



Improvisation, Analysis, and Listening Otherwise *

August Sheehy

KEYWORDS: improvisation, music analysis, Derek Bailey, David Lewin, listening

ABSTRACT: This essay asks what it would mean to conceive of music analysts as improvisers. Drawing on Derek Bailey's observations on improvised music and performance, Lydia Goehr's distinction between *improvisation impromptu* and *improvisation extempore*, and elements of David Lewin's analytic work, I argue that such a conception returns continually to the relationship between the analyst and the analyzed work as it unfolds in real time, i.e., in listening. Rather than placing moments of heard music within an *a priori* theoretical frame, which I call "idiomatic listening," analysis-as-improvisation resists the idea of stability suggested by theories of music. I suggest that analysis-as-improvisation thereby reflects part of what analysis has historically accomplished as well as the goals analysts implicitly pursue.

Received March 2013

Introduction

[1] Derek Bailey, the English guitarist and indefatigable champion of free improvisation, wrote in 1980, "For the description—or evaluation—of improvisation, formal technical analysis is useless" (1993, 15). As categorical as his assertion sounds, I don't think Bailey was criticizing analysis so much as diagnosing a conceptual gap between improvisational and analytic practices at the time. Had he been a committed music analyst rather than an improvising performer, the sentence might have read, "For formal analysis, improvisation is beside the point." There is an element of truth in these reciprocal statements: improvisation and analysis seem to pursue different ends. But putting the problem this way obfuscates a linguistic sleight of hand that turns the activities of improvising and analyzing into pseudo-objects: "improvisation" and "analysis."

[2] Improvisation as such can't be analyzed because "improvisation" is not a thing. Or, if it is—if we speak of *an* improvisation—it is the kind of "thing" that "seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else" (Brown 2000, 5). Improvisation is not a structure that can be broken down into its constituent parts in order to see how it works (to paraphrase Ian Bent's (1987) definition of analysis). Rather, I would argue, improvisation is a mode of action, or even an attitude, that involves not only degrees of spontaneity but also an implicit or explicit valuation of such freedom with respect to the activity. Such a broad conception accords with the word's use in everyday language, in which it means so much more than a certain kind of musical performance. ⁽¹⁾

[3] Music analysis is not a thing either. It is—as David Lewin liked to remind his readers—something one does to, or with, music. Or, as Arnold Whittall put it in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, “analysis is interpretation—even a kind of performance” (2013). To speak of “analyses” leads away from the practice of analyzing and suggests that the finished product (the analysis) is what is important, as others have recognized (Agawu 2004). This hierarchy of values recapitulates, almost uncannily, the structure identified by Bruno Nettl (1998) in which compositions take precedence over improvised performances (recordings of which may be treated as compositions for the sake of analysis).

[4] With a shift in emphasis from thing to process, however, analysis and improvisation might be brought into a productive relation. To put this in the form of a question: If music analysis is first and foremost an activity, and improvisation is a way of acting, in what sense can analysis itself be understood as improvisational? I suggest that whatever the answer to this question turns out to be, it hinges on the analyst’s relation to the music as it unfolds in real time—which is simply to say that it will return us again and again to the moment of listening and what happens, or can happen, in that moment.

[5] Lydia Goehr’s (2012) recent distinction between two varieties of improvisation may be useful here. She describes the first, *improvisation impromptu*, as the sort of improvisation prompted by unforeseen turns of event that force one to adjust a planned course of action; as we say, one improvises a solution. The second variety, dubbed *improvisation extempore*, is practiced within a pre-established spatial, temporal, and conceptual frame that, once entered, allows one to acknowledge, “Now I am improvising,” I will return to *improvisation extempore* shortly, but it is worth lingering on *improvisation impromptu* for a moment in the case of music analysis, for it is a useful reminder that music analysis, even at its most formalized, can be motivated by something unexpected. How often does one analyze a piece because something about it forces a question: why is that moment so beautiful? Or, more circumspectly, why did the music go like *that*? And: what do I *do* with this as a listener?

