

ARTEIDOLIA

- [current](#)
- [recent](#)
- [circulating](#)
- [writers](#)
- [index](#)
- [about](#)

Free Improvisation & How It Means

Daniel Barbiero
April 2017



Does free improvisation mean anything? This may seem like a strange question to ask. Surely when we play free improvisation there must be something meaningful that we're doing. There is, but to push the question a little farther in, what is it that we mean, and how do we mean it?

Free improvisation is an activity. Like any activity it has a meaning which derives from the kind of activity it is and from the way it engages the person undertaking it. Free improvisation is a creative activity, one which results in the creation of an artwork, no matter how ephemeral. The improvised performance may literally vanish into air once it's completed, but even if it exists only as a temporary object, during that time it carries and conveys meaning, the meaning put there by the improvisers.

It just seems essential to an artwork, of which a freely improvised performance is one, that it mean something. By one definition, an artwork is something that represents an intended meaning in a medium-specific way. The meaning of an artwork—a painting, a poem, a piece of music composed or improvised—inheres in its representation of content—that is, in its capacity to be about something. What makes it an artwork as opposed to a more mundane representational entity—such as, say, a street sign—is the role its medium plays in conveying, and indeed in constituting, its content as such. Thus for an artwork it isn't just a matter of what it represents, but of how it represents, that constitutes its meaning. Its medium is, to a significant extent, its meaning. But so is what we might think of as its medium-independent meaning.

Self-Disclosure & Expression

When we talk of what an artwork means, we're referring to its content, or what the work is about. We might further think of its content as having two components, one of which is medium-independent, and the other of which is inextricable from its medium. Each of these two components is deeply intertwined with the other, but still, it's possible to speak of each separately and in its own terms.

The central, medium-independent content of free improvisation is the improviser's disclosure of him- or herself, from the first person perspective. When we play a free improvisation, we relate something very basic about ourselves, from our own point of view. What we play relates our own interpretation of the given moment, how we see it and how and to what extent we commit ourselves to it. To a degree greater than with any other type of musical performance, the meaning of free improvisation inheres in just this conveyance of the performer's own perspective on the music. It is about what it is like to participate in the music in the moment it's being created. Not the performer's interpretation of the score—because of course there is no score—but an interpretation of the performance as it unfolds.

As an art concerned with self-disclosure, free improvisation is essentially expressive. It externalizes, in a medium-specific form, the emotional and cognitive states of the improviser as they pertain to the performance unfolding in the moment. The key idea here is “expression.” The underlying intuition is that free improvisation doesn't describe or depict the performer's state, it expresses that state. The idea is that in creating a free improvisation, we aren't purporting to depict something as we would in telling a story or describing an event or painting a picture or sculpting a figure. Instead, expression through improvisation is a kind of modeling or simulation rather than a variety of depiction.

Think of how music can convey an emotion such as agitation—with rapid flurries of notes, loud dynamics, dissonant pitch combinations it can model the restlessness and unease of an agitated emotional state. What seems to be involved here is a kind of simulation in which certain features or qualities of something are represented in a different medium by way of features or qualities appropriate to that medium. The central notion here is again that of representation, or something standing for something else. What is being represented is the state of the improviser, the first person perspective on the performance, in the medium of organized sound. Sound, organized by the performer in such a way, stands for his or her state in relation to the performance.

Expression of the first person perspective through modeling of emotional states is something done to brilliant effect by, for example, some of the more unrestrained free jazz performances of the 1960s. Free improvisation can of course also be about different things. It can be about the interrelationships among the performers, or—and this is to anticipate somewhat—it can be about the interplay of musical elements, in which the musicians are engaged in contributing complementary or contrasting formal structures in building the performance. Even so, it would seem that the modeling of the performer's emotional responses to the unfolding performance is something fundamental and always there, in the same way that a non-reflective awareness of or presence to self is fundamental and always there when we engage in purposive action. The parallel is perhaps a rough one, but suggestive nevertheless.

Expression to Description: The Move from the First to the Third Person Perspective

The expressive part of free improvisation's content can be described—we can say of a player that his line is agitated or her harmonies are anxious—but in itself it isn't description. Through the agitated line or anxious harmonies the performer isn't describing his or her state but rather is expressing it. In this case it might be useful to think of the difference between description and expression as corresponding roughly to the difference between the third-person and first-person perspectives, respectively. Or, as a kind of paraphrase.

In fact, one way to think of medium-independent meaning is to think of it as liable to paraphrase or description in another medium, most typically language. Thus what we can paraphrase about an artwork's meaning is, briefly, what we can describe in terms that aren't medium-specific or peculiar to the artwork. We can, for example, paraphrase the content of a poem in prose, can describe in words the story or event depicted in a painting or the figure or geometrical form depicted in a sculpture.

With free improvisation this matter of paraphrase becomes complicated. To see why, first consider instead a piece of program music that purports to depict or comment on something in the world. A work like Sean McClowry's April '94 for double bass and electronics specifically alludes to events in the Balkans in 1994; it is, in a broad sense, descriptive, and what it describes can be paraphrased. But what of music that isn't program music, that is to say, isn't descriptive by intent? I believe it still can be described—still can be paraphrased—but that taking the descriptive stance toward it involves a shift in perspective that—crucially—is not the performer's perspective. In paraphrasing we move from the first person perspective to a third person perspective. A kind of translation, in a sense, is required—which is appropriate in that paraphrase itself also is a kind of translation.

Form as Expression

It seems intuitive to hold that the meaning of free improvisation—its serving as a vehicle for the self-disclosure of the improviser—is to be found in the content it expresses through the kind of modeling suggested above. But what of the medium? What, or how does it contribute to the expression of meaning, specifically to the expression of self-disclosure?

What's left of the work after the medium-independent content has been extracted, as it were, is the formal language in which that content is presented: The rhythms and diction of the poem, the visual composition and literal colors of the painting, etc. Any formal language includes an expressive element, but with free improvisation, the expressive element is particularly important—in fact, we wouldn't be far off in saying that in free improvisation, form just is expression.

In the absence of pre-conceived or composed forms, a free improvisation's forms and sounds are all chosen by the performers, in real time. Consequently, as free improvisers, we don't realize or replicate another's pre-existing, formal language but instead expresses our own. In doing so, we disclose something substantial about

ourselves—specifically, our internalized sense of forms and their appropriate uses. Thus formal choices—what it is we actually play in real time—say something about us as realized possibilities within the context of the purposive activity that is free improvisation. As such, they supply a substantial part of the improvisation's overall meaning.

Because these formal choices reflect our ongoing judgment in real time (albeit a judgment made more often than not tacitly or without prior or explicit reflection), they effectively express our cognitive responses to the performance. They give signs, in organized sound, of how things are with us as we assimilate and respond to the ongoing flow of musical cues and forms. In this sense, the forms we create are indicative, in an expressive way, of one very important dimension of our first person perspective on the performance.

Thus our freely improvised formal choices do a kind of double duty. In the first place, they are the means through which we disclose our first person stance—they are the medium through which we express our position within the flow of sound. But at the same time they are in themselves meaningful as the expression of our formal judgments. These latter count as simply another dimension or facet of how things are with us during the course of the performance. It just follows, then, that the way musical content is presented—the formal elements and relationships through which its content is conveyed—is part of that content. These formal elements and relationships are part of content, part of meaning.

A Mediated Immediacy

Free improvisation has sometimes been characterized as a music of immediacy—of the direct expression of the artist's state of being. And to an extent this is true. But no matter how immediate it might appear, what we express through free improvisation is in fact mediated—through musical gestures, forms, structures, technical competence and limitations, etc., which are representational of what we express through them. To the extent that the free improvisation is a musical performance, it is bound up in this system of representations which mediate, and consequently give form to, the expression of how things are with the musician at any given moment of the improvisation.*

As with other artworks, then, when we convey meaning through free improvisation we are doing it through a system of representation. This may seem odd, since music is not ordinarily thought of as being representational in the same sense that a painting depicting an event or a person, or a sentence expressing a proposition is representational. And in a sense the question of whether or not free improvisation is representational is a special case of the larger question of whether or not music can be representational. Although music doesn't represent what it is about in the same way that a descriptive sentence or a proposition represents what it is about, it is nevertheless representational in that it uses a medium—organized sound—to convey, that is to represent, a meaning. It just follows that free improvisation, as a variety of music, entails a kind of expression that is mediated representationally by the forms, gestures and formal elements through which its meaning is conveyed.

But while I believe this is true—that free improvisation is a representationally mediated art form—paradoxically, I think that it is in some valid, intuitive sense immediate in that the state of the performer and his or her own choices of sounds and gestures provide the primary meaning of the art form, as opposed to pre-conceived or composed forms. Its primary meaning is the expression of what I've termed the first person perspective, albeit through the medium of musical forms and structures. So then yes, the meaning of free improvisation is mediated, but the sense of urgency, the reliance on moment-to-moment choice—in short, the risks of working without a net so critical to the actual doing of free improvisation—give it an experiential immediacy that is there for us to hear.

* An expressive utterance—a cry, a shout—also has the appearance of immediacy, but it too at least potentially represents, by giving outward form to the state of the person doing the uttering.

Search



©2018 ARTEIDOLIA