Rehearsing Free Improvisation? An Ethnographic Study of Free Improvisers at Work^{*}

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ABSTRACT: Free improvisation is often presented as a form of musical creation where preliminary decisions or preexisting plans are kept to a strict minimum. However, long-standing groups and collaborations that span over many years are not uncommon in the free improvisation scene. One might wonder, then, how do these musicians work together? How do they manage to balance the openness, spontaneity, and unpredictability of free improvisation with the unstoppable normalizing force of familiarity? In order to answer these questions, we need to understand what is at stake during rehearsals of free improvisers. What do these improvisers do when they work and practice together, since they literally have *nothing* pre-established to rehearse, or at least no pre-composed material, such as standards, arrangements, chord charts, and themes?

This paper presents the results of an ethnographic study conducted with three Paris-based improvisation ensembles: the *Orchestre des Nouvelles Créations, Expérimentations et Improvisations* (“Orchestra of new creations, experimentations, and improvisations”); a duo comprising pianist Ève Risser and clarinetist Joris Rühl; and a quintet made up of the five founding members of the “Umlaut” collective. This data is used to show the different functions rehearsals have for these improvisers.

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1. Introduction

[1.1] Free improvisation has often been presented as an improvisational practice in which musicians try to reduce to a strict minimum the decisions made before performance, aiming at the spontaneous act of improvisation in and of itself, independent of the expression of any musical idiom. The guitarist and well-known improviser Derek Bailey took this stance, especially in the way he organized his Company Weeks festival, which brought together a number of musicians invited to improvise in constantly shifting configurations (Watson 2004). Derek Bailey has indeed

always endorsed an understanding of free improvisation as an art of ephemeral encounters—encounters which ideally take place under the watchful eye of an audience:

In this kind of playing I had always found the early stages of a group's development the most satisfying, the most stimulating. Once the music hardens its identity to the point where it becomes susceptible to self-analysis, description and, of course, reproduction, everything changes. The group, having got its act together, discovered "our music," reaches a stage where, although it might continue to develop musically, and be more marketable—an almost irresistible combination—nevertheless at this point the music becomes less relevant to, less dependent upon, improvisation. (Bailey 1993, 133)

According to Derek Bailey, then, it would be incoherent to want, on the one hand, to freely improvise collectively and, on the other, to create a musical ensemble that is in any way stable and permanent. In other words, it would be impossible to *truly* freely improvise repeatedly with the same people. In this view, free improvisation is therefore entirely the work of ephemeral and unique performances. Such a view immediately raises two questions. First, is it really the case that, after playing together for a time, an improvisation group will tend to "harden its [musical] identity to the point where it becomes susceptible to self-analysis, description and, of course, reproduction?" Second, if this is indeed the case, in what ways exactly does this make the music "less dependent upon improvisation?"

[1.2] These questions are that much more important given that, *pace* Bailey, the world of freely improvised music is not only (and perhaps not even primarily) made of first-time musical encounters that occur without any kind of preparation. Indeed, a great number of well-established improvisation groups do exist, some of which have a long shared history,⁽¹⁾ and whose music is typically classified as "free" improvisation. Then to what extent, and how, can we say that these groups are freely improvising when they perform together? Bailey's somewhat radical view, which equates improvisation to sheer spontaneity and fluidity, could be contrasted to a more nuanced view, such as that proposed in Jeff Pressing's work on the psychology of improvisation. According to Pressing (1984), free improvisation is perhaps more a matter of deliberately avoiding reliance on an explicit *referent*—understood as a pre-established temporal structure or formal schema (such as a jazz standard)⁽²⁾—than it is a matter of avoiding any kind of *references* to existing aesthetics and musical idioms, or to the shared memories and conventions free improvisers build over time.⁽³⁾ In other words, if the music of long-standing improvisation groups is still recognized as free improvisation, it is not only because of the festivals where they play or the labels which sell their music, but because such groups do not use preexisting "tunes" as a springboard for their collective improvisations, and do not explicitly "pre-commit" to certain temporal structures,⁽⁴⁾ musical materials, or stylistic references before a given performance.

[1.3] However, the fact that free improvisation groups do not explicitly rely on preexisting tunes or pre-commit as stated, does not preclude that some elements may be predetermined in such improvised performances. Indeed, although some improvisation groups only play together on stage in the space-time of a concert, it is however much more common for these groups to also play together *between* concerts and organize, with varying frequency, work sessions that they sometimes—paradoxically—call "rehearsals."⁽⁵⁾ It is precisely this strange paradox that I will address in the present article: What do these improvisers do when they rehearse, given that, by definition, they literally have *nothing pre-established* to rehearse,⁽⁶⁾ or at least no pre-composed material, such as standards, arrangements, chord charts, and themes? What exactly is at stake in this time of collective work?

[1.4] In order to address these questions, I followed the work of three free improvisation ensembles from the Parisian music scene: the *Orchestre des Nouvelles Créations, Expérimentations et Improvisations* (ONCEIM—"Orchestra of new creations, experimentations, and improvisations"), which includes approximately twenty-five musicians under the artistic direction of pianist Frédéric Blondy, and devotes much of its activity to free improvisation;⁽⁷⁾ a duo comprising pianist Ève

Risser and clarinetist Joris Rühl (Risser-Rühl duo); and a quintet made up of the five founding members of the “Umlaut” collective (Pierre-Antoine Badaroux, saxophone; Sébastien Beliah, double bass; Antonin Gerbal, drums; Ève Risser, piano; Joris Rühl, clarinet). Because their shared histories vary in length (the Risser-Rühl duo was founded in early 2009, the ONCEIM in late 2011, and the Umlaut quintet played its first concert in 2015) and because their size ranges from a duo to an orchestra, following these three ensembles allowed me to analyze free improvisers’ rehearsals in very different contexts. Over the course of my ethnographic study, I collected the following data:

1. ONCEIM: video documentation of a three-day residency prior to a concert at the Densités festival in Fresnes-en-Woëvre (October 2015), two short rehearsals in May 2016, two rehearsals in June 2016, one rehearsal in August 2017, and interviews with twenty musicians of the orchestra regarding their improvisation practice (November 2015–January 2016).
2. Risser-Rühl duo: video documentation of a working session in October 2014 and interviews with both musicians after this session. In addition, I organized individual listening sessions wherein the musicians commented on recordings of eight of their own improvisations (half recorded in 2009, in the very first two-day session they did together, and the other half in 2014). I asked them in particular to indicate for each passage if they considered it to be representative or not of the duo’s music. (January 2016–June 2016)
3. Umlaut quintet: video documentation of the group’s first rehearsal and audio recording of their first concert (June 2015). In addition, I asked two musicians of the quintet to segment the improvisations made during the rehearsal and the concert into different parts. (June 2016)

[1.5] It goes without saying that such a limited corpus cannot account for the wide variety of aesthetics and conceptions in today’s improvised musical scene. In particular, the musicians I studied all stem from a specific tradition of improvised music, which favors a so-called “non-idiomatic” approach to free improvisation, claiming freedom from the preexisting idioms used in other forms of improvisation.⁽⁸⁾ But despite this obvious aesthetic variety, the creative processes underlying these different improvisational practices likely lie along a continuum. As many authors have argued, pure improvisation or pure composition does not exist; there is rather a continuum of musical practices that combine spontaneity and predetermination to various degrees (see for example [Nettl 1974](#), [Dahlhaus 1979](#), [Pressing 1984](#), and [Benson 2003](#)). As such, I believe that this initial inquiry into the collective working practices of free improvisers can pave the way for a better understanding of the creative processes at play in free improvisation groups, regardless of the specific aesthetics they favor.

[1.6] The various data collected over the course of my study show that rehearsals have three main functions for improvisers. First, rehearsals are a time of practice when musicians familiarize themselves with the specificities of a given group, both by simulating concert conditions and exploring various musical situations through exercises or “constrained” improvisations. Second, rehearsals provide a setting for musicians to shape and define the group’s musical identity. Third, rehearsals work as a forum where musicians negotiate individual preferences and differing conceptions of improvisation through performance and discussion. In the following paragraphs, I will thus discuss in detail what free improvisers actually do together when they meet for rehearsals, and show the importance that such rehearsals have in regulating their collective practice.

2. Rehearsals as practice time: simulation, exploration and familiarization

[2.1] Free improvisers’ rehearsals do not dramatically differ from other performers’ rehearsals (see, for example, [Bayley 2011](#) on the rehearsals of a string quartet), in the sense that they are first and foremost moments of practice, laying the groundwork for potential public performances:

We rehearsed a lot at the beginning; and once we had something we were happy with, in which we felt more comfortable, we wanted to play some concerts, so we started looking for opportunities to take our music on stage.⁽⁹⁾ (interview with Ève Risser)

In other words, even if free improvisers sometimes rehearse just for the pleasure of playing together or meeting with new musicians, improvisations performed in rehearsals often act as preparatory steps for upcoming public performances which, in a way, are their main *raison d'être*. This is manifest in the belief held by several of the musicians I have interviewed that free improvisation only really happens when an audience is present:

I think that our job is really to play this music as much as possible, and if possible in front of an audience, because I'm convinced that that is the true improvisation setting. I actually have a theory about that: when I play for an audience, when there's the actual physical presence of a human being listening in the same room, that puts me in what I call "real time." That listener represents real time—I can't go back, I can't skip ahead. I'm confronted with this listener, and the listening changes that instant into a moment, in real-time duration, and, even, in the real world. I mean, the listener actually represents the entire world for me, and I really feel this very strongly. And as long as I have that feeling, I will keep doing concerts. (interview with OM11)

I have to admit that practicing improvisation alone, without anyone to listen, in a kind of vacuum, that doesn't really speak to me—even though it can sometimes be good practice. (interview with OM29)

[2.2] Many rehearsals are indeed organized with a more or less imminent concert in mind. As such, a first aspect of the improvisers' practice during their rehearsals is to simulate as closely as possible the *conditions* of the upcoming concert situation. This is quite obvious when it comes to the improvisations' duration: musicians tend to perform improvisations of approximately the same length as the concert's intended duration (typically 40–45 minutes, the conventional format of a "set"). This work on duration is particularly crucial for the ONCEIM: because of the large number of musicians involved, it can be difficult for the improvisers to collectively "navigate" from one musical idea to the next, which sometimes leads the music to naturally fade out after a first sequence has been explored. Hence, their artistic director, Frédéric Blondy, often urges the musicians to improvise for a typical "concert duration" in rehearsal:

We tear it up in concert mode, about 40 minutes. (October 2015)

We try to stick with 40 minutes . . . concert format, you know? (October 2015)

We aim for concert duration. (October 2015)

Similarly, the length of the concert was one of the first questions raised during the Umlaut Quintet's rehearsal:

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: How long are we supposed to play tomorrow?

Ève Risser: There will be three different groups, so we can play 40 minutes, or maybe 35 minutes.

Antonin Gerbal: Ok, so let's improvise for at least 40 minutes, right?

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: Yes, we'll play one improvisation of 40 minutes and that'll do it for today.

[2.3] In addition to duration, musicians also rehearse others aspects of the upcoming public performance in their preparatory sessions. For example, musicians try to come to the rehearsals with the same instruments that they will use for the concert. The fact that the drummer of the Umlaut Quintet almost cancelled their rehearsal because he only had a very limited drum kit available (a snare drum and two cymbals) clearly shows that, for him, the rehearsal was only useful insofar as it could properly simulate this aspect of the concert:

Antonin Gerbal: I'm afraid it won't be very useful . . . we won't be able to really rehearse for tomorrow, it will be too different from what I'll play during the concert.
Ève Risser: I know you won't be able to play the music you'll play tomorrow, but we can still listen to each other the way we will tomorrow.
Antonin Gerbal: Yes, the difficulty is that I can only play the bare bones of what I'll play tomorrow. I'll have less possibilities, but I can still work on what I'll do tomorrow, that's still worth it.

