Music of the Common Tongue

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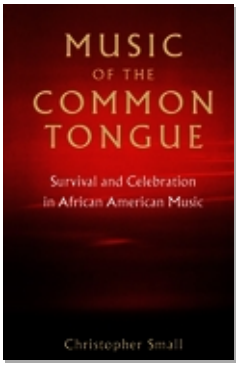

Chapter 10

ON IMPROVISATION

I have remarked on the dependence of the modern classical performer on written or printed texts. Virtually never will concert performers of our time attempt in public anything other than the realization of a score which has been rehearsed as thoroughly as time will allow. It is not only that the training of musicians has almost certainly left them unequipped to engage in any kind of on-the-spot invention but it has also left them without the slightest idea that such an activity is either possible or desirable; I have known competent instrumentalists, and even singers, who have been rendered completely mute when they are denied access to a score or asked to perform 'by ear'. Performers are imbued from childhood with the notion that their task is to realize a written musical text, down to the last semiquaver, as faithfully as is in their power; they understand that the musical work they are performing is not theirs, having been created by a higher order of musicality than their own, and that they are required merely to burnish it and present it to their hearers for their edification and admiration. It does not seem to occur to most performers in the classical tradition that they might have a creative role to play in respect to the musical works they perform; even in the comparatively rare case of composers who are sufficiently skilled as performers to appear in their own work, they will regard themselves, in their latter capacity, as bound to reproduce faithfully what they have provided in their former capacity. Memorizing the notes does not diminish their dominant role in the performance, since they are simply transferred from the pages of the score to the performer's head, where their control is if anything even more absolute.

The completeness of the rule of the written notes can be seen most clearly in the performance of a solo concerto from the time of Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven. It was the custom of those masters and their contemporaries to leave, at a point near the end of the first movement, a space where the soloist was expected to show his or her own inventiveness, ingenuity and technical brilliance by improvising an extended passage, known as a cadenza, based on the musical material of the movement that was nearing its conclusion. Today no soloist ventures to do such a thing, but instead plays a fully composed, notated and rehearsed cadenza which has been written perhaps by him or herself in careful imitation of the style of the rest of the piece, or, more probably, by an eminent performer of the past or even by the master himself, should he have provided one. Mozart, who wrote his piano concertos for himself or one of his pupils to play, did leave some written-out cadenzas, but we need not imagine that he ever played them as written, as a modern virtuoso will feel obliged to do; he was far too inspired an improvisor ever to have relied on such a pedestrian procedure. More likely he intended his cadenzas as models, to show pupils and others the sort of thing they might do. Beethoven, on the other hand, was more prescriptive; he wrote cadenzas for all his concertos as he meant them to be played, showing in this way his dissatisfaction with the performers of his day. It was not, as is sometimes said, that the art of improvisation was falling into decay; it was just that he did not like the way performers improvised. With him any pretence that the cadenza was improvised ended with his fifth and last piano concerto, the 'Emperor', for which he not only provided an extended written-out cadenza but wrote an orchestral accompaniment for it as well, leaving no chance for the soloist to improvise even if he wanted to. Beethoven had by this time by reason of his deafness been obliged to retire from public performance, thus increasing the separation of composer from performer which was starting to become apparent in his day. The increasing distrust of performers by composers can be traced through concertos of the nineteenth century from Schumann and Mendelssohn to Chaikovski, all of whom wrote out their cadenzas as they were to be played, thus reducing them to a functionless appendage; twentieth-

century composers of concertos have for the most part not even bothered with that pretence.