[6] In point of fact, in the act of listening, I have already done something. Listening is implicitly an analytical act—that is, a dissolving or loosening of what one hears into elements. One separates “music” from the total acoustic environment. One then parses the music’s constituent events, which themselves may consist of rhythms, pitches, timbres (instruments), dynamics, harmonies, and the like. While most of this may happen below the threshold of consciousness, moments that focus one’s fleeting attention are causes for *improvisation impromptu*. These moments need to be figured out or understood—at least if they are not to be glossed over and forgotten—as points of reference in one’s flexible, ongoing adjustment to the exigencies of musical experience.⁽²⁾

[7] Usually, however, “analysis” refers not to this pragmatic and spontaneous engagement, but to ensuing attempts to explain, justify, refine, or even change such experiences (with an underlying implication that simply listening is not enough). These *ex post facto* attempts may be conceptualized as improvisation *extempore*. One sets aside a time and place, perhaps at a piano on a moonlit evening as Hugo Riemann was supposed to have done, and says, “Now I am analyzing this music” (Rehding 2003, 15–19). Part of the equipment for analysis may be a codified theory such as (neo-)Riemannian harmonic functions, or Schenkerian voice-leading, with which one attempts to link understanding and hearing, and perhaps, to further develop both.

[8] Because such theoretical frames determine the relationships between musical elements, they may seem to preclude improvisation. Yet the irreconcilability of analytical frameworks with improvisation is only apparent. I would like to consider an analogy to what Bailey called “idiomatic improvisation,” which is to say, improvisation whose performance is limited by the strictures of idioms such as Renaissance counterpoint, the eighteenth-century Italian *gallant* style, various styles of jazz, and so on. Let’s take bebop as an example. In this idiom, famously developed by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and others in the 1940s, chromatic neighbors to chord tones, melodic resolutions to extended triadic sonorities, rhythmic syncopations within a fast eighth-note swing feel are legitimate moves; sustained non-chord tones, rigidly straight eighths, and a-metric, chromatically planed quartal arpeggiations are not. It is not that one *can’t* play those things—just that one is then no longer playing bebop. But who would say that playing according to certain rules—the rules of bebop, of modal counterpoint, of the *gallant* style—means one does not improvise?

[9] Now consider Schenkerian analysis: diminutions of various kinds (passing tones, reachings-over, voice exchanges, etc.), consistency between hierarchical levels, and so on, constitute an idiom of listening, within which one may try out different possibilities. Debates over whether particular works originate from a 3-line or 5-line *Urlinie*, the lack of a script that

automatically produces reliable Schenkerian analyses, Schenker's own self-designation as "an artist," and Schenker's enormous investment in the idea of improvisation as virtually constituent of what it means to be truly musical, all suggest that the performative aspect of analysis allows considerable room for improvising. Again, one may transgress the "rules"—for example by listening to a passage in terms of functional harmonies focused on the movement of an imagined fundamental bass—but then one is no longer analyzing (or improvising) within the Schenkerian idiom.

[10] Are theory-based idioms of listening necessary; or, alternatively, might there be an analytical analogue to freely improvised musical performances? Could one do away with idioms of listening altogether? Again, Bailey is suggestive. "Free improvisation," he writes, "is open to use by almost anyone—beginners, children, and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available. It can be an activity of enormous complexity and sophistication, or the simplest and most direct expression: a lifetime's study and work or a casual dilettante activity" (1993, 84). I see no reason Bailey's observation could not apply to analysis as well as performance, so long as we view analysis as something at which one can become an expert without claiming that analysis is the exclusive privilege of experts. I can imagine, for example, a musically untrained listener wondering what makes the chorus of Taylor Swift's enormously popular "I Knew You Were Trouble" work musically (or not). What is the viral video clip in which Swift's vocals are replaced by a bleating sheep (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7j0XE-CjVrg>), if not a dilettantish act of analysis—an attempt to communicate an intuition about how the passage "goes," produced using available skills and intellect? We should note that it required and used technology as well—in this case, the internet, which as George Lewis has noted, "is perhaps the largest technologically mediated collective improvisation ever created" (2007, 117).

[11] David Lewin's essay on Stockhausen's *Klavierstück III*, in contrast, is far removed from dilettantism. Written "partly as a methodological model" (2007, 16), Lewin's essay self-consciously exemplifies the discipline of music theory and analysis: it takes the notated score as its point of departure, makes analytic claims that do not depend on a narrative about the work's genesis or historical context, focuses mainly on pitch, and assumes some kind of coherence and arrives at a coherent view of the piece (where "view" literally indicates visual diagrams of the networks Lewin develops). And yet, Lewin's essay does not end with "an analysis"; rather, he brings the reader back to the moment of listening. After determining that the music's opening pentachord [9e28t] might form the basis for analysis, he states, "I went through the score myself, hunting for pentachord forms by ear." Later, Lewin rejects his first network model of the piece, which tracks the various pentachord events because, he writes, "I cannot say that I 'hear' the *Je* motive as a presence. I cannot say even that I hear some specific 'signature' of the move" (2007, 32). He suggests instead, "Rather than trying to make our transformations denote phenomenological presences in a blow-by-blow narrative, we can more comfortably regard them as ways of structuring an abstract space of P-forms through which the piece moves" (34). Lewin refuses to let musical events simply be, a methodological point he famously stressed elsewhere (2006).⁽³⁾ But if a given musical event never unequivocally *is*, the question becomes how to hear ways in which it might be otherwise. For Lewin, the answer lies in the analyst's ability to heed Rilke's famous injunction (as quoted by Lewin): "Du mußt dich ändern." You must change yourself.⁽⁴⁾