[2.4] During the rehearsals, musicians also tend to position themselves according to their usual position on stage, in order to simulate the way they will actually hear each other during the performance. This was the case in the rehearsal of the Risser-Rühl duet, where the two musicians spent some time finding adequate spacing in the pianist's tiny studio:

Joris Rühl: If I stay here, I'll be too loud for you. It won't be like that tomorrow, I'd better move.
Ève Risser: Yes, try to find a place a bit farther from the piano.

This issue is even more acute for the ONCEIM, where the positioning of the musicians has a direct impact on what each improviser will actually hear (and on what she or he will not be able to hear):

Rehearsals, first off, that's really the point: getting used to where we are on stage so that we're not lost on the night of the concert. (interview with Cyprien Busolini)

[2.5] Lastly, musicians try to mimic the irreversibility of performance time in their rehearsals, by not interrupting the improvisation once it has started, even when difficulties arise. The importance of this aspect clearly appeared during the ONCEIM residency in October 2015. After having decided to perform an improvisation "in concert mode," the musicians started to play for about two minutes (a very quiet beginning, with only two or three musicians of the orchestra actually playing) before being interrupted by Frédéric Blondy—a decision that was strongly contested by some of the musicians:

Frédéric Blondy: Can we start again? That wasn't a good start, I think . . . the beginning wasn't clear.
[Chatter within the orchestra]
OM17: Instead of just stopping, we'd better try to find strategies or solutions to see how we can continue playing after that kind of beginning!

There is thus a minimal set of musical elements—more related to the *conditions* of the upcoming performance than to its content—that are explicitly rehearsed by free improvisers during their rehearsals. In other words, during their rehearsals, free improvisers practice the specific spatiotemporal framework in which their musical actions will take place when they have to play on stage.

[2.6] At the same time, the improvisers' rehearsals are also used as means of exploration. This exploration is mainly achieved through imposing specific constraints on their improvisations, which David Borgo refers to as "handicapping:"

Handicapping refers to a self-imposed challenge designed to limit material or techniques available to the improviser. These may be conceptual or even physical handicaps imposed on the performer. Conceptual handicaps could involve playing only one note or within a specified range or aiming for a uniform mood to an improvisation. (Borgo 2002, 174)

The Risser-Rühl duet often performed such exercises in their first rehearsal. Many of the improvisations from their 2009 rehearsals had an explicitly exploratory function, clearly understood as such by the musicians. Two brief exchanges, fortunately preserved on the recordings made by the musicians of these early rehearsals, precisely show how the musicians differentiate “musical” improvisations from “constrained” improvisations (e.g., systematically trying to imitate each other), which are exercises to try out different situations, without paying too much attention to the overall result:

Ève Risser: Should we **develop an idea, or just play?**

Joris Rühl: We can stay with an idea until one of us decides to change. We’re only doing breaks . . .

Ève Risser: Breaks?

Joris Rühl: I mean no slow transitions . . . we have to react immediately when the other changes.

Ève Risser: Yeah, that’s pretty good! It’s like units: we try an idea, we see what happens, and then we change.

Joris Rühl: Yeah, that’s what the exercise is about. (May 2009 rehearsal)

Joris Rühl: Wait, I just have a question: **are we doing something more musical or are we really just working?**

Should we stay awhile in the different situations so we can try things out?

Ève Risser: I was doing something more musical, but we should decide.

Joris Rühl: Let’s work, then. We can start from where we left off.

Ève Risser: Yes, but there I had started again. This time, you start and I’ll try to imitate you. (June 2009 rehearsal)

[2.7] ONCEIM musicians also did a number of constrained improvisations during their rehearsal in October 2015. These restrictions took the form of interaction schemas (e.g., only interacting with one’s immediate neighbors), material constraints (e.g., improvise with a granular texture), dynamics (e.g., play only pianissimo or fortissimo), or temporal structures (e.g., one musician starts alone before the rest of the orchestra joins in). A more spectacular example was one of their June 2016 rehearsals, in which the entire rehearsal was one gigantic constrained improvisation where the musicians were supposed to improvise continuously for three hours, with only one person at a time allowed to leave for a break. These constrained improvisations were intended to help the orchestra explore new or less familiar collective situations. For example, by forcing themselves to play for a very long time, the ONCEIM musicians could try new things (e.g., letting one musician develop a chordal sequence over a pedal point for a few minutes, as shown in **Video Example 1**)⁽¹⁰⁾ that they probably would not have tried in a standard “concert” format:

Frédéric Blondy: Great work! The great thing with this very long format is that we can experiment with many different things, make mistakes, try again, etc. We let ourselves play things that we wouldn’t play in a shorter improvisation. Maybe when we play for 30 or 40 minutes, we aim at something tighter. But here, if there is a half an hour that isn’t so good, it’s not really a problem, it allows us to explore many things and it’s also interesting to see what we can make of those moments, how we feel inside. We need to do that again! (June 2016 rehearsal)

Similarly, the constraint of playing only fortissimo in one improvisation, or on the contrary only pianissimo in the improvisation that followed, clearly echoes a discussion the musicians had that morning about the limited dynamic range of their improvisations:

OM29: At the moment, we’re not doing large crescendos anymore. We’re always playing mezzo-forte or mezzo-piano.

OM22: It's true that we're not playing very loud!
 OM4: We could also play much softer. Yesterday, when the string players were improvising alone, we heard that they could play really pianissimo, and it would be nice for them if, once in a while, we played at a much lower dynamic.
 OM29: Yeah, that's what I'm saying: we're always playing mezzo, and we could go much louder or much softer. For now, it sounds as if we were constantly hesitating.
 OM4: Yes, that's probably something we need to work on.

[2.8] Many musicians also underscored the importance these constrained improvisations have both for their collective practice and for their individual repertoire. Improvisers seem to take advantage of these moments to search for individual solutions (for example, in terms of instrumental techniques) to situations that might arise in the course of a given improvisation:

I found those constrained improvisations very useful. Each time we do a short exercise like that, it forces us to go elsewhere than where we would naturally go in an improvisation. By simply restricting ourselves to playing pianissimo, for example, we listen to each other very differently, and new things emerge. So it's very important to do stuff like that, just to be aware that it's something that can also happen in our improvisations. (interview with OM13)

We need to work through a wide array of situations in order to be comfortable with almost anything. That way, if the music goes here or there, I know that I will have the tools to play with the others, rather than just stopping because I don't know what to do. (interview with OM6)

Video Example 2, in which the trumpet player appears to be searching for the most imperceptible sounds he can produce with his instrument during the "pianissimo" improvisation, provides a nice illustration of this exploratory behavior:

I found a few new sounds during that improvisation. They're not necessarily great sounds, but I think they could work in that kind of context. (interview with OM22)

[2.9] More generally, even if musicians just improvise without any kind of pre-established script or constraint, they still see the improvisations done in rehearsal as having a specific "work quality" that fosters an exploratory attitude. In other words, an improvisation that takes place in rehearsal can stick as closely as possible to the conditions of an upcoming public performance and yet still maintain an overall exploratory feel that is typical of the rehearsal situation:

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: I thought many times while we were playing that this wasn't a concert, and I was more in the spirit of trying different things, to see what worked. In a concert, there are things I wouldn't have done . . . for example, I would have continued to play longer in some situations . . . Here, I was telling myself: I'm going to stop what I'm doing and I'm going to try to interact with someone else to see what we can do together.
 Sébastien Beliah: I played in the same spirit. I was really thinking that we were in a rehearsal. (Umlaut Quintet, June 2015 rehearsal)

This exploratory behavior has clear consequences for the music itself, which can be shown by comparing the structure of the improvisation made in rehearsal to that of the concert improvisation the following day. To that end, in June 2016 I asked two musicians of the quintet to segment each improvisation into different "parts" or "moments": they heard twenty-one sections in the 42-minute rehearsal improvisation (i.e., an average duration of 2' for each section) while, according to

them, the 40-minute concert only had twelve sections (i.e., an average duration of 3'30" for each section). The fact that the collective discourse shifted more frequently in the rehearsal than in the concert is a clear indication of the former's exploratory nature, as the musicians strove to go through a large number of different musical situations (in terms of the sound material or interaction pattern used⁽¹¹⁾) in the limited time they had.

[2.10] In other words, in the "safe" and intimate setting of a rehearsal, musicians can take more risks and try more things than they would in a concert, where they often want to present a faithful, characteristic snapshot of their music:

Sometimes, in rehearsal, I feel like we try to do really lousy things just to see if they could work. In a concert, we know that we've already tried those things four times and it won't be good the fifth time either! I think that in rehearsal, we have a more humble attitude, and we can try things that we know won't work, just to see if, with time, we do them differently. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation F)

It often happens that we have these searching moments, thank goodness—that's why it's a rehearsal! (Joris Rühl, comment on Improvisation J)

When we're rehearsing, I try to force myself to change the way the piano's prepared for each improvisation, I allow myself to be surprised by the sounds it will make. But for a concert, I have a kind of standard preparation, which allows me to react quickly to any sound. (interview with OM33)

During the rehearsals in Fresnes, I tried to play with everybody. Before each improvisation, I would tell myself: "now, I'll play with him or her . . ." And of course that's not something I do when we play in concert. (interview with OM1)

[2.11] Finally, rehearsals are also times when improvisers get to know each other (or get to know each other better), thus eliminating the trial and error typical of many first-time musical encounters between improvisers:

Ève Risser: We've already gone through the first few awkward minutes of the improvisation, that's always a good thing, we won't have to do it again on stage tomorrow! (Umlaut Quintet, June 2015)

In this respect, it is noteworthy that, contrary to Derek Bailey's position, the large majority of the improvisers I interviewed were not particularly keen on the idea of meeting a musician on stage with whom they have never played before, without any preparatory work:

In improvised encounters, you can't go very far, the music is often quite superficial. Each musician does his own thing in his corner, and once in a while, they meet in the boxing ring. I prefer playing with groups, because generally, when you're playing in a group, it's because you like the people in it! (interview with OM29)

I really like working with groups, I'm not such a big fan of improvised encounters. I did it for a while, but now I'm much more interested in creating new groups and working with them over the long haul. (interview with OM22)

I like meeting new musicians, but . . . that's not something

I like to do on stage. I prefer to do that without having to think that we are performing for an audience. (interview with OM3)

I'm not doing many musical encounters on stage. In an improvised encounter, each musician must clearly state his own position while allowing for the other's musical interventions to exist. But the exchange of ideas is much more limited than in an established group. (interview with OM25)

[2.12] It is indeed often during rehearsals—through the combination of a simulation of concert conditions and an exploration of a large array of musical situations—that musicians familiarize themselves with the specificities of a given improvisation group: the artistic personalities of the musicians involved, the instruments they use, their skills, and so forth. This is manifest in the case of the ONCEIM. The ONCEIM musicians are all involved in many improvisation projects, most of them with small groups (from duos to quintets). As such, they have many opportunities to develop their general ability to improvise in a small group context simply by performing frequently with other musicians. Even if the music differs widely from one project to another, the core skills required to perform in such contexts are more or less the same (coordination, reactivity, close listening, etc.). However, the ONCEIM project is quite unique due to the size of the ensemble, which means that the musicians do not have other opportunities to freely improvise in an orchestral setting. Rehearsals are thus moments when the musicians actually learn what it is to improvise in a very large ensemble—something that is notoriously difficult to do.⁽¹²⁾