In the western classical tradition, the art of improvisation is today to all intents and purposes dead, and resists all efforts to revive it. The resistance, surprisingly, comes largely from performers themselves, who mostly have little idea of what improvisation is or what it entails (the late Cornelius Cardew once said that before trying it he had thought it would be 'something like composing, but accelerated a thousand times',[1] a feat of which he believed himself to be incapable), and do not show any desire to make a contribution to the substance of those music-objects which it is their life's work to perform. It is not hard to see why they should feel that way. The professional performer has invested a great deal of time, energy and emotional capital in learning to interpret the work of others; he or she has learnt to seek out and to realize in sound every nuance of a given text, having assimilated at the same time the whole weight of a non-literate performance tradition which conditions him or her to interpret it in a particular way. In improvising, these very considerable skills are thrown into the melting pot, and the performer may be forgiven for thinking the whole investment will be lost if he or she attempts to work without the aid of a score. Besides, both performers and listeners in the classical tradition have learnt to think of music as a collection of sound-objects bequeathed to us from the past, objects that are stable over a long period and subject to the test of time in assessing their quality and value; this idea is negated in improvisation, which is all process and leaves us without a sound-object at all. And, lastly, since the world of classical musicking, like the rest of our society, is permeated through and through with the industrial ethic, and its associated division of labour, it is only natural that performers should feel that it is the composer's job to compose and theirs to play; if the composer's name is on the score and he collects the plaudits and the performing rights fees, then he is in honour bound to be absolutely specific about what he wants the performers to do.

The expectations of listeners in the classical culture have also contributed to the decline of improvised musicking. They, too, want a stable sound-object that they can hear over

and over again and become familiar with; music is a commodity which is bought and paid for and the purchasers want to be sure that they are getting their money's worth. What they are buying is stability and reassurance, and the tension and the possibility of failure which are part of an improvised performance have no place in modern concert life.

There are a few survivals in classical musicking of the once-great tradition of improvisation, most notably among organists. This seems to be a consequence of the organist's occupational association with church services, in which pauses of unpredictable length — waiting for a dilatory bride, or during communion — have to be filled with music. It is a traditional part of a recital by a virtuoso organist that he or she be given just before the performance a theme (a sealed envelope is sometimes used to heighten the drama) on which a sonata movement, a fugue or a set of variations is composed on the instant. It may not be coincidental that the one environment in which classical music remains functional (that is to say, it serves a direct social function over that of sheer aesthetic enjoyment) is also that in which the ancient art survives. It survives, too, in a limited way, among keyboard players of baroque music, and I shall have more to say about that in a moment.

It is true that in the last thirty years or so composers of the European and American avant garde, for example Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, have in some of their pieces asked from the performers something which resembles improvisation. In all cases of which I am aware, however, it is the composer's name which is on the score; the piece remains his, even when the score consists of nothing more than a few sentences, and the performers remain the instruments of his will, even if the way in which they implement it retains some flexibility. The composer has to remain in charge, otherwise he would forfeit the title, and with it the socially elevated position, in which he has invested so much time and energy. The desire to give freedom of action to the performers may be quite genuine (even if it is not in fact the composer's to give), but it seems that it cannot extend to the decisive step of acknowledging that the essence of music lies in performance, not in composition, and of handing over

responsibility to those who are actually performing.

The subservience of the performer to the composer and to the score is a comparatively recent phenomenon. At least until the end of the eighteenth century the ability to extemporize was an essential element of the skills of any musician worthy of the name. We should remember that those whom we call the 'great composers' of the past, at least up to the time of Beethoven, saw themselves not just as composers but as working musicians whose duties centred around performance; when they composed it was to give themselves and their patrons something to play, for those patrons were themselves not mere listeners but active performers and even sometimes competent composers. And of course if the composer were also on a particular occasion (nearly all pieces were written for a specific occasion) to be the performer he might feel no obligation to write his ideas down at all. Many of these musicians were valued in their own time as much for their unwritten as for their written compositions, and such evidence as we have (it is tantalizingly scanty) suggests that their improvised performances were even more daring, exciting and memorable than the compositions that have come down to us (anyone who has engaged in improvising will agree that their free flights of instrumental invention can become tethered and even mundane if they attempt to write them down after the event). Here for example is a contemporary of Mozart writing about his improvisation: 'It was to me like the gift of new senses of sight and hearing. The bold flights of his imagination into the highest regions, and again, down into the very depths of the abyss, caused the greatest masters of music to be lost in amazement and delight,' while another wrote: 'If I were to dare to pray to the Almighty to grant me one more earthly joy it would be that I might once again hear Mozart improvise.' I also leave the reader to ponder the implications of one breathtakingly casual remark by the teenaged genius himself concerning his performances of one of his early piano concertos: 'Whenever I play this concerto I play whatever occurs to me at the moment.'[2] One could cite similar accounts of the improvisation of other masters such as J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Hummel and Liszt, but it is clear that they represent only the peaks of achievement in

what was regarded as a necessary skill for any competent musician.