[12] But how does one change oneself? The very question implies something beyond or outside a Markov-chain of events that constitute a life. Just as the improvising performer refuses to accept that performance should aspire to realize a pre-given, ideal model, so the improvising analyst does not settle into an ideal model of listening. He or she develops theories and interpretations, only to replace them when they no longer provide access to new ways of listening to the music they take as their object.

[13] To return to my question as to whether there could be something like a freely improvisational analysis—perhaps the answer is no. But as theologian Jeremy S. Begbie has argued in his work on improvisation (Begbie 2000), that might not be a bad thing; constraints enable freedom. And as I noted earlier, the constraints on an analysis *extempore* are not so different from those of the performed music to which we are happy to grant the status of improvisation. Both cases compel the conclusion that through improvisation one confronts one's own ingrained habits. Whereas improvised musical performance enacts structural changes in the deployment of musical materials in an attempt to transcend and transform expressive habits, free analysis entails semi-directed, spontaneous changes in the structure of listening that transcend and transform receptive habits. Again, Bailey's comments on the attraction of improvisation could describe either case: "A lot of improvisors find improvisation worthwhile because of the possibilities. Things that can happen but perhaps rarely do. One of those things is

that you are ‘taken out of yourself.’ Something happens which so disorientates you that, for a time, which might only last for a second or two, your reactions and responses are not what they normally would be” (1993, 115).

[14] The idea that improvisation places performance and analysis in a reciprocal relationship may be worth exploring from a historical perspective. Within the Western classical tradition, the ascent of music analysis as a cultural practice in the nineteenth century coincides with the decline of improvised performances. This “cross-fade” comes after a long history in which the dichotomy between composition and improvisation was not strictly recognized. The development of that dichotomy points outward to “improvisational” others, as Laudan Nooshin (2003) has shown, but othering always has its effect at home as well. Perhaps a decrease in poietic difference resulting from a gradually solidified canon of masterworks and the suppression of improvised performance practices led some listeners to compensate by increasing the production of esthetic difference through analysis. The emergence of analysis as an independent discipline around the time that musical texts could be truly fixed by recording is also suggestive.⁽⁶⁾

[15] In any case, analysis *does* manifestly produce differences in the structure of listening. How many ways of hearing the “Tristan chord” do we have today? For many theorists, the idea that musical works have *a* structure has given way to a more flexible attitude. Joseph Dubiel, for example, writes, “The structure of a work is whatever happens in it—whatever happens, as characterized through the deployment of whatever concepts help to make the work’s identity specific and interesting *for us*” (1997, 314, my emphasis). Dubiel’s locution, “whatever concepts” recalls Bailey’s “whatever is available,” and the insistence that structure is linked to the analyst’s own concerns resonates with Lewin’s desire for self-change. This tight linkage of music-theoretical concepts, the self who uses them, and the notion of change, come out clearly in Steven Rings’s *Tonality and Transformation* (2011), the very title of which suggests that even the deeply entrenched collection of habits grouped together under the rubric “tonality” might be transformed through practices of analysis. Rings makes the connection explicit when he writes, “The hope is that . . . experiences may be defamiliarized in the process, making us acutely alive to them again, and allowing us to sense tonal effects with renewed intensity, and in new ways” (2011, 5). Here again, we return to the moment of listening and question how such moments might spontaneously become something other than what they have been.

[16] The search for the new is necessarily improvisational, but that does not make it completely accidental. If what I have suggested here is convincing as far as it goes, then music analytic studies might benefit from closer engagement with improvisation studies; the questions raised by the latter bear on the goals, methodology, epistemology, and ethics of analysis. No one need abandon the idea that analysis is valuable because it produces representable, communicable, and durable knowledge about its object, just as no one need claim that recordings of improvised performances are not valuable documents or as musical object in their own right. I only suggest that we can analyze music in an improvisational mode in order to unfix habits so that we might listen otherwise.

August Sheehy
University of Chicago
Department of Music
Goodspeed Hall
1010 E. 59th Street
Chicago, IL 60637

aasheehy@uchicago.edu

Works Cited

- Agawu, Kofi. 2004. “How We Got Out of Analysis, and How to Get Back In Again.” *Music Analysis* 23, no. 2–3: 267–86.
- Bailey, Derek. 1993. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. New York: Da Capo Press.