[2.13] The large scale of the ONCEIM indeed creates many specific issues. First, improvising with the ONCEIM means not being able to actually hear everyone because of masking effects that might arise or, more simply, because of the distance between the musicians. This leads the ONCEIM members to develop new listening strategies:

I think it is important to use rehearsals to find ways to listen to the others in such a crowded sonic landscape . . . to find what it is that we really need to listen to. (interview with OM6)

When we are improvising with the ONCEIM, we need to give up on the idea of listening to everything. So we have to make decisions in a very different way . . . it is a system that doesn't work the same way as a group, a small group. (interview with OM19)

It's impossible to listen to everything . . . so it's like a game, you're making choices about what you're going to listen to. It's like in a Bach fugue: you have to learn to navigate between the different voices, because it's almost impossible to follow all the voices at the same time. (interview with OM15)

[2.14] Second, playing within the ONCEIM means accepting very limited agency over the sounding result. Because of the complexity of the interactions taking place in such a large ensemble, it is almost impossible to feel "in control," for example, by anticipating the effects a given action will have on the group or by pushing the ensemble in a new direction:

When I'm introducing a new sonic event in the ONCEIM, I never know what will happen. Even though we know each other very well, the reaction will always be different because of the number of musicians involved. So I never know what the reaction will be, or even if there will be a reaction at all. So I have to play without any kind of anticipation, which is not really how I improvise in groups with fewer people. (interview with OM25)

In a trio or a quartet, all the decisions I'm making have an immediate impact on the music. With the ONCEIM, when you're making a decision, it may be a full minute before the others start reacting. So you can't really impose your voice, like you would do in a small group. So I've deliberately developed a strategy when I'm playing with the ONCEIM: I throw out a new idea or new material and then immediately stop playing to hear more clearly what will happen. (interview with OM19)

In this passage, I started a new idea, but the music took a direction that I didn't like at all. I couldn't stop what I was doing, because the other musicians were starting to react to what I was doing in a way that I didn't expect at all. I didn't know how to stop, I was really feeling uncomfortable. (interview with OM34)

This feeling of powerlessness generally leads the musicians to approach the performance in a very different way than they would in a small-group setting, by ascribing greater agency to the music itself than to their own individual actions:

OM31: I think that in the ONCEIM, we have to let go and follow the music where it wants to take us, rather than where we want to go individually. (October 2015 rehearsal)

[2.15] Third, the large number of musicians involved necessarily prompts improvisers to play much less than they would in a smaller group:

I think I improvise with the ONCEIM in a much less dense way. (interview with OM22)

When there are twenty-five people playing, you're trying not to take the whole space. So you're playing less, you're more in support, providing others with the sonic material they need. (interview with OM17)

This has a strong influence on the behavior of the musicians during performances. For example, musicians seem to favor a more conscious, almost strategic approach, restricting themselves to interventions they think will be "useful" for the ensemble, and avoiding entering the state of flow they typically associate with the improvisation experience:

I believe that I think more when I play with the ONCEIM, it's maybe less natural or spontaneous. I feel like I don't have easy access to the overall sound of the ensemble, and that I need to make an effort to imagine it . . . it's a bit complicated to explain! It's very different from what happens in smaller groups, where I will let myself go, without too much thinking. (interview with OM13)

When I'm improvising alone or with two or three other people, I'm often in a trance-like state. With the ONCEIM, I never really let go. . . I'm always paying attention to what is going to happen, to decide when and how I'll play . . . it's very different. (interview with OM33)

In the ONCEIM, I'm much more conscious of what I'm doing, even if there are also moments where I just let myself go. (interview with OM25)

For me, playing with the ONCEIM is a highly tactical thing. There are so many musicians that I can't let myself go. In some improvisation concerts, you can be carried

away by a gesture, and keep doing it to see where it's going to take you. That's not possible in the ONCEIM. (interview with OM28)

Over the course of their many rehearsals, the musicians of the ONCEIM thus progressively construct a very specific improvising behavior, learn to play less often, to make decisions that are deliberate but also colored by a certain feeling of powerlessness, and to make choices about what they listen to and what they deliberately ignore.

[2.16] In short, rehearsals play a critical role in the way free improvisers develop individual behaviors and collective strategies in response to the specific problems raised by their groups. It is during rehearsals that ONCEIM musicians learn how to improvise in an ensemble where it is not possible to actually hear everyone; and it is during their rehearsals that Ève Risser and Joris Rühl learn how to blend two instruments that are very different in their respective timbres. To paraphrase Helmut Lachenmann's well-known definition of composition, creating a free improvisation group is like building a new instrument;⁽¹³⁾ and it is in rehearsal that the musicians learn to play it.

3. Finding a shared territory: rehearsals as a space for defining the group identity

[3.1] Many of the musicians I studied indicated that the music of the various groups in which they play inevitably ends up being standardized or homogenized:

Maybe it's like this in all groups, but in the improvisation groups I play in, and which have been around awhile, it's always been that way. After a while, the group's territory and sound, what I call the musical space of the group, becomes obvious—it's a world, a universe unto itself. You can twist it, play with the limits, try to destroy it or rebuild it, or try to change it. I think it's practically indestructible, both socially and musically. (interview with OM11)

With two other musicians, we had a project called *R.Mutt*. It became a kind of oral composition . . . we progressively defined a set of sounds and improvised with that. (interview with OM19)

I've got a band called *DDJ*, it's really a free rock band. When we're playing concerts, we never discuss the music, we just improvise . . . but we've played together for so long . . . our way of playing is more or less the same each time, our interactions don't change a lot from one concert to another. When I'm doing a concert with *DDJ*, I know what the music is going to be. (interview with OM13)

For example, my duo *Viola to Viola* almost has an identity of its own, and it's not exactly the combination of our two identities. Maybe that duo can't really play another kind of music . . . or maybe it will eventually change, but at a much slower speed than the way we're individually changing. (interview with OM6)

With *Dans les Arbres*, we all have a kind of sonic repertoire—basic sounds that we know will work in the context of this group. For me, it's some specific multiphonics or certain abrupt screams. So we have our licks, our standards, things that work really well . . . but at the same time, we're always trying to distort them, like you would do in jazz. (interview with OM8)

All of these statements would seem to largely confirm Derek Bailey's (1993, 133) remark that, after some time playing together, an improvisation group's musical identity tends to "harden to the point where it becomes susceptible to self-analysis, description and, of course, reproduction." But is such a musical identity, as Bailey thought, truly incompatible with the practice of free improvisation?

[3.2] Of course, one could say that this standardization process is the inevitable result of the normalizing force of familiarity. In other words, playing music together creates a certain number of shared aesthetic expectations and interactive reflexes, from which the musical identity of the group emerges. However, the data I collected shows that the construction of this collective musical identity is often actively sought by the musicians. Indeed, far from being solely the result of a sedimentation process that works slowly over the long term, this identity is on the contrary one of the objectives of the group's work:

I think that one of the goals of collective work is also, and foremost, to create a group sound—even if that means sometimes doing the same things or doing improvisations which are, quote unquote, "very close" or "similar" . . . we're working to have a defined sound which is recognizable, which we can use as a foundation. (interview with OM4)

This also explains why most of the musicians I interviewed said that, after a while, they tended to rehearse less with their improvisation groups, precisely because they felt that the artistic territory of the group was now established in a satisfying way:

It's important to work with your improvisation groups up to a certain point. When you need to determine the kind of music you'll be playing, yes, that's important. But there are some groups which I don't work with anymore. For example, with *Hubbub*, we just meet for concerts. But at the beginning, we really did a lot of rehearsals together! (interview with OM25)

The construction of a musical identity for a group is thus precisely what is at stake in rehearsals: that is precisely what the group rehearses and refines in these rehearsals, and it is this musical identity that it *performs* when it improvises.

[3.3] The listening sessions organized from January to June 2016 with the Risser-Rühl—in which I asked them to indicate for each passage of several improvisations recorded either in 2009 or in 2014 if they considered it to be representative or not of the duo's music—made it possible to bring to light the process of artistic definition which underlies the work of many free improvisation groups. The results of these sessions are reflected in **Figures 1a** and **1b**, which are based on the grouping of the musicians' comments into the following three categories.⁽¹⁴⁾

1. The musician deems that the passage he or she is hearing is typical for the duo (sequences in yellow).
2. The musician deems that the passage he or she is hearing is possible in the context of the duo, but is nonetheless unusual in at least one aspect (sequences in orange).
3. The musician deems that the passage he or she is hearing is exceptional for the duo and/or would never happen in a concert (sequences in red).

Improvisations B, C, D and E (Figure 1a) are from the musicians' first session together (in May 2009),⁽¹⁵⁾ which they recorded so that they could listen back to them and discuss them.

Improvisations F, G, I and J (Figure 1b) are taken from the October 2014 session, which I attended and recorded.⁽¹⁶⁾

[3.4] These figures show that a standardization process took place between 2009 and 2014: passages judged to be frankly atypical or non-representative (in aesthetic or stylistic terms) are very frequent in the improvisations of 2009, while this type of passage has almost completely disappeared in the improvisations of 2014. Furthermore, there are many passages deemed to be very representative of

the duo's music (in the sense that they show musical situations that one would typically hear at one of their concerts) in the improvisations done in rehearsal in 2014, while these passages were rather rare in the rehearsal improvisations of 2009.

[3.5] Of course, one should remember that these two musicians made their comments in 2016 and that, as such, there is inevitably a dimension of retrospective reconstruction. In other words, what the musicians found typical in 2016 may very well not be what they would have found typical in 2009 or in 2014. One could even wonder if they would have found anything typical in 2009, since the very idea of typicality only makes sense in relation to a repetition, and the 2009 improvisations were part of their very first session together. However, the comparison of typicality ratings is still highly illuminating for three reasons. First, simply by comparing the number of sequences the musicians identify as typical in their 2009 improvisations and in their 2014 improvisations, it is clear that both musicians feel, rightly or wrongly, that the music they improvised in 2014 was much more standardized (i.e., made up of the kind of passages that occur frequently in the duo's performances) than the music they did together in 2009. Second, most of the time, they agree on which sequences are typical of their playing, and which are not, particularly for the more recent improvisations. This means that, at least in 2016, the two improvisers shared a stable representation of what their music as a duo was, and what was characteristic of their playing and what was not. Third, the sequences they identified as highly typical in their 2009 and 2014 improvisations share many musical characteristics. This can be heard clearly in **Sound Examples 1** and **2** (the beginnings of Improvisations D and G, respectively), which provide short excerpts of passages that were immediately identified by both musicians as highly typical of their improvised performances, and which are both built on long held sounds, sometimes in unison, sometimes one semi-tone apart.

[3.6] In other words, over the course of these individual listening sessions, the musicians were clearly able to identify musical characteristics they see as "typical" for their improvisations. This characterization mainly describes the type of sound material used (relatively calm, continuous, static, non-narrative, with great attention to the euphonic dimension of the sounds used), the interaction principles that regulate their collective discourse (rather imitational, in that they play with aural illusions in which the listener is unable to assign sound events to the acoustic source that produces them), and the formal processes that underlie the evolution of the improvisation (favoring either very gradual transformation of material or extremely rapid shifts from one musical state to another). And while these musical elements only account for a small part of the improvisations they did early on, they account for a much larger portion of their 2014 improvisations. In other words, these musical elements progressively grew in importance, to the point where they became the core of the duo's identity. Conversely, passages that were very active and discursive, with the two instruments easily recognizable (as in **Sound Example 3**, taken from improvisation B), or passages in which more noisy sounds dominate (as in **Sound Example 4**, taken from Improvisation C), were immediately discarded as highly atypical of their improvised performances as a duo, and are nowhere to be found in their 2014 improvisations.