Even Mozart, however, like his contemporaries of the late eighteenth century, notated exactly what others were to perform. If we look further back, to the early years of orchestral music and opera in the early seventeenth century, we find that the skills of composers and performers were less differentiated from each other; the performing musicians functioned as partners in the musical act and not as mere executants of the composer's instructions. In the operas of the early seventeenth century, singers and players were presented only with notations which showed the composer's melody line and bassline, along with a kind of numerical shorthand known as figured bass to indicate the harmonic progressions. Even the melodic line was not expected to be sung as written; there are surviving notations in Monteverdi's own hand which give a melody and, in parallel, an almost unrecognizably ornamented version of it, showing the sort of thing he expected the singer to do. From this, not only the singer but also each orchestral musician invented his own part, with due regard for what colleagues were doing as well as for the over-all effect. A treatise of 1640 has this advice for the player: 'If the player is good, he does not have to insist so much upon making a display of his own art as of accommodating himself to the others . . . They will show their art in knowing how to repeat promptly and well what another has done before, and in giving room to the others and fit opportunity for them to repeat what they have done; and in this way, with a varied and no less artful manner, though in a manner neither too difficult nor requiring such deep knowledge, they will make known to the others their true worth'.[3] There are even in the scores of early operas instructions such as 'The Chorus of Tempests is repeated here; let them play,' with no notations given or even a suggestion of what instruments might be concerned; clearly the orchestral musicians were expected to work things out for themselves during rehearsals, which were customarily thorough and extensive. It might be added that the orchestra for a major performance might well consist of forty or more players; nothing was skimped, either musically or scenically, in those early opera performances, and we can be sure that

whatever, from the modern point of view, was omitted from the composer's instructions to his players it is not to be taken as evidence of carelessness but was in accordance with the best professional practice of the day.

Here we have the reason why it is today found necessary, if a performance is to be given of an opera by Monteverdi, Cavalli, Cesti or the other masters of that first brilliant explosion of the new art form, to make a notated 'realization' of the original score, with all the musicians' actions prescribed in the modern manner, down to the last detail, since the training of modern classical musicians who make up the virtuoso orchestras of today not only does not prepare them for, but indeed actively discourages them from, engaging in the kind of improvisation which was everyday practice in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the concerted instrumental music of the period, the figured bass was played not only by a bass instrument following the composer's bassline but also by a keyboard player, who would delight in improvising an elaborate part over the given bass and harmonies. Some modern keyboard players have trained themselves to play this continuo part; that such players remain limited in number is shown by the continuing healthy market in editions of baroque music with the keyboard part realized by an editor for those who cannot, or dare not, attempt to make their own as the composer expected them to do. Even more interesting for our discussion is the fact that any such improvised continuo is circumscribed by the need to work in a style that has been extinct as a contemporary creative medium since about 1750. We should speak more of historical reconstruction than of creation, since the player's task is not to bring about a new experience, as would have taken place when the piece was first performed, but to recreate an old one. It is significant that an eminent modern baroque harpsichordist and conductor, when asked in an interview how he would view a performance that was more memorable for the continuo player's improvisation than for the composer's music, replied, 'That would be an absolute artistic crime.'[4]