- Begbie, Jeremy. 2000. *Theology, Music and Time*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bent, Ian. 1987. *Analysis*. London, UK: Macmillan.
- Brown, Bill. 2000. "Thing Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1: 1–22.
- Cook, Nicholas. 1987. *A Guide to Musical Analysis*. London: J.M. Dent.
- Dubiel, Joseph. 1997 "On Getting Deconstructed." *The Journal of Musicology* 15, no. 3: 308–15.
- Goehr, Lydia. 2012. "The Agon of Improvising—On Broken Strings." Presented at "Perspectives on Musical Improvisation," Oxford University, September 12.
- Kramer, Lawrence. 1990. *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lewin, David. 2006. "Music Theory, Phenomenology, and Modes of Perception." In *Studies in Music with Text*, 66–121. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2007. "Making and Using a Pcset Network for Stockhausen's Klavierstück III." In *Musical Form and Transformation: Four Analytic Essays*, 16–67. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, George E. 2007. "Mobilitas Animi: Improvising Technologies, Intending Chance." *Parallax* 13, no. 4: 108–122.
- . 2013. "Critical Responses to 'Theorizing Improvisation (Musically)'" *Music Theory Online* 19, no. 2.
- Nattiez, Jean Jacques. 1990. *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nettl, Bruno. 1998. *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nooshin, Laudan. 2003. "Improvisation as 'Other': Creativity, Knowledge and Power: The Case of Iranian Classical Music." *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 128, no. 2: 242–96.
- Rehding, Alexander. 2003. *Hugo Riemann and the Birth of Modern Musical Thought*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 2001. *New Poems: A Revised Bilingual Edition*. Translated Edward Snow. New York: North Point Press.
- Rings, Steven. 2011. *Tonality and Transformation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Whittall, Arnold. 2013. "Analysis." In *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Oxford University Press. Accessed March 21. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e257>.

Footnotes

* Michael Gallope, Berthold Hoeckner, Erika Honisch, Marcelle Pierson, Braxton Shelley, Martha Sprigge, Paul Steinbeck, and Dan Wang read earlier versions of this essay. I would like to thank them for offering both encouragement and thoughtful criticisms.

[Return to text](#)

1. Consider the expansive literature cited by George E. Lewis (2013) in his response to this panel.

[Return to text](#)

2. Such moments are what Lawrence Kramer would call hermeneutic windows; see [Kramer 1990](#).

[Return to text](#)

3. The point forms a kernel of an extended appendix to the essay, in which Lewin takes issue with Nicholas Cook's assertion that "We have to think about what the music does to us [...] We need to describe it rather than speculate about it" (1987).

[Return to text](#)

4. In what might be considered his own micro-improvisation, Lewin actually misquotes the line that closes Rilke's "Archaischer Torso Apollos" (Archaic Torso of Apollo, 2001), which reads, "Du mußt dein Leben ändern." (You must change your life).

[Return to text](#)

5. The ideas in this paragraph recall Jean-Jacques Nattiez's (1990) tripartite semiotic model of music.

[Return to text](#)

6. It is of course recording that makes possible the very idea of combining traditional analytic practice with improvised music. But the historiographic framework I'm positing here suggests a plausible reason why the relationship has always been a fragile one.

[Return to text](#)

Copyright Statement

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for Music Theory. All rights reserved.

[1] Copyrights for individual items published in *Music Theory Online (MTO)* are held by their authors. Items appearing in *MTO* may be saved and stored in electronic or paper form, and may be shared among individuals for purposes of scholarly research or discussion, but may *not* be republished in any form, electronic or print, without prior, written permission from the author(s), and advance notification of the editors of *MTO*.

[2] Any redistributed form of items published in *MTO* must include the following information in a form appropriate to the medium in which the items are to appear:

This item appeared in *Music Theory Online* in [VOLUME #, ISSUE #] on [DAY/MONTH/YEAR]. It was authored by [FULL NAME, EMAIL ADDRESS], with whose written permission it is reprinted here.

[3] Libraries may archive issues of *MTO* in electronic or paper form for public access so long as each issue is stored in its entirety, and no access fee is charged. Exceptions to these requirements must be approved in writing by the editors of *MTO*, who will act in accordance with the decisions of the Society for Music Theory.

This document and all portions thereof are protected by U.S. and international copyright laws. Material contained herein may be copied and/or distributed for research purposes only.

Prepared by Carmel Raz, Editorial Assistant