[3.7] The ONCEIM members had greater difficulties describing precisely the ensemble's identity, but they all spoke about the particular "sound" of the orchestra, which was forged over the course of rehearsals:

I increasingly think that this is a group which has its own sound. And furthermore, I think that it would make our lives a lot easier to say that when we play with the ONCEIM, we play this specific sound, almost like a traditional blues musician who doesn't know how to play anything else, or, at least, plays as if he doesn't know how to play anything else. (interview with OM1)

Over time, there was a kind of "ONCEIM sound" which became clearly established in our improvisations. (interview with OM11)

There's definitely this idea of a sound that we want to

reproduce all the time, this idea of a drone and a mass that changes slowly. (interview with OM17)

[3.8] The “ONCEIM sound” is firstly the result of the musicians’ individual tendency to hold more or less complex sounds for long stretches:

We often have very similar textures, made up of held sounds. (interview with OM29)

There are things that come back a lot, for example the fact that we play long sounds, held notes, we played a lot of pieces like that at the very beginning. [. . .] The most typical thing for the orchestra is long sounds! (interview with OM26)

This technique is indeed clearly identified by the musicians as the most efficient response to the difficulties of large-group improvisation: first, held sounds can be easily combined together to produce a nice overall, shimmering texture; second, they are seen by the musicians as more “neutral” than more active interventions (e.g., playing motives, discontinuous impacts, etc.), thus allowing for other things to happen at the same time elsewhere in the orchestra:

I’m often playing simple notes, maybe just a little bit distorted in their sound. It seems to me that this kind of playing leaves a lot of room for the others, maybe more than if I were using a more complex instrumental technique or if I were playing something busier . . . just playing a long note, and then varying the length, the dynamic . . . that’s something I often used with the ONCEIM. (interview with OM13)

Often, we end up using more or less neutral sonic material, which allows us to navigate in any direction. (interview with OM6)

If you want to specify what I’m doing within the ONCEIM, it’s either a sound that is interesting in itself, either something completely neutral, as devoid as possible of any intention or meaning . . . something that can be added to the other sounds to produce an orchestral sound. (interview with OM22)

Sometimes, when we don’t know what to do, there are things that come back, for example we do that background thing, with long held notes. You know . . . it’s true that that’s a cliché I’ve heard in many different improvisation groups. But there’s this thing in the ONCEIM which is really nice, and which means that, in this case, numbers play in our favor—because when you start doing that kind of thing, you’ll end up with this massive sound, and you know it’s beautiful. And I think everyone knows this, feels it, in an instinctive way. (interview with OM3)

Video Example 3 (which compiles several successive short excerpts from their October 2015 concert) illustrates the importance these “drone-like” textures—made of either held sounds or repeated sounds—have in ONCEIM improvisations, either as a supporting layer for other kinds of interventions or as a full orchestral sound.

[3.9] However, the “ONCEIM sound” is also the result of the musicians’ tendency to adopt more or less determined roles within the orchestra.⁽¹⁷⁾ Some musicians endorse a “leading” role, in the sense that they tend to initiate new ideas or suggest elements that contrast with a given collective texture. For example, the passages from the October 2015 concert compiled in **Video Example 4** show that the double bassists often play the role of jump-starting the group:

Sometimes, if I feel that the orchestra is drifting toward something a bit monotonous, I try to shake things up a bit with my instrument, to send the orchestra in another direction. For example, I might play a sharp, loud sound. So sometimes, I'm playing a sound not for itself but for the effect it will have on others. (interview with OM25)

I feel that, within the orchestra, I'm part of the group of musicians who have a thorough practice of free improvisation. So yes, I think that I'm part of the musicians who, in some situations, have a somehow more leading role. (interview with OM3)

Others mainly restrict themselves to a "follower" position—complementing or developing what they hear in the orchestra:

When we are in a sound texture that is rich and slowly moving, and in which it is still possible to add new things, yes, I feel really good. I never try to have the orchestra change direction, to suggest an idea that strongly contrasts what is happening at that time in the orchestra. I rather try to emphasize what's happening elsewhere or amplify what is already there. (interview with OM13)

Given the constraints of my instrument, it's difficult for me to start with something very clear. So often, I'm more of a follower, I don't start new ideas. I rather try to fit into something that's already there, or to react to something that's there by playing something in contrast, to open other paths for the orchestra (interview with OM32).

These contrasting behaviors also clearly appeared when ONCEIM musicians were asked to comment on specific passages of their improvisations—for example, on the passage shown in **Video Example 5:**

Here, I'm deliberately trying to change the sound of the orchestra (it sounds a bit artificial now that I'm listening back to this). But it works: [the guitar player] joins me and other musicians also start to play long sounds. (interview with OM3)

Now I'm joining the drone with a held multiphonic inspired by the short repeated sounds made by the double-bass player. (interview with OM13)

The coexistence within the orchestra of "leader" and "follower" roles often leads to amplification or propagation processes that have a certain inertia, since each new idea can be backed up by a large number of "following" musicians. As such, it also plays an important role in the emergence of the slowly mirroring textures that are at the core of the ONCEIM sound.

[3.10] The question then becomes, how is this group sound defined over the course of the improvisers' rehearsals? The data I collected show that improvisers build the artistic identity of their group and circumscribe the shared musical territory they will explore together through different kinds of selection processes, some more explicit than others. In the rehearsal I studied of the Umlaut quintet, for example, the selection process was almost entirely implicit. After their first improvisation, the musicians had a short discussion about whether they should define more precisely the music they wanted to improvise together:

Ève Risser: Don't you think that the overall form of the improvisation was the result of this "switch" system that we used a lot? [. . .] I feel like this idea of clear and abrupt breaks was a kind of tiny consensus among us. Usually, I

play music that develops more slowly.

Joris Rühl: So now the question is: after this, should we set some directions for tomorrow?

Ève Risser: The idea, now, would be to work on what we did there, to replay it and after a while to cut out the things we don't like, which are too redundant or are traps. But in any case, there were already clear collective choices, even in that first improvisation. If any of us hate abruptly cut-off sounds, we certainly didn't show it!

Joris Rühl: Do you want to play again?

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: No, I don't think so.

Joris Rühl: We did something that has many possibilities, perhaps because it was a bit hybrid . . . but if we play like that tomorrow, we will be thinking about how what we did today wasn't very good, without having found solutions for it.

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: Yes, but I think it's also nice not wanting to play something which is already very specific, not telling ourselves: we're playing this material, this thing and not that thing, etc.

Antonin Gerbal: It's important to tell ourselves that there are some things that we will *not* discuss. I think that just by playing, we've opened some doors, we've tried to develop some things.

Ève Risser: Yes, maybe we're not looking for something too specific. With this group, I think it's good to leave things rather open to start with.

Pierre-Antoine Badaroux: And I think that we all know what works and what doesn't.

Joris Rühl: Yeah, totally.

[3.11] This discussion is very interesting in many regards. First, it appears that there is some disagreement about the very idea of defining or even discussing the music they would like to improvise together, which probably indicates that the musicians of the quintet have different conceptions of the practice of free improvisation—some favoring a more compositional approach, in which the musical framework is predetermined to a certain extent, while others favoring a more open and spontaneous approach.

[3.12] Second, according to the pianist, collective choices were spontaneously made in the course of the performance, without any kind of prior discussion between the musicians. For example, as the pianist noticed, they ended up playing a rather discontinuous music, quite different from the more slowly evolving music that she usually favors. This “discontinuous” aspect was, however, not only a matter of individual aesthetic preferences. As the performance unfolded, the musicians’ use of discontinuity progressively turned into a collective strategy for managing their interactions—what the pianist called, in the discussion reported above, a “switch” system, according to which the musicians used each other’s entrances and exits or short impacts as signals to stop playing, change what they were doing, or start playing again. **Figure 2a**, which is a schematic visualization of the very beginning of the improvisation that can be seen in **Video Example 6**, shows that the premises of this “switch strategy” were already present right at the outset of the performance, most notably in the interactions between the double bass and the drums, but also, to a lesser extent, between the clarinet, the saxophone and the piano. As this way of interacting progressively stabilized and created shared expectations between the musicians, it started to be used in a much more systematic manner in latter passages of the performance. This can be seen in **Video Example 7**, taken from the end of their improvisation, and in the schematic visualization of the corresponding passage in **Figure 2b**, which clearly shows how systematically this “switch” strategy could be used within the quintet. Remarkably, this improvisation strategy emerged in a purely implicit way, through musical interactions, without any kind of prior discussions between the musicians. It must be said, however, that the fact that they discussed it after their rehearsal improvisation made it more explicit for the musicians that this could be seen as a characteristic element of their group aesthetic.

As such, it is not surprising that they ended up using that very strategy in some parts of the concert that they performed the next day.

[3.13] Third, and more interestingly, even if the musicians did not say explicitly what worked and what did not in their first improvisation, the conclusion of the discussion seems to indicate that they at least tacitly agreed on what was intended. In other words, the fact that things were left unsaid during that discussion does not mean that there was no implicit selection process at play between the rehearsal and the concert. Of course, it is difficult, based solely on that discussion, to know for sure what the musicians had in mind, or even if they had *the same thing* in mind. But when comparing the improvisation made in rehearsal with the concert improvisation the following day, it is clear that some musical situations explored by the quintet during the rehearsal simply disappeared from the concert. For example, there is no equivalent in the concert of a passage such as the one that can be heard in **Sound Example 5**, whose characteristics (short motivic imitations between the double-bass, the saxophone and the piano, relatively high level of dynamic and activity, etc.) were possibly judged to be too evocative of a more traditional form of free jazz.

[3.14] Conversely, some passages from the concert improvisation clearly echo sections from the previous rehearsal. **Sound Examples 6** and **7** (graphically presented in **Figures 3a** and **3b**)—respectively taken from the rehearsal and from the concert—give a remarkable example of this phenomenon. The excerpt from the rehearsal opens with a series of *glissandi* spread out amongst the quintet. At 0:58, the double bass settles onto a D₁ pedal tone, which gets progressively filled out with cymbal rolls and *bisbigliando* from the saxophone,⁽¹⁸⁾ then reinforced with a long held note from the clarinet, oscillating between E $\flat$ ₂ and D₂. At 2:50, this dense texture provides a backdrop on which the pianist begins to play a series of parallel ascending scales in both hands, broken up at irregular intervals. The collective discourse progressively builds in intensity, notably with the addition of split tones in the saxophone and increasingly rich chords in the piano. The crescendo continues until 4:07, when the bassist leaves the D₁ pedal tone for a pitch a fifth higher (A₁). The dynamic drops in what follows, which gives space for the pianist's scales to move into the foreground, accompanied first by some high-pitched punctuation from the saxophone (at 4:25), and then by the bassist, who, in turn, offers a series of ascending chromatic movements at a speed approximately twice that of the pianist's (at 4:56). The excerpt from the concert shows a similar general situation: it opens, once again, with a series of long collective *glissandi* that leads to, at 0:45, the piano's entrance with ascending chords, slowly spreading out, in the upper register with the right hand, accompanied by the same cluster in the low register with the left. The pianist is soon joined by the saxophonist (at 1:10), who then unfurls his own chromatic ascending scale, still surrounded by the *glissandi* of the clarinet and double bass. In both cases, then, the group somehow *solidified* the musical material, by going from a liquid, continuous form (*glissandi*) to a solid, discrete form (unfolding of ascending scales). However, the precise way this process was carried out obviously remained flexible, as evidenced by the interchangeability of the instruments (the saxophone "took" the role of the double bass in the concert version, and the pianist's left hand plays the pedal provided previously by the double bass), and especially by the temporal reduction that took place in the concert improvisation, in which the musicians eliminated individual developments and other collective stases to concentrate instead on the backbone of the formal process.