It is a thought that would almost certainly have puzzled and distressed Mozart, that most present-day performing

musicians spend their entire careers, from before adolescence to retirement, without ever acknowledging a single musical idea or gesture as their own. One wonders why it was that the art of improvisation became thus lost in the western classical tradition, and the domination of the art by notation so complete in our own time. Some clues are given, so far as I can tell all unawares but perhaps the more honestly for that, by the English composer Jonathan Harvey in his book *The Music of Stockhausen*, in a chapter where he discusses those works of the composer which do leave room for an element of improvisation. He says: 'Only to the extent that functional harmony (even in the *very* broadest sense) does not matter any more are group improvisations successful, for it is strictly impossible to improvise *cogent* harmony in a group. Simultaneous intervals or controlled densities do still matter and those works such as [Stockhausen's] *Adieu* and *Stimmung* in which the harmony is not improvised are therefore the most successful. But even that must (logically) be considered inferior (for all the liberation of performers etc) to music with all the "best improvisation" thought out and written down in the leisure of the composer's workshop, and then well performed. That is why Baroque improvisation — for example as in a Corelli violin sonata where the violinist ornaments his lines furiously and the harpsichordist realizes his figures with all the imagination the tempo will allow him — for all its brilliance — was eventually and progressively superseded by the exact notation of all the cleverest ideas of the harpsichordist, with other middle parts added, to create an even more complex interplay of independent life in individual parts under an overriding harmonic order.'[5] (italics in original)

The historical correctness of this view is not in question; what is interesting about it is the implicit set of values, accepted apparently without question, in which the perfection of the music-object, which the performers present ready-made to the listeners, is considered to be of more importance than the music act, in which performers and listeners are involved together. Assuming this order of priorities, it is clearly worth while to curtail the performer's freedom of action (the dismissive tone of that 'etc' is too obvious to be missed) in order that the quality of the music-object can be

improved, and the author, rightly in my opinion, gives as the principal factor in the eclipse of improvisation in the classical tradition the urge towards an ever more fully worked-out and complex interplay within the created object. The fact that this process requires the gross simplification of the relations, not only between performers and creative act but also between performers and listeners, passes, as it passes in countless histories of western music, without comment. What is gained in the 'cleverness' of the created object is lost in the engagement of the performer, on the one hand with the musical material and the process of its elaboration, which has become none of his business, and, on the other with his listeners' responses to his playing; once the music-object becomes fixed in all its details and the centre of attention in the performance, then clearly the listeners have no role other than to contemplate it, in stillness and in silence. And, further, it is not just that the performers' liberty etc is curtailed but also that in having no creative role to play each becomes a non-person, whose personality and idiosyncrasies, instead of being something human to treasure, are just a nuisance to the composer in the realization of his ideas; the performer whom the composer likes best is one who, assuming him or her to be equipped technically to realize the composer's ideas, submits wholly to them. The eagerness with which many composers in the 1950s seized hold of tape composition shows how strong was the desire to 'eliminate the middleman' in the musical transaction.

When a musician improvises, the act of creation is experienced at first hand, with the active participation of all those present, listeners as well as performers, while in fully-composed music the act is already in in the past, complete before the first sound is heard; it is abstracted, distanced from performers and listeners alike. That this abstraction and distancing have made possible the creation of magnificent sound-structures which have fascinated, and continue to fascinate, generations of players and listeners should not blind us to the price we pay for them, or give us leave to assume the inherent inferiority of other ways of musicking, as does clearly the author of the above passage. It is not just that Mozart, J.S. Bach, Beethoven and Liszt, as well as numberless other

musicians great and forgotten, would protest at such an assumption, but we also have evidence that many of their most felicitous ideas grew out of improvisation, which strongly suggests that the existence of a thriving tradition of notated music depends not only on a thriving tradition of improvisation but also on an intimate connection between the two. That such a tradition is not only dead but even derided by classical musicians would seem to have serious implications for the health of their art.

