Cf. Huron 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Levinson 1997 calls this capacity to grasp minimal musical units perceptively "quasi-hearing". Levinson's theory in fact has much in common with the phenomenological theory of musical perception defended by Alfred Schütz based on Husserl's theory of time consciousness, though I cannot show this here. Nor I can enter here into the dispute between Levinson's Concatenationism and the so-called Structuralist or Architectonicist theory of musical understanding (defended, for example, by Peter Kivy and Stephen Davies). Basically, Concatenationism does not deny that large-scale musical forms affect the way smaller musical parts are shaped while listening, but argues that listeners do not perceive large musical forms. Architectonicism defends that the knowledge of technical, historical and large-scale musical elements not only affects musical understanding, but is also necessary in order to understand music. I can set this quarrel aside here, because I am committed only to the claim that *a* (I am not saying *the*) minimal condition of musical listening is the capacity actively to find organization, or some sort of sense, in the sounds, while one follows the music in real time. For a discussion see Levinson 1997 and 2006b, Davies 2007, Kivy 2001.

active and imaginative power of listening in a more radical way than predictable music, for the simple reason that it is more surprising and informative for the listener than music that simply fulfils expectations. Yet even informed and well prepared listeners, who know perfectly what they are hearing, *can* be taken by surprise. Listeners *can* be surprised and get new information or understand the piece differently (or simply get confused!) even by hearing well-known music, because every *experience* of a piece of music is to a certain degree different from all the others; it cannot, therefore, be completely anticipated, owing, for example, to the particular situational context of listeners and performers (cf. Tychener & Broyles 1973).<sup>18</sup> The way the aural perception shapes the music in the moment cannot be completely foreseen, is somehow spontaneous. In this sense, Lewis argues that listening may give new meanings to recorded improvisations, such that they can be experienced again as creative processes.

Therefore, listening, as activity of shaping sounds through generation, confirmation and/or frustration of expectations, may be termed improvisation(al), by considering that, although prepared, the activity of listening is not the execution of a fully determinate and unchangeable plan. Paul Thom regards it as such, when he says that unlike the performers' responses to a work, "audience response cannot normally be distinguished into stages of planning and execution. Spectators normally respond immediately to (their reading of) the action [...] of the performers." (Thom 1993, 197).<sup>19</sup> While performers of composed works (may) usually prepare

<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that a piece of music is good only if it is surprising: obviously, surprises can be good, but also bad. Moreover, I do not deny that the experiences we have in repeated listenings to well-known music are almost always very similar, nor do I mean that we do not take pleasure in listening to pieces that we know perfectly, recognizing and following all their moments. Yet sometimes I am surprised even by Beatles' songs – music that I know and can follow quite well – because I pay attention to a particular vocal tone colour, or to a melodic line in the bass, that I did not previously notice before, or had not noticed for some time. Or I am struck because just yesterday I listened to a very similar arrangement in another song by an Italian band, and now that I listen again to *Strawberry Fields forever*, I am surprised to hear it here again. Although I know the song perfectly well, it now surprises me again: it is an unforeseeable experience of the well-known.

<sup>19</sup> Thom's claim refers actually to the perception of every art performance. Yet it seems to work very well for listening.

an interpretation and then perform it, this does not happen in listening. In the course of a 'listening performance', thinking and doing coincide. For this reason listening can always be surprising. Yet, as argued above, the performative quality of musical listening seems to be a general trait of music experience, and not exclusively true of listening to improvised music.

Indeed, as it has been shown in recent studies in the field of psychology of musical perception and musical understanding, listeners respond to music in different ways in different listening situations. They actively re-construct, by means of imagination, the music that they are hearing.<sup>20</sup> Listening is a re-creative activity, "which interacts with the social and cultural environment" (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, North 2012: 160), and may be conceived as a kind of performance. Not only that: "listening performance[s]' (...), and actual performances (on instruments or voices) involve the same internal processes of active cognitive construction and reconstruction" (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, North 2012: 160). In other words, the active, performative quality of listening seems to be validated by empirical research that suggests that "[...] common mental structures underlie the three main activities of invention (composing and improvising), performance, and listening, and that these structures are constantly changing, revealing imagination and creativity". (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, North 2012: 162).

#### 4.

Let's see if this can help us to answer the questions raised above.

a) The minimal condition of listening to music is the procedural (cultivated and cultivable) *knowing how* to follow the music by shaping and organizing sounds while they are produced. Listening can be termed improvisational in the very general sense that this activity of organizing and shap-

<sup>20</sup> The notion of listening as imaginative activity of re-creation of the musical material is old. For example, Pietro Verri in *Lindole del piacere. Discorso* (Livorno 1773) argued that, while the pleasures of poetry and painting require passive beholders and listeners, in listening to music the imagination is active. He valued the role of listeners more than the one of composers, because listeners, by means of imagination, can discover beauties that composers may not notice in their own music. Cf. Giordanetti 2011, 38.

ing in perception is not completely planned before its execution, but is carried out ‘spontaneously’. Listeners react to sounds, by shaping, without executing a plan, what they hear on the spot. They organize their perception by playing with the expectations and hypotheses (related to all musical parameters) that are re-generated, transformed, confirmed or frustrated by the musical performance.

In this sense, the *improvisational quality of listening seems not to depend upon the improvisational character of the music performed*. Listeners “improvise”, to different degree, even while attending to performances of composed works. Although ‘improvisation’ *can* label the activity of listening, this does not suffice to determine the distinctive and specific character of *listening to an improvisation*.

b) The “improvisational” quality of listening depends on the real-time dimension of music as a flow, which is always heard *now*. Like performers, who, even in playing composed works, must always make decisions ‘on the spot’ about how (and what) to play, listeners shape what they are perceiving ‘on the spot’, and differently each time. Even recorded music is *now* being played back and unfolds while it is being perceived, so that listeners (can in principle) organize it differently each time, because their point of view of the world changes through time, and through the music. In perceiving a piece, listeners (can) renegotiate its aesthetic features, its organizational structures, its symbolic and expressive meanings, or the criteria for its evaluation ‘in the course of performance’. Reflecting on this, we get a sense of the fact that music is *existentially* and *experientially* ‘tied’, as it were, to the real time of its being intentionally performed or played (when recorded) and simultaneously intentionally perceived. Therefore it is *potentially* always somehow unexpected and surprising, and its experience cannot be completely planned in advance.

c) Yet, this is *not* yet the specific way Lewis and Iyer understand listening to an improvisation as improvisational. Lewis’s and Iyer’s thesis is different from the general and rather trivial claim that listening is as such improvisational because it is an activity that is not the execution of a plan and can generate surprise, and which, at least in reflection upon it, can lead us to recognize the real time quality of music experience. They think instead that, by listening to an improvisation, listeners *perform*, in real time, such reflection on the real time quality of musical experience.



They think that in listening to an intentional improvisation we (may) *feel* – while and by means of listening – the immediate ‘touch’ between listening and performing and empathize with performers.<sup>21</sup> In this way we (may) reflectively feel the active quality of listening.

Yet the fact remains that it is often difficult to grasp only by means of listening whether or not a certain performance is improvisational. Especially when we are not familiar with the style of the music played, we must have explicit knowledge that the piece is improvised in order to be able empathetically to feel the immediacy of the performance.<sup>22</sup>

d) Hence, the improvisational nature of the performance does not suffice to arouse an empathetic (self)feeling of listening as improvisational. “Virtuosi listeners” are required: listeners well-acquainted with the genre and the style of the performance, yet open to the unknown and the unforeseen, who may not only witness, but even share in the production of the music (cf. Berkowitz 2010, 175). Improvised music blurs not only the division between composers and performers, but even the one between performers and listeners. Listeners not only interpret, even construct, the meaning of the music perceived, but can influence, to varying degrees, the atmosphere of the performance: musicians can react to the affective and acoustic reactions of the audience, recognizing them performatively as musical partners.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, Iyer seems to claim that 1) every listening is improvisation, in the above stated large and trivial sense, because listening is perception and perception is improvisation and 2) listening to an improvisation is the proper and specific way to feel the improvisational quality of the improvisational performance (both of playing and of listening to music).

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the “improvisational feel” of the music we hear can be deceptive (Cf. Brown 2011, 62). A performance of a composed piece may sound improvised as well as completely improvised music may perceptively seem to be the performance of a composed work. On the contrary, if we know that a recorded music has been improvised, we may react in a different way to the recorded music, perceive its improvisational quality, i.e. its being made on the spot, and evaluate it accordingly (Brown 2000, 119). Hence, the revitalization of the improvisation does not depend on our ‘improvisational’ listening, as Lewis argues, but on previous knowledge of the improvisational quality of the music originally performed.

<sup>23</sup> Hence, as a heuristic hypothesis, one might say that the general and natural tendencies of listeners are actually to participate, performatively, in the production of music (or to follow it, sharing its time while dancing, or imagining to dance, to it: cf. Scruton

e) The performative-imaginative power of listening can be considered also from the perspective of performers (and this is a point shared also by Lewis and Iyer), because listening is a general condition of music making: not simply in the above explained sense that listening is a tool for improvising, but in the sense that listening performers interact with themselves and with other musicians, playing with their own expectations, anticipating the course of performance, and reacting to the unexpected. More generally, they interact with the sounds they hear and produce.<sup>24</sup> This capacity to integrate the activities of listening to music and of producing musical sounds into a single process is a condition for a good performance.

f) More generally, improvisation may allow us to understand that the roles and the rules of listeners and performers *can* be re-negotiated and modified, to different degrees and ways, through the same performing practices that shape them. Listeners and performers enact a dialogue, in which their respective parts can change, while it is taking place (cf. Benson 2003). This way of understanding the notion of improvisational listening is very different from the previously discussed view of listening as spontaneous execution without a detailed plan. It concerns instead the possibility of a closed interplay between artists and beholders.

g) As a concluding remark, we might entertain the attractive working hypothesis that both approaches to the issue can be taken together, if one looks in general at the experience of art. As suggested by some theories of aesthetic reception (especially the ones proposed by Nicolai Hartmann, Roman Ingarden, Mikel Dufrenne, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolf-

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1997, 354-5, 391). In certain musical traditions (for example Western classical music), these tendencies are inhibited due to aesthetic and social conventions. Yet, in order to follow music in real time, even in this case listeners *simulate* – offline, as if were – the interactive and empathetic participation in the production of music that in other genres, performing contexts, and social situations (rock played in a stadium, jazz performed in a club) is a sheer fact. With respect to some musical genres, this simulation can be mimetic and physical, even if it has no perceivable acoustic effects: it happens not infrequently (nor is this problematic) that we are surprised to find ourselves moving physically, imitating the way musicians play or sing.

<sup>24</sup> Musical improvisation does not imply only reactions to unforeseeable situations that improvisers encounter, but also reactions to unforeseeable events they produce while improvising. It is not only reactive, but also productive improvisation (for this terminology see Kurt 2012, 168).

gang Iser, Umberto Eco), beholders' reception inventively integrates the undetermined aspects of artistic phenomena. In the experience of art, beholders take part in the constructive interpretation of what they perceive. Encounters with an artwork are therefore potentially different each time, not compelled by a strict set of rules, and surprising. In this sense, art invites beholders to enjoy the active character of perception as well as the unexpected and surprising modes of its processes and products. The performing arts, as real time practices, are particularly apt to allow us to feel and understand this *openness* of our perception. Undetermined compositions, characterized by forms deprived of clear directions (for instance, like certain works of Ligeti and Stockhausen) or consistent coherence, as well as free improvisations seem to call for this kind of active perception in an enhanced way: in these cases, listeners experience the musical situation as a field of possibilities in which, while listening, they establish connections and more or less inventively and responsibly shape on the spot the musical 'meaning' of the music.<sup>25</sup> Hence, expanding this line of thought, the notion of improvisation may apply to listening and be more generally metaphorically extended to every aesthetic perception, precisely to convey the active openness of our perception, especially in the case of art perception (cf. Bertram 2005). For improvisation (not only in music), as thinking while making while being perceived, offers a way to grasp the openness of art experience not only after, but during, the performing process,<sup>26</sup> by means of perception that reflectively manifests his/her own activity to the perceiver.

h) This is maybe the general aesthetic significance of the idea of an improvisational listening, as proposed by Lewis and Iyer. Still the fact remains that, even if listeners can be said to 'improvise' in the ways just discussed, the distinction between musical improvisation as production of music on the spot and listening as improvisational must be rigorously preserved. Both can be understood as actions in which, to different degrees and extents, there is no gap between thinking and doing (they are spontaneous), although they are at the same time the fruit of experience (they are based on prior preparation). Yet, what musicians and listeners

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Nanz 2011, 21-3.

<sup>26</sup> See Bertinetto 2010 and 2012d.

are doing is different: listeners respond perceptually to what composers prescribe and performers make.

Hence, instead of defining the practice of active listening as ‘improvisational listening’, it seems more appropriate to conceive this active musical listening as *imaginative*. For the notion of improvisation seems to require that something is produced (or ‘created’) on the spot, while listeners - as they are silently listening to music - do not really create music, but perceive it, even though in an active way. Hence, active listening is a perceptual process that involves *imagination*, rather than creativity and improvisation. Although this kind of imagination is cognitively the same musical imagination used by composers and performers, in the case of listening this imagination is not productive, because listening does not *produce* music in the proper sense. As a matter of fact, “imagination is a more fundamental process than ‘creativity’ as the latter involves the translation of internal cognitions into external sounds via the composer and the performer” (Hargreaves, Hargreaves, North 2012: 169), while the first can be practised and cultivated, without needing the actual production of sounds. Therefore, active listening is imaginative, but not truly creative. As Levinson (2010, 220) writes, “l’essentiel (...) est de reconnaître qu’il y a une différence grosso modo entre la pensée poïétique (ou générative) musicale et la pensée esthétique (ou réceptive) musicale, même si en pratique ces deux modes s’entrelacent et se chevauchent, et aussi se relayent à tour de rôle, dans presque toute activité musicale”.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that at least two kinds of musical imaginative performances – the improvisational production of music on the spot and the imaginative listening of music – are (inter)active and require a feeling for the fleeting moment as well as the capacity to organize expectations and actual perceptual experience, without losing the pleasures of surprise. In this limited sense, the imagination at work in musical listening may certainly have an improvisational flavour.

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