[3.15] Of course, the musicians never specifically discussed this passage from the rehearsal or said that they liked it more than other sequences. But it is interesting to note that this passage, which lasts five minutes, is by far the most developed section of the rehearsal, the other parts being typically much shorter, with an average length of two minutes (cf. *supra*). This could be seen as a sign that they particularly enjoyed playing that part, or that they felt something special was happening worth developing over a much larger time scale than the previous parts. As such, it is quite plausible that this passage from the rehearsal was particularly present in the musicians' minds when they approached the concert improvisation. At the very least, such transfer phenomena, from the rehearsal to the concert, would seem to indicate that the improvisations taking place during rehearsals undergo an *implicit* selection process. Some formal or interactional patterns end up being stored in the group's collective memory in the form of relatively abstract

representations that can be used and reworked during the concert, thereby creating a shared set of expectations amongst the musicians.

[3.16] The selection process is much more explicit in the Risser-Rühl rehearsals. Here, recording plays a crucial role, which allows the musicians to discuss something more than just their feelings, thanks to the distance and relative objectivity that such a medium provides. The musicians of this duo indeed record most of their rehearsal improvisations, and an important part of their rehearsals consist precisely in critically listening to these recordings and discussing them. Both musicians even said multiple times that this was the core of an improvisation group's work: working on improvisation means first and foremost to listen to a recording of oneself. During the interviews and listening sessions with this duo, the improvisers often referred to the role of listening to recorded improvisations in the selection process that was at play during their rehearsals, which results in keeping or eliminating certain materials or interaction patterns:

We often discuss before we work, about our memories from the previous day or further back, but most often the discussion is based on listening to a recording. [. . .] When we go back to a recording, we try to identify what works, what doesn't really work, and why, etc. (interview with Joris Rühl)

All the more energetic passages, every time we would work on them, we never kept them. Because when we listened to the recording, they weren't the best thing for our duo. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation C)

That's something that's right on the line between the things we mess up and the things we pull off. So we took a long time to decide if we wanted to keep that kind of thing or not. I remember during a rehearsal the day before a concert, when we listened to the recording of an improvisation we had just done, we discussed this issue again. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation B)

[3.17] The rehearsal that I documented in October 2014 also had a listening component, during which the musicians listened back to the recording of a long improvisation (45 minutes) from the first day of their rehearsal. This session provided an opportunity to see precisely the kinds of exchanges that might take place in this type of situation. There are typically two kinds of interventions in the improvisers' discussion: the expression of a value judgment (positive or negative) about a given passage, which is then submitted for approval to the other musician; and the presentation of a counterfactual scenario, which allows the musicians to virtually explore a situation that could have happened, and to express their opinions about it:

Joris Rühl: You know, I like that—those little abrupt things like that, the small parts of the overall sound that light up and go out, and make the whole thing change.

Ève Risser: Yes—they're little transitions, little pockets of air . . . a kind of bend in the road.

Joris Rühl: It's also these kinds of proportions that I like. There's a part where something's happening every 2 or 3 seconds, and then we go off on a long passage.

Ève Risser: You like those pockets of air that make the transition? I agree that they're nice.

Ève Risser: Do you think that when you did those first percussive sounds . . . did that mix well with what I was doing?

Joris Rühl: Not really.

Ève Risser: Maybe I could have joined you with my own percussive sounds?

Joris Rühl: That would have been even worse.

Ève Risser: I had started those sounds before, so I couldn't change there.

Joris Rühl: No, no—it's just a choice that doesn't really work, I think, in hindsight. It's probably best to avoid those kind of sounds!

In both cases, the dialogical nature of the situation leads the musicians to ground their personal positions in precise musical elements (e.g., the type of individual material used, the relationship between the two musical discourses or, most often, the temporal unfolding of a given sequence or transition). This kind of discussion thus allows the musicians to express their sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent, individual preferences and to precisely identify the moments they both like or, conversely, the moments in which at least one of them felt uncomfortable.

Joris Rühl: I'll play that part again, I like very much what is going on, here. It's pretty standard, but it's well done.

Ève Risser: Yes, it's very flexible but at the same time, we're staying in the same sound, I like it too.

Joris Rühl: Here, I was totally lost. I was trying to play high pitched sounds, but it didn't work.

Ève Risser: No, I liked it . . . but I got the feeling that I had taken you to a place where it was more complicated for you . . .

[3.18] The selection process that eventually leads to the construction of the duo's identity is thus also (and perhaps essentially) based on a confrontation of individual preferences. Using critical listening as a springboard for verbal exchanges, the musicians come to an agreement about a lowest common musical denominator which corresponds to both their musical tastes, at least initially. What ends up being integrated into the duo's music is thus the situations that both musicians view favorably, while those which are evaluated negatively by both are, of course, ruled out. What is perhaps more surprising is that when the musicians have contrasting opinions on a given musical situation, that situation tends to be eliminated. As an example, **Sound Example 8**, taken from a passage towards the end of improvisation C, was praised by the clarinetist, while the pianist was clearly annoyed when listening to it:

I like the speed, the frequency of events—they are all very short—the variety of timbres and the interweaving of our lines, which really blend well, and the surprises that come from the variety of timbres, sometimes a short resonance, or a longer sound. (Joris Rühl, comment on Improvisation C);

It blends well here, but it's totally unbearable! There are many aspects of our sounds that echo each other, but it's too tense, it annoys me. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation C)

Both improvisers nevertheless judged this passage to be non-representative of their music, which is a sign that this type of situation, which met contrasting opinions, was not retained in the shared vocabulary of the duo. In other words, the duo's musical identity is made of the sonic elements and musical situations that were accepted by *both* improvisers.

[3.19] The selection process in the ONCEIM rehearsals takes yet another form, somewhere between the very implicit process of the Umlaut quintet and the rather explicit process of the Risser-Rühl duet. This is probably due to the peculiar structure of the group. Indeed, the large number of musicians involved in the ONCEIM makes organizing rehearsals particularly difficult, and rehearsal time is therefore precious. For this reason, when the orchestra was created, playback sessions were not seen as a viable option for rehearsal time. The critical listening role was thus given to the artistic director and founder of ONCEIM, the pianist Frédéric Blondy, who chose *not* to play in the ensemble. His job is not only to set the agenda for the rehearsals, but also to provide an

“external ear.” This puts him in a more “objective” position to give his impressions on what works and what does not in the group’s improvisations. It is clear that Frédéric Blondy’s opinion is not equal to others in the ensemble, due to his status as artistic director, but also because he tends to initiate and lead the collective discussions, asking other members of the orchestra to express their thoughts. As such, even if he is not playing at all within the orchestra, Frédéric Blondy has a very strong influence on the artistic identity of the ONCEIM, as the feedback that he gives to the orchestra inevitably tends to be interpreted by the musicians as implicit rules of action or prohibitions:

I remember, at the very beginning of the ONCEIM, there was a passage where I did a kind of free jazz thing, and I remember that Frédéric [Blondy] commented on it. It’s always implicit, and usually he makes his comments with a humorous tone. But afterwards, you realize, you think — “oh right, I kind of let myself go there . . .” And little by little, you restrict the range of things you allow yourself to do. (interview with OM22)

At the beginning, I had a vibraphone, but I think in Frédéric [Blondy]’s mind that instrument really has “jazz” connotations, so I don’t bring it anymore. (interview with OM17)

Nothing is explicitly forbidden, but everybody understands that we shouldn’t show off our virtuosity or our instrument, no big gestures to say “look, listen, here I am!” One time, one of the musicians tried to do something like a solo and Frédéric [Blondy]’s reaction was really harsh. (interview with OM32)

[3.20] This does not mean, however, that the ONCEIM obeys a strictly hierarchical structure. From that perspective, the October 2015 rehearsal provided an episode that revealed the complexity of how selection processes operate within the ONCEIM. After an improvisation generally judged to be very successful, Frédéric Blondy made the following comment (the passage evoked by Frédéric Blondy is shown in **Video Example 8**):

Frédéric Blondy: After, there was that whole passage which started with what [a cello player] was doing, which resulted in something more rhythmic and phrased—that raises some issues for me, I’m personally not such a fan . . . We could work on it to see what we can do with it, but for the time being, it’s kind of a cliché of badly played contemporary art music. We hear phrases, and everybody starts playing wide intervals, and it actually doesn’t resemble . . . you’d think it’s music where people just play around with new music lines, but at the same time, the piece is not well written, and it doesn’t sound super interesting. I don’t know. What’s your opinion on this style of playing?

What followed was a long discussion of whether or not to exclude this type of situation from the shared vocabulary of the orchestra. Many of the musicians took part in the discussion, some simply arguing that nothing should be out of bounds as a matter of principle, while others wanted to work more on this kind of material before making a decision about excluding it or not. A third group spoke of the difficulty pointed out by Frédéric Blondy in more general terms, by distinguishing between musical ideas which “open,” in that they allow everyone to find his/her place in the collective discourse, and those which “close,” since they dominate the group’s space. This long discussion finally led Frédéric Blondy to revise his initial position, and to propose a consensus that brought together the diverse opinions expressed by the orchestra’s members, thus strongly attenuating the prohibition implicitly contained in his first comment:

I remember during the residency, we did an improvisation where the strings played a kind of highly melodic material, and we had this debate about whether it was OK or not to play that kind of thing. But what came out of this debate was a kind of consensus and in the end, it was not clear anymore what we were supposed to do with that kind of material. (interview with OM3)

The selection process that takes place during ONCEIM rehearsals is thus probably more the result of interpersonal negotiations than the vertical structure of the orchestra would imply, even if it is also clear that, within the orchestra, some points of view tend to be more valued than others, mainly due to the reputation or the improvisational expertise ascribed to the musicians who express them.

[3.21] In short, the musical identity of the improvisation groups I observed is the result of various selection processes that operate over the course of rehearsals, either implicitly (collective memorization of sound material, instrumental techniques, developing strategies or interaction patterns that “worked” in the specific context of the group) or explicitly (more or less informal discussions where musicians share their feelings about a given improvisation, critical listening sessions, etc.).⁽¹⁹⁾ One of the main reasons free improvisers rehearse together is precisely to trigger these selection processes that help them delineate the shared territory they will explore in their performances.

4. *Rehearsals as a forum*

[4.1] I would now like to discuss how the rehearsals serve as a forum where musicians negotiate between different conceptions of improvisation. I will specifically focus here on the ONCEIM, since it is probably within that ensemble that these negotiations were the most remarkable. It bears noting that they were also present to a lesser degree in the Risser-Rühl rehearsals, as the contrasting aesthetic preferences expressed by the musicians at many points during their rehearsals often derived from divergent conceptions of what is really at stake in free improvisation. More generally, one should keep in mind that the world of free improvisation is extremely diverse in its practices, and characterized by a lack of unifying conceptions about how it should be done. In that respect, even at the level of a local improvisation scene like the Parisian one, musicians are bound to perform with people who can have views on improvisation that strongly differ from their own.

[4.2] In gathering many active improvisers from the French improvisation scene, the ONCEIM orchestra reflects the diversity of practices that can exist in such a scene. The musicians involved with the ONCEIM are indeed quite different from each other:

1. They belong to different generations, between 25 and 50 years old.
2. They have different backgrounds, from classical music, jazz, improvised music, experimental noise music or laptop music.
3. They have different relationships with free improvisation: for some, free improvisation is a singular artistic practice, for others it is an extension of jazz and its history. Others see it as a practice associated with the interpretation of a certain repertoire in contemporary art music (graphic or verbal scores, aleatoric music) or as a tool for musical creation (whether composing for the stage, multimedia shows, or written scores).

[4.3] As such, even if the musicians all share a strong interest in freely improvised music, the heterogeneity of their individual journeys inevitably results in differentiated *conceptions* of improvisation—conceptions which often come head to head when the musicians discuss their improvisations. For example, the opposition between improvisation as process and improvisation as product—improvisation being either seen as either a (particular) way of composing music or as an autonomous, relational and/or communicational process, independent of the result—arose at many points during their three-day residency in October 2015:

OM4: I think that **our goal must be to try to create collective compositions, and not just to improvise.**

OM2: But I thought the communication between us was good!

OM4: I'm not saying there are no interactions, I'm simply saying that the result is not . . .

OM3: **But are we really looking to make a piece of music?**

OM4: **Yes, I would like to hear a piece of music!** The problem was, for me, that I couldn't hear the sound of the group. I heard many things, many individual things interacting, but I didn't hear the group sound.

OM25: Do you think it's a good idea to have a fixed group sound?

OM4: It's nice to explore a lot of things, but it's also nice to quickly find some basic level of comfort in our playing and listening, so that we feel good in the sound. Did you feel good in that sound?

OM1: Yeah, it was not bad at all!

OM3: **What I didn't like, precisely, is that we were focusing too much on trying to make music.** I think it's more interesting to start the improvisation by listening to each other, trying to find ways to interact with each other.

OM4: That's precisely the problem. I heard many individual, one-off interactions, but a true group sound was missing.

Even when it came to select new constraints for exercises, this process/product opposition was still at play:

OM3: I feel that when we select constraints related to the type of sonic material we're supposed to use, this detracts from the quality of our interactions. I'm focusing much more on what I'm doing rather than on what I'm doing in the group. And it also seems to me that **we tend to be more interested in the result than in the process itself.**

OM15: Yes, that's true.

OM4: **But the process is only interesting insofar as it produces something. If the process leads to poor music, then I'm not interested in that process.**

OM3: But I think that if we start with the result we want to obtain, we'd be better off composing a piece of music, it would be easier to get that result.

OM29: But those exercises are just there to create shared experiences and enrich our shared vocabulary. That's not really the point! (October 2015)

Of course, these are not the only conceptions of improvisation at play in ONCEIM rehearsals. Another important opposition is that between a conception of improvisation practice as "anything goes" and a conception of improvisation practice as exploring a territory whose boundaries are more or less fixed. This is clearly illustrated in the following short exchange:

OM6: So now the question is: what are we doing with that kind of material? We could try to play much denser stuff, and still find a way to let a lot of room for the others. And I think we need to be able to do this . . . **since we're in an improvised setting, we should be able to deal with everything . . .**

OM4: **Or not . . .** What I mean is that we can also make choices based on how the music sounds. For me, this passage was not very convincing. But we can still go down that path and see where it leads us. (October 2015)

[4.4] More generally, based on the interviews I have conducted with the musicians, one can create a typology of the different conceptions of improvisation that coexist within the ONCEIM (and,

probably, within the world of free improvisation), using the following four criteria:

1. The primary *substance* of improvisation:
 - a. Material: improvisation as a space for finding new timbres, instrumental exploration, extended techniques, etc.⁽²⁰⁾
 - b. Form: improvisation as “real-time composition,” with great attention to the temporal and vertical organization of the discourse.⁽²¹⁾
 - c. Interaction: improvisation as an exploration of multiple communicational processes and sonic relationships with others.⁽²²⁾
2. The *nature* of improvised action:
 - a. Improvisation as a spontaneous, even random action.⁽²³⁾
 - b. Improvisation as a deliberate, even strategic action.⁽²⁴⁾
3. The *goal* of improvisation:
 - a. Improvisation as an end in and of itself.⁽²⁵⁾
 - b. Improvisation as a means to produce something that has value independent of the fact that it was improvised.⁽²⁶⁾
4. The *identity* of improvisation:
 - a. Improvisation as a space for all possibilities.⁽²⁷⁾
 - b. Improvisation as a specific means to allow the group to understand what “its” music is.⁽²⁸⁾

[4.5] The varying aesthetic judgments formulated by the musicians regarding their improvisations can often be understood in light of these different individual conceptions of improvisation. Most of the time, the musicians simply do not understand the term “improvisation” in the same way, and it is precisely this lack of common ground which leads to disagreements. The following two quotes, with two radically different descriptions of the same improvisation passage, clearly illustrate this point:

The end made me angry. Someone held a note after everyone else had stopped playing, but it wasn’t clear what the intention was behind this gesture. It was as if the communication between us had been broken. (interview with OM22)

At the end, someone held a note, all alone, for a very long time, and it was beautiful, very beautiful, very daring. It was striking because, all of a sudden, the desire to play well just disappeared, it was just the pleasure of improvising and taking risks. (interview with OM29)

These two musicians obviously apply different value schemas to the practice of improvisation. By granting more importance to one value over another (risk taking or clarity of intentions, in the present case), they end up with opposing judgments. Interestingly, the aesthetic disagreements that run through the ONCEIM are often consistent over time, which shows how deeply the value schemas that underlie such appreciative judgments are embedded in the musicians’ practice. For example, in one of the June 2016 rehearsals, OM29 related a discussion he had with OM22 after the ONCEIM concert in May 2016 where, once again, they strongly disagreed:

OM29: Beyond the question of where we sit in the orchestra, which can explain why we don’t all hear the same thing, there are often important differences of appreciation. For example, at the end of our last concert, I remember that I was sitting next to [OM22]—so we’re supposed to have heard more or less the same thing—and I looked at him and told him: “Nice, I think that was in our

top ten concerts!"; and he said: "You're kidding, that was one of our worst concerts!"

[4.6] Of course, the fact that such distinct conceptions of free improvisation coexist in the same group is not without consequence for how the musicians approach their work together. Quite the contrary, it plays a crucial role in shaping their rehearsals. Indeed, the heterogeneity of the musicians' aesthetic preferences—and of the conceptions of improvisation that underlie such preferences—leads the musicians to never fully make explicit or define the artistic identity of the ONCEIM. Of course, Frédéric Blondy's own aesthetic preferences somehow transpire each time he gives feedback to the orchestra. For example, it is quite clear for everyone that he does not like musical materials that are too evocative of jazz or that he tends to favor collective texture over solo interventions, as I already mentioned above. But the important point here is that these "rules" almost always remain implicit, even if some of the musicians sometimes push Frédéric Blondy to be clearer or more explicit in his prohibitions:

Frédéric Blondy: Maybe we could pay more attention to the kind of material we use when there is a crescendo, and to avoid individual clichés or things that could evoke famous musicians, or music that we already heard before and that would be less interesting for us to play [...].

OM22: But can you tell us what are those things that we already heard before? When you're telling us that we should avoid using instrumental materials that we already heard before . . . What are you thinking about exactly? (ONCEIM, August 2017)

OM29: May be we should clearly forbid that kind of thing?

Frédéric Blondy: No, no, it's not a question of forbidding it! I'm just saying that right now, it doesn't sound great. (ONCEIM, October 2015)

Frédéric Blondy expressed a similar reluctance towards the idea of explicitly delineating the artistic territory of the ONCEIM in the June 2016 rehearsal:

OM29: Up to now, we haven't really defined what is common to all of us . . .

OM25: Maybe not explicitly, but through our shared experiences . . .

OM29: During our residency together in Fresnes, I think we clearly heard that the different improvisations we made were strangely similar, and also that the concert was not that different from what we did in the rehearsals. The fact that we never explicitly defined with words what that thing was that we kept playing in one improvisation after another . . . it's like we're all playing something unspoken . . .

Frédéric Blondy: Maybe . . . but I really want to keep this project as open as possible, because I believe that one of the great things about this kind of music is precisely to discover musical spaces that we wouldn't have imagined or anticipated. [...] But at the same time, we're also discussing, and so a given aesthetic emerges, some stuff ends up being pushed aside indirectly . . . even if it's less precise or less clear than in other groups, in which some basic principles are maybe more openly pre-defined or pre-established.

[4.7] As such, there is clearly a tension between, on the one hand, the (at least partly) vertical structure of the ONCEIM—the musicians being inevitably exposed to their artistic director's own aesthetic preferences and conceptions—and, on the other hand, the wide variety of opinions expressed in the orchestra. The fact that many things remain implicit within the orchestra is thus

important for its regulation. First, it allows for a more peaceful coexistence of the contrasting conceptions of improvisation that exist therein, as explicitly forbidding certain types of musical material or delineating a precise stylistic territory would inevitably alienate part of the improvisers or intensify the conflicts that may exist between certain musicians. Second, having the aesthetic territory explored by the ONCEIM only tacitly delineated leaves a lot of room for negotiations: it makes it easier for the musicians to regularly test those implicit boundaries during performances and rehearsals and measure the effects that these “violations” have on the other musicians.⁽²⁹⁾ Such negotiations are not uncommon during ONCEIM rehearsals. For example, here is how one musician explained to me why, at the end of an improvisation, he made the choice to keep playing, against the implicit rule of avoiding soloist interventions:

I really wanted to test that—keep playing despite the fact that everyone else had likely already finished. So when I did that, I was really interested in what was going to happen, and what kind of reaction it would provoke. We have had many discussions about our endings, so I was trying to put my foot in it, so to speak, since we were in rehearsal. (interview with OM6)

[4.8] But most of the time, these negotiations are not just the work of a single musician. If someone starts to play something “unorthodox” in the context of the ONCEIM, he or she will often be joined by other musicians—as if, in a kind of anti-authoritarian gesture, the musicians were ganging up against some of the implicit restrictions or injunctions they see as being at play within the orchestra:

The very structure of the orchestra, the fact that we are always playing in front of someone, that we have always someone listening to us . . . I think it’s like in a regular orchestra, or in a classroom . . . a kind of solidarity between the musicians emerges through opposition to the leader or the conductor. (interview with OM33)

This was already the case of the “motivic” interventions suggested by the cellist in Video Example 8 (discussed above), which were quickly imitated by many string players. But this was also the case in the two occasions I heard a musician introducing an element that was clearly reminiscent of the free jazz tradition in an ONCEIM improvisation: in **Video Example 9**, taken from a June 2016 rehearsal, the tenor saxophonist started playing with a typical free jazz sound (made up of a lot of vibrato and growl effects), before being joined in this evocation by the double-bass player who created a rhythmic pattern using virtuosic percussive gestures on the body of his instrument; and in **Video Example 10**, taken from the August 2017 rehearsal, the motivic energetic interventions initiated by the bass clarinetist were picked up in a more overt manner by the soprano saxophone player and, to a certain extent, by one of the euphonium players.

[4.9] Of course, such improvisations were typically followed by a heated debate amongst the musicians. What is of note in these instances, however, is that the musicians used an unexpected argumentative strategy in these debates. Since the emergence of some form of general consensus about the ONCEIM’s artistic identity seem unachievable for most of the orchestra members, given the wide variety of opinions and practices coexisting within the orchestra,⁽³⁰⁾ the musicians tended to use *pragmatic* statements over *aesthetic* ones. Their arguments were thus typically linked to the specificities of the ONCEIM ensemble and what works and what does not in the context of a large orchestra:

OM1: The question is not really if we can play long sequences of notes, pulsed or not, tonal or not. It just seems to me that it’s difficult to have the group suddenly move in another direction, as we should always be able to do, when we’re playing that kind of material. It creates a kind of inertia, which is already a problem for us.

OM31: But we’re always playing long held notes!

OM1: Yes, but when there are some phrased or expressive

elements, it's more complicated, maybe not impossible, but more complicated. (October 2015)

OM4: Our first job should always be to listen, especially when we are playing in the ONCEIM. Sometimes, people are just playing to play . . . we are more accustomed to playing than listening.

OM22: Maybe that's the best guideline to follow for our improvisations: to focus more on listening and less on action . . . that way, aesthetic concerns would simply disappear. (October 2015)

This strategy was even explicitly suggested by one member of the orchestra during the August 2017 rehearsal as a solution to defuse the tension that was quickly escalating within the orchestra after the "free jazz" episode mentioned above, thus leading Frédéric Blondy to rephrase his remarks:

OM8: Obviously, in such a project, there are questions and problems that are specific to the number of musicians involved, which would be different for smaller groups.

Maybe we should talk about the problems that are specific to this situation, so that we can have discussions that help us move forward and think more clearly about our music, with a shared vocabulary. Because if we just keep talking about our individual tastes, everything we say will inevitably be very subjective . . . [. . .]

Frédéric Blondy: Yes, I'm just pointing out some elements that do not work very well in the specific context of this improvisation. In the context of the orchestra, when someone plays that kind of stuff, it immediately sounds like a concerto for soloist and orchestra, and it's really a shame because it overshadows all the other cool things that are happening at the same time in the orchestra . . . In that kind of context, it's extremely important to stay focused on the orchestra itself rather than on what we're doing individually. (August 2017)

[4.10] The coexistence of distinct conceptions of free improvisation thus has a clear impact on how the ONCEIM musicians build the artistic identity of the orchestra in rehearsal: they avoid making it fully explicit and frame its constitutive elements in pragmatic terms rather than in aesthetic ones. This also partly explains why "musical" discussions take up such a large amount of time in the ONCEIM rehearsals—an average of 34% of the total rehearsal time during the ONCEIM three-day residency in October 2015, for example:

There are more discussions in the ONCEIM than in my other groups. But why do we talk so much? I think we feel the need to talk because there's something undecided, like a void . . . There's something undefined and we're doing everything we can to fill that void. (interview with OM19)

[4.11] In the context of free improvisation—where the improvisers do not share any explicit referents on which they can rely—any comment made in front of the group just before a performance can play the role of a verbal script, an oral score which will shape the upcoming performance:

I think that discussions play a central role in every improvisation group. Improvisation is an oral music, and the oral character of it can also be found in discussions—in what the musicians tell each other before or after playing. You quickly realize the power of words when you're teaching improvisation workshops. Sometimes, you hear stuff that's really not interesting, even really bad . . . and

with just a few words, a few sentences, people will listen differently and play differently. So yes, each word you're saying in that kind of context has an effect on the group—sometimes immediate, sometimes more indirect. (interview with OM3)

This is particularly true in the case of the ONCEIM rehearsals, where musicians are often asked explicitly to take into account the remarks made during collective debriefings:

Frédéric Blondy: Ok, let's do a second improvisation. Try to remember what we said about the last one, which was very good for the most part. Let's just try to develop stuff in small groups or in orchestral sections, as we discussed. (October 2015)

And indeed, during the improvisation that followed this discussion, the musicians attempted several times to divide the orchestra into different small sub-groups or sections sharing similar musical material or instrumental techniques, as in **Video Example 11**, which shows the string players playing a slow and continuous trill while the horn players sparsely interject short interventions on top of it. Similarly, after a discussion in which someone commented on the tendency many musicians had in the ONCEIM to repeat what they were playing, the musicians did an improvisation that was on the contrary quite discontinuous. This was immediately noted by one of the musicians in the debriefing that followed:

OM28: We went from one thing to its exact opposite! Since we just said that we shouldn't systematically repeat what we were doing, we ended up playing a sequence of isolated sounds. Each one of us was playing a sound, a silence, a different sound, and so on . . . (October 2015)

[4.12] These moments of collective debriefing thus have a definite impact on the improvisations that follow. Some musicians seem to regret that discussions play such an important role in the ensemble rehearsals, because they observe that these discussions produce simplistic reactions, inhibit the players, or create strong expectations which distort the dynamic of improvised interactions.⁽³¹⁾

I really feel that the discussions have too much weight. When someone says something, we immediately hear in the following improvisation that we just said this or that—it's really too obvious. (interview with OM13)

Maybe the debriefings have too much influence on our improvisations. We say that we shouldn't do this or that, and the orchestra immediately goes in the opposite direction, which is not necessarily a good idea. (interview with OM34)

We talk a lot, there are many opinions. And when we play, that can impact the way I play. I start to think: "with everything that we just said . . . maybe so and so won't like what I'm playing." (interview with OM12)

If we discuss before an improvisation, we expect the others to behave in a certain way. For example, we might expect them to play much less if we just said that it would be better to play less. And I think that one of the worst dangers for improvisation is precisely to have expectations about what should happen. (interview with OM6)

On the contrary, some musicians see these discussions as an opportunity to exercise their influence on the ensemble's music, by exposing their views on how the orchestra should or could proceed. This often leads to long conversations during which each participant seems to want to have the last

word, in order to secure his influence on the upcoming improvisation. The following discussion, which took place in the first day of the ONCEIM October 2015 residency, clearly illustrates how quickly debriefings can turn into a succession of more or less prescriptive statements:

OM4: That was great. I really liked the obsessive quality of the music . . . But the little things that were more melodic—I mean . . . “melodic” in scare quotes because they were not really melodic—maybe it didn’t fit very well in that context . . . OK, let’s start again with another short improvisation?

OM1: Wait, I wanted to add something. Maybe the music is lagging because each time someone does something, he or she always repeats it. And that doesn’t leave room for shorter interventions.

OM28: It’s also the way we deal with time . . . we could repeat things, but much later . . . that’s another way of thinking about musical temporality . . .

OM3: In other words, we should avoid settling into something.

OM4: If we individually play in a more discontinuous way, the music would be even more dynamic and lively.

OM1: And also, I think it would keep everyone on their toes! . . . Each one of us should behave as if we were always playing, even when we don’t make a sound.

OM3: And when we’re playing, we should try to maintain a certain level of tension. I think that we always repeat what we’re playing because it’s more comfortable: we feel more comfortable with our instrument, more comfortable within the group, etc. We should pay more attention to this.

[4.13] Finally, if the discussion plays such a critical role in the ONCEIM rehearsals, it may be because they offer a similar experience to that of improvising together. In both cases, musicians must address similar questions and problems; in both cases, they experience the deep dissensus that runs amongst them—each musician’s decisions and evaluations being inherently tied to her or his own subjective perception of the situation⁽³²⁾—and must find a way to deal with it:

Discussions are not that different from improvisations—in a way, we’re trying to come to an agreement. It helps us better understand how the others work, and how we can connect with them. (interview with OM25)

OM31: In that discussion, we really realized that our feelings are extremely different . . . and we’ll never be able to all have the same feelings—that’s precisely what makes collective improvisation interesting, especially in such a large ensemble. (October 2015)

If we never discussed things, the music would never work. You can do that in a trio or quartet if you play a lot together. But with twenty-five musicians who don’t play that much together, it’s much more complicated, especially because our aesthetics and our opinions are very different. So if we can’t play more together, we need to at least talk more together. (interview with OM28)

The collective discussions are thus not only a time for elaborating collective, more or less formalized scripts that then determine the group’s performance, or a time for negotiations whereby the group’s identity is defined; they are also especially a time during which individual (and sometimes irreconcilable) *narratives* of the improvisation that was just played are established. These discussions thus play a central role in the way the rehearsals are organized, for the very reason that

they are a decisive moment in which the musicians learn to coexist in the space of the collective despite the absence of a consensual reading of the practice that brings them together.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] Rehearsals play a strategic role in the creative process of the free improvisers I studied. It is indeed mainly in rehearsals that these musicians establish, explicitly or implicitly, shared musical territory. For many musicians, such collective work is seen as a necessary condition for improvisation, and particularly for *collective* improvisation:

For me, you need to develop some kind of shared experience to be able to improvise with other musicians.
(interview with OM29)

[5.2] First, the familiarization process that takes place during the rehearsals gives musicians the means to understand each other during a performance, and thereby to *communicate* and interact:

What I like in improv is when I manage to clearly understand what other people's intentions are and to play with that, and therefore to create a kind of communication . . . I think that the group work we do makes it possible to go a little further in this communication. (interview with OM22)

Working together, that's what makes it possible to go beyond the desire to just produce a result, which is what you often hear in improvisation concerts. Instead, we can concentrate on what is being produced in these relationships, what is happening between people who have a connection. (interview with OM15)

I think I prefer groups that stay together for a while, in which you have time to develop a local patois, a certain way of working together. That way I can focus on other kinds of questions. Not: "What will I play," but: "When will I play? In relation to whom?" (interview with OM3)

Just as it would be difficult to call a verbal exchange between two people speaking different languages who do not understand each other a "dialogue," collective improvisation should not be confused with the superimposition of musical soliloquies.

[5.3] Second, the collective work that takes place in rehearsal gives the musicians a reassuring starting point, ultimately allowing for exploratory behaviors that go well beyond purely reflexive (and sometimes standardized) actions often encountered in highly unpredictable musical environments:

Frédéric Blondy: I think we need to start with something solid, a nice group sound on which we can build. Because if the beginning is successful, if everyone feels good in the sound, then it's much easier to open the music to new possibilities. (ONCEIM, October 2015)

Frédéric Blondy: It's a great basis for us. . . From there, I feel that we can really explore and invent new music. The more we're comfortable with that orchestral sound, the easier it will be to explore and generate music together. (ONCEIM, May 2016)

Now we have our recipe: we always start with the ebows, ⁽³³⁾ because that puts us in an environment which favors exploration. It's the safest way to reach real moments of

magic and improvisation. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation J)

In a way, then, most of the musicians I followed see collective free improvisation as requiring more rehearsal and preparation than other forms of collective improvisation where musicians can easily meet spontaneously on stage (e.g., for a jam session), thanks to the stylistic conventions and repertoire of musical actions that are largely shared within that community.

[5.4] But at the same time, the artistic identity forged by musicians over the course of their successive rehearsals and concerts is also inevitably seen as an *obstacle* for improvisation,⁽³⁴⁾ since it solidifies at least part of the music produced, and therefore runs against a desire for spontaneity, risk taking, or unpredictability—all intrinsically linked to improvisational practices (Brown 2000):

The thing that scares me the most, and I know that's the case for Joris [Rühl], too, is the feeling of having found our thing. Since we don't allow ourselves to find [but rather to search], things will always shift and it will never be perfect. (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation I)

[5.5] In other words, free improvisers must negotiate between two contradictory regulatory objectives in rehearsal: on the one hand, the necessity of finding and delineating their shared musical territory so as to make collective music making possible, and on the other, the imperative of keeping things sufficiently fresh and unpredictable so as to allow for improvisation to happen. The following remark made by Frédéric Blondy to the ONCEIM musicians after their August 2017 rehearsal nicely illustrates how these two regulatory objectives compete with each other in the work of free improvisation groups:

Frédéric Blondy: Sometimes, I wonder if it wouldn't be better to just say: OK, let's always start with that kind of held orchestral sound, so that we can immediately be in something that works for us . . . but maybe that's not such a good idea, it could be too restrictive . . . it's also always nice to leave things as open as possible . . . I don't know . . . (August 2017)

This dynamic oscillation between two regulatory objectives is at the heart of improvisers' rehearsals, as it leads to nearly constant discussions and negotiations about what to "open" or "reopen" in the music and what to "close." And it is precisely because this tension can never be resolved once and for all that free improvisers keep rehearsing together.

[5.6] On a more general level, this ethnographic study of free improvisers' rehearsals can help us better understand the specificities of free improvisation. I have demonstrated that free improvisation often involves some kind of predetermination process. Even if nothing is explicitly set before a given performance, nor is anything precisely repeated in anticipation of it, the simple fact that the musicians have already played and discussed together is enough to introduce some predetermined elements that will ground upcoming performances. In other words, free improvisation performances are not, at least most of the time, purely spontaneous performances. But the fact that free improvisation, like every other form of improvisation, involves a dialectical relationship between predetermination and spontaneity, should not lead us to conclude that there is nothing specific in so-called freely improvised music. On the contrary, my study shows that the predetermined elements that emerge from free improvisers' rehearsals are extremely different in their nature than the referents most commonly used in other forms of improvisation. They are mainly *contextual* (referring either to a global aesthetic framework or to specific sonic elements), while referents such as jazz standards are often *temporally* structured, regulating the generation of improvised behavior on an intermediate time scale (Pressing 1984). They are *never fully explicit* (thus allowing for a large amount of dissensus and negotiations in the performance) while referents such as jazz standards are most often *common knowledge* among a group of musicians.⁽³⁵⁾ And lastly, they are *regulative* (i.e., musicians can always decide to discard them in the course of the performance if they feel the music needs it) rather than *normative*.⁽³⁶⁾

[5.7] In suggesting that free improvisation has a specific phenomenology, I am not insinuating that we should abandon the idea of a continuum of improvisational practices, nor should we revert to thinking of such practices in absolute, rigid categories. However, we should consider the possibility that the continuum of improvisation unfolds through many different dimensions (degree of normativity; degree of explicitness; degree of temporal structuration, etc.) beyond the sole spontaneity/predetermination binary.

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Footnotes

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1. One example would be AMM, certainly the most well-known long-standing improvisation group, as its activity stretches over five decades, with, of course, some changes in its members. For a detailed presentation of AMM, see [Saladin 2014](#).

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2. According to Pressing (1984, 346), a referent is a formal schema that serves as a basis for a given improvised performance, thus greatly "facilitating the generation and editing of improvised behaviors on an intermediary scale" and solving most of the coordination problems that might arise in a group performance.

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3. See also Nunn (1998, n.p.): "Style semblance can be maintained for a time, but its effectiveness wears thin if continued for too long, too literally. In free music, there is a mandate to (at least eventually) deconstruct or re-contextualize known or familiar musical properties such that the attention of the listener is diverted away from issues of style recognition or historical identity."

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4. For an in-depth analysis of the notion of pre-commitment, see Elster (2000).

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5. The paradox is perhaps stronger in French, where the same word is used to refer to "rehearsals" and "repetitions."

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6. See Nunn (1998, n.p.): "[Since] the term 'rehearsal' implies rehearsing [and that] nothing in free improvisation is never heard (live) more than once, there is really nothing to rehearse, in the usual

sense of the word.”

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7. Throughout this article, the names of the ONCEIM members have been fully anonymized (using the following convention: OM1, OM2, . . . , OM34), with the exception of its artistic director, Frédéric Blondy, because of his unique position in the orchestra.

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8. See Lewis (1999) and Borgo (2002) for a discussion of how this “Eurological” approach to freely improvised music might differ from an “Afrological” one more clearly rooted in the African-American jazz tradition.

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9. All the conversation and interview excerpts cited in this article were originally in French and were translated by the author.

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10. Note the behavior of the musician who leaves the room at the beginning of the video excerpt: once he arrives at the door, he suddenly stops, turns around and starts listening to the guitar player for a while, as if he were surprised by the highly unusual turn the music has taken.

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11. For an analysis of interaction patterns in jazz, see Pelz-Sherman (1998), who distinguishes between three “static” modes of interaction (“sharing,” “non-sharing,” and “soloing/accompanying”) and five “dynamic” modes (“emerging/withdrawing,” “merging/accepting,” “interrupting/disappearing,” “initiating/responding,” and “interjecting/supporting”), and Givan (2016), who defines three kinds of improvised interactions (“microinteraction,” “macrointeraction,” and “motivic interaction”). See also Steinbeck (2008) for an analysis of the improvisational performances of the Art Ensemble of Chicago in terms of “interactive frameworks.” For a general account of the importance of interactions in improvised music, see Berliner (1994), Monson (1996), and Hodson (2007).

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12. Double-bassist Joëlle Léandre even believes that free improvisation should not be practiced with more than five or six musicians (see Léandre 2008, 103: “I don’t like big ensembles [. . .]. I don’t believe in masses, I believe in the intimacy of listening. [. . .] In improvisation, which is a natural and urgent music, duos are the most perfect ensemble”). On that topic, see also Solomon (1986, 232): “the number of players in an improvisation has a profound effect on its outcome. Control is inversely proportional to the number of players”; Fell (1998, 24): “There are also straightforward but often overlooked difficulties in large-scale performance; actually hearing what other players are doing can be difficult if they are physically separated from you by a large number of musicians. This can limit the potential for subtle interaction to only those musicians who are relatively near, or encourage musicians to play more loudly or forcibly than they would otherwise consider”; or Jost (1974, 182): “A larger group requires a larger measure of musical organization and pre-planning than a small group, in which spontaneous interactions between the musicians work out more smoothly.”

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13. According to Helmut Lachenmann (2009, 134), “to compose means: to build an instrument.”

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14. The few white blocks on the figures correspond to passages that were uncommented by the musicians.

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15. A first improvisation (improvisation A) from this session stopped after a few minutes, interrupted by a loud siren sound coming from the street. Six other improvisations were recorded by the duet in 2009 (four in June and two sometime in the fall); they were quite close in their

aesthetic to the four I selected.

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16. Improvisation H is a false start. These four improvisations were the only ones performed in the 2014 rehearsals.

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17. It should be noted that this fact seems to bother some of the musicians: “Indeed, I go more for a specific attitude . . . maybe systematically, and that bothers me a little—I would rather not have roles, like in a little society where everybody has to play his or her role” (interview with OM1); “I think it’s unfortunate that my job seems to be to create accidents in the group, as if everybody were limited to a specific role” (interview with OM29).

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18. A *bisbigliando* is a timbre tremolo, obtained by alternating different fingerings of the same pitch.

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19. Such selection processes can even take place before the very first improvisation of a group: “With *Zoor*, one of the musicians brought some suggestions in our first meeting together, like basic axioms for the music he was thinking of playing with us” (interview with OM19). Similarly, French pianist Sophie Agnel told me that in the preliminary discussions she had with other improvisers about a prospective group, one of the musicians said that they should define in advance the music they would like to do together, before actually starting to rehearse together (interview with Sophie Agnel, January 2018).

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20. “For me, improvisation is a space for exploration. Each time I feel like I discover new things with my instrument” (interview with OM33).

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21. “What interests me in improvisation is to explore forms” (interview with OM28).

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22. “In improvisation, what I’m really interested in, is the work we do on relationships” (interview with OM15).

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23. “What I’m looking for in improvisation is a feeling of wonder, the feeling that something eludes us” (interview with OM34).

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24. “I work a lot on listening, the way I position myself, the way I react or don’t react—sometimes forcing myself not to react, for example. Doing exercises like that so that there aren’t overly spontaneous reflexes in improvisation, but rather a kind of awareness. I feel like, in the state of improvisation, there’s a kind of hyper-awareness rather than a lack of awareness” (interview with OM11).

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25. “For me, the result is totally secondary. In improvisation, the fabrication process is so interesting that we can be doing whatever sound, doesn’t matter, I’m just captivated by the creation process. And I think that’s what interests me primarily in improvisation” (interview with OM22).

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26. “I don’t really believe, and I don’t really want to believe in this thing of improvisation as an end in and of itself. For me, it’s just a way to make music, and it’s an interesting way to make *certain* kinds of music” (interview with OM1); “We don’t just improvise, we have to create something, whether you call it composition or something else. At the end of the day, something should be there, and it should be good” (interview with OM4).

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27. “In improvisation, what I’m looking for is unpredictability, the idea that everything can change from one second to the next” (Interview with OM17).

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28. “I play in several improv groups, because I don’t want to do everything with just one project. Each project can take a different path, which becomes clear over time. Because every time, you’re dealing with a specific issue which comes from the unique individuals who are in the group” (interview with OM25).

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29. “Maybe it’s better to let things be implicit . . . That way, everyone keeps his free will, to try things or not” (interview with OM22).

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30. OM3: “There are things that I don’t like but they are probably not the same than for the twenty-eight other people in the orchestra. So if we’re saying that we should avoid playing in a ‘bad aesthetic,’ it’s complicated, I don’t really know what that means” (ONCEIM, August 2017 rehearsal).

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31. In the same vein, according to one member of the ONCEIM—saxophonist Bertrand Denzler who, with Jean-Luc Guionnet, has interviewed more than forty improvisers from all over the world over the course of the last twenty years—many musicians from the first or second generation of free improvisers were very reluctant to explain their improvised performances: “We met musicians who are seventy years old today, mostly English musicians, and who’ve played this kind of music for the last forty years. And almost each one of them told us: ‘we weren’t discussing our music, neither before nor after playing . . . no post-mortem examination!’ The discussion was happening in the music itself. When we were interviewing them, we had the impression that it was almost taboo for them to discuss free improvisation” (interview with Bertrand Denzler).

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32. See Pras, Schober, and Spiro (2017) for a recent empirical study showing that free improvisers often tend to offer very different characterizations of a given joint performance. See also Canonne and Garnier (2012) for a discussion of how such diverging representations can lead to miscommunication or miscoordination during the performance.

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33. Ebows are electronic bows used by guitar and bass players, but they that can also be used directly on piano strings, to produce soft sinusoidal sounds.

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34. See also Iyer (2004, 400) for a discussion of how the desire to express an individual musical identity can enter in conflict with other objectives (e.g., the impulse to imbue a particular improvisation with internal coherence, the search for maximal spontaneity, etc.).

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35. P is common knowledge among a group G if and only if each member of G knows P, each member of G knows that each member of G knows P, and so on (see Lewis 1969 for an analysis of conventions which relies on this notion of common knowledge).

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36. “The work we do together—the discussions and so on—it’s to help us improvise together, it’s like guidelines. But in the end, if we feel that it’s better to play something that goes against something that we just said, so be it! I think we’re always trying to do what is judicious in a given context” (interview with OM19); “I try not to think in terms of rules or restrictions . . . In the end, each musician has the responsibility to keep the music alive, to maintain the collective edifice that we’re building together” (interview with OM11). Similarly, all the typical elements of the Risser-Rühl duo that are part of their group identity were absent from a short passage of Improvisation G; but, interestingly, this did not prevent this passage from being highly appreciated by both

musicians: “I don’t know why I started playing like that—it almost sounds like Messiaen! That’s very unusual for this duo . . . I don’t understand anything that’s happening here, but I love it! I think this passage really helped us go on in this performance” (Joris Rühl, comment on Improvisation G); “Wow, that’s really not typical . . . this sudden burst of energy . . . that was a huge risk! But it works, it’s a great transition!” (Ève Risser, comment on Improvisation G).

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