I shall have more to say later concerning the above quotation, but first I wish to examine the concept of improvisation itself, to try to arrive at an understanding of what the word means. It is in fact extremely difficult to pin down any agreed understanding, either of what it is, or indeed of what it is not. The best definition I have been able to find comes from H.C. Colles's article in the 1954 edition of *Grove's Dictionary*, where it appears under the heading of 'Extemporization', and is defined as 'the art of thinking and performing music simultaneously.'[6] Even this, however, for all that it pays tribute to the instantaneity of the art, takes no cognizance of one of its most important characteristics: that it involves a great deal of prior thought, knowledge and agreed convention. Never do the performers start completely from scratch, even if the prior work is done without the participants giving it conscious thought or even necessarily being aware that it is taking place. Improvisation occurs always within a set of rules, or, rather, conventions, which are agreed, either explicitly or implicity, by all the participants before playing begins. Most commonly, the musicians have an idea before they start of how they are going to play, what conventions they are going to adopt, and quite possibly an over-all plan, which may be modified as they go along through factors such as audience response. In this respect an improvised performance is not unlike a conversation — which is also, as we have noted, an improvised art. Both musical performances and conversations are occasions for exploration, affirmation and celebration of identity and of relationships, and both depend on the existence of a commonly agreed language.

Improvisation, then, is never total uncontrolled invention — indeed, it is doubtful if the human mind is capable of such a

thing — and most commonly these rules, or conventions, as well as a good deal of predetermined material, are provided by the idiom in which the players operate. In many musical cultures, such as the high-classical culture of India and the drum cultures of West Africa, the players do not consciously choose their idiom, any more than they choose the community into which they are born, of which in many ways the idiom is the ritual embodiment, but are acculturated naturally into it from infancy in much the same way as they enter their language community. This was once true also of improvisation in the western classical tradition. But in the west today improvisation flourishes only within the Afro-American tradition, where performers are free to choose within a number of styles and modes, and many are indeed to be found operating in different styles at different times and on different kinds of occasion. The various styles of improvisation will not be separated, but flow into and feed one another, producing an interaction of idioms, which is to say, of communities, that is absent in the virtual monoculture that is classical music today. Let us look now at some other modes of improvisation that have been found in the classical tradition in the past.

After the demise, around 1750, of the Baroque art of group improvisation, it was solo improvisation exclusively that was practised in classical music. There are important differences between solo and group improvisation; in the first place, the solo improvisor can engage in the wildest and most unfettered flights of the musical imagination, the most surprising harmonic changes, the most original formal devices, the most dramatic contrasts of texture, tempo and tone colour, without being bothered by the basic problem of group improvisation, which is that of ensuring among all the performers a common understanding of what is going on.

And secondly, it is clear that classical solo improvisors not only adhered to the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic conventions of their day but also worked within its conventional forms — fugue, sonata, variations and so on. Here we see one of the most striking differences between the improvisation practised by the classical masters and that which we find in the modern Afro-American tradition: the former

were making compositions on the spot. Bach improvised, we are told, a piece 'in extemporized fugal form' on a theme given him by Frederick the Great; Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny tells us that the master, working extempore from a single theme, composed a sonata movement, a free fantasia and a set of variations; and we have from Mozart a pair of fantasies, in D minor K397 and in C minor K475, which according to tradition started life as improvisations, but which bear all the signs of eighteenth-century compositional techniques: careful preparation when introducing a new theme or an important key change, adherence to acceptable key relations and a sense of over-all formal balance, with a return to the tonic key in time to establish it as firmly as in any carefully-composed sonata movement. We cannot, of course, know just how closely these pieces resemble the original improvisations, but they are pointers to what the latter might have been like. In fact, as Colles has it, 'what impressed listeners in that classic age most profoundly was the ability of the masters to extemporize in fugue and sonata, which the written art had evolved. Their triumph was to show that they could do without premeditation at the keyboard what they did in their studies on paper.'[7] There was, as the comments which I quoted earlier suggest, certainly more to it than that; it must have been not just a party trick but a genuine increase in excitement and daring over the written-down compositions. But we shall never know for sure.

In any case, the intention was to create on the spot a rounded composition that conformed to the conventions of the day. I know of no evidence to allow us to decide whether the performance was affected in any way by audience response, which is an important shaping force in other kinds of improvisation; none of the accounts makes any direct reference to it. A description by Ferdinand Ries of a performance by Beethoven of his Quintet for piano and wind in E flat, Op 16, is instructive, however: 'In the last allegro there is, in several places, a pause before the theme begins again. In one of these, Beethoven suddenly began to improvise, taking the Rondo as a theme, entertaining himself and the others for quite a long while. This, however, did not at all entertain the accompanying musicians; they became quite indignant and

Herr Ramm actually furious. It was truly comical to see these gentlemen waiting every moment for their entrance, put their instruments continuously to their mouths, and then quietly put them down again. Finally Beethoven was satisfied and led into the rondo once more. The whole company was delighted.'[8]

Except, no doubt, for the four wind players; the story emphasises once again the essentially soloistic nature of improvisation within the classical tradition. Participation for the wind players was impossible, however much they might have wanted to join in, for the pianist's imaginative flights, no doubt into remote and unexpected harmonic fields, would have excluded them. It is interesting that tonal harmony, that field upon which is acted out those dramas of the individual soul which are compositions in the classical tradition, should also through its very nature be the factor which makes direct group interaction impossible and confines improvisation to those displays of individual virtuosity which we have seen described.

On the other hand, jazz musicians and other musicians in the Afro-American tradition do improvise together within a framework of tonal harmony; we shall see in a moment how this has become possible, through a change which they have wrought in the meaning of harmony. First, however, let us look at improvisation outside the western tradition, especially in Africa, which has of course been the major formative influence on the music which is the subject of this book.

A study of African improvisation brings home once more the very important truth about the art, that it is never total on-the-spot invention. It is not just that there is always a certain amount of preformed material, but also that there is nothing to stop the players from repeating what they have done before. What is significant, in fact, about improvisation is not that the players are constantly inventing anew but that they are free to do so when it is appropriate (one can hear this process in successive takes by Charlie Parker in his Savoy recording sessions of 1944 to 1948; it is not the size of the changes from one take to the next that reveals his power but the effectiveness of those often quite small alterations that he makes). In the West African drum ensemble the leader, or master drummer, has spent his apprentice years playing the supporting drum

rhythms, and his performance consists of improvised variations on those rhythms, simple at first and then with increasing complexity, in such a way as to make the development of each out of its predecessor clear and audible to all. We must never forget that he and his colleagues are playing, not just for listeners but also for dancers, with whom they are constantly interacting; John Miller Chernoff even relates how, when he was learning his craft as a drummer among the Ewe in Ghana: 'When I played poorly for dancers, they *danced* their criticism by executing their steps in a half-hearted way, or they helped me by simplifying their steps to emphasise a more consistently responsive rhythm.'[9] The basic patterns are traditional, and thus given; it is what the drummer does with them in collaboration with the dancers that is the sign of his musicianship and of his command of the idiom. As A.M. Jones says, 'The master drummer . . . has a number of standard patterns at his disposal . . . What he does, having first established the pattern, is to play variations on it . . . Besides being able to repeat the patterns at will, he can also play them in any order and he need not play them all. It all depends on the aesthetic sense of the drummer and the fitness of the pattern to adorn the dancing of any particular dancer who happens to be dancing.'[10]

This may involve repetition of the same pattern for quite a long time. There is no need for the master drummer to be constantly inventing new rhythms; on the contrary, his task is not so much to invent as to give form and organization to what already exists, in collaboration with the other drummers, whose task in turn is to support him through the repetition of what are individually simple rhythms but which in combination build into complex and subtle, constantly developing, sound structures. He does not dominate the musicking so much as pick up in his playing and give a focus to the general sense of the occasion, to how his fellow-drummers (without whose rhythmic patterns his own would be meaningless), the dancers and even the spectators feel and move, and to allow everyone to contribute to it. 'A musician,' says Chernoff, 'can afford to take his time because of the openness of the arrangements to various interpretations. He does not have to change much because he is not trying to monopolize the

possibilities. He knows he is not responsible for providing all the interest and that he can only suggest some of the potential that is there.'[11]

This brings us back to what we have seen is an important aspect of African musicking: the musician regards himself as responsible, not just for the sounds that he makes, but for the whole social progress of the event, for its success as a human encounter. The musician as he improvises responds not only to the inner necessities of the sound world he is creating but also to the dynamics of the human situation as it develops around him. It is his task to create not just a single set of sound perspectives which are to be contemplated and enjoyed by listeners, but a multiplicity of opportunities for participation along a number of different perspectives. As Chernoff says: 'The music is best considered as an arrangement of gaps where one may add a rhythm, rather than as a dense pattern of sound.'[12] And again: 'As they display style and involvement, people make their music socially effective, transforming the dynamic power of the rhythms into a focus of character and community. We are even quite close to a metaphysics of rhythm if we remember that sensing the whole in a system of multiple rhythms depends on comprehending, or "hearing", as the Africans say, the beat that is never sounded. At the convergence of essence and form stands the master drummer, not creating new rhythms but giving order and organization to those already there. Every place, a drummer once told me, has its own rhythms which give it character; going there, one must find a rhythm which fits, and improvise on it.'[13]

Here we see a social purpose in the performance of music which goes far beyond the evocation of an individual response to a sound-object such as we find in the western classical tradition; such a purpose could not possibly be served by the note-perfect reproduction of a musical entity created at another time, in another place, for another purpose, no matter how perfect in itself that entity may be or how skilled and sensitive the performance. It is only by keeping possibilities open, by modifying the performance as it goes along, that it becomes possible to pick up the sense of an occasion, to bring it into focus and enhance it for the greater social and spiritual benefit of all. The traditions of African music

represent a cultural achievement of the first order in their gift to the the music maker of the materials and the idiom through which he or she can do this. It is a gift which has been passed on to the Afro-American musician.

It is of course not only in the African tradition of improvisation that one finds this carefully maintained balance between, on the one hand, existing musical material and organizational principle (one could, by analogy with spoken language, legitimately call it a syntax) and on the other the sense of what the occasion requires. The sitarist Viram Jasani, in conversation with Derek Bailey, says of Indian improvisation: 'The time that we spend with a Guru is purely spent in trying to understand the framework in which Indian music is set. And a Guru doesn't, or your teacher doesn't, really tell you how to improvise . . . What (the student) really learns from his teacher is the framework in which improvisation or performance of Indian music takes place.'[14] Or the flamenco guitarist Paco Peña: 'I'd say that within a piece you can reach certain heights because you have let yourself improvise, say, a little bit, not too much, but that little bit changes the whole character of the piece. But I certainly would not say that the whole piece is improvised — anyway in my case it never is completely improvised — but it is true that it can change according to how I feel at the moment . . . you are completely free to improvise and you also have the choice not to improvise. You can leave it as it is, simply because it feels better to leave it as it is.'[15]

To improvise, then, is to establish a different set of human relationships, a different kind of society, from that established by fully literate musicking. As we examined the relationships that are to be perceived when people come together to take part in different kinds of classical performance, let us now look at the relationships brought into being when musicians improvise in the idioms of the Afro-American tradition.

I have already made some observations concerning blues as performance; we can now look more deeply into its meaning. Once again, we find that no blues performance is invented from scratch, but consists, both poetically and musically, mainly of pre-existing material. The performer may, indeed, perform the blues exactly as he or she heard it from another

singer, merely giving, perhaps, his or her own twist to the melody, a different accentuation to the words, a different shape to the instrumental 'responses'; these changes may not be premeditated or even intentional, but may arise simply from lapses of memory, or from the possession of a different kind of voice or different instrumental technique — they may be none the less effective for that in the new circumstances in which the performance is taking place. And of course a performer, having found an effective way of putting across a blues, may do it in the same way over and over again — but this does not rule out, at any time, the possibility of introducing something new. A mediocre performer may be satisfied with evolving a performance and sticking to it, and, indeed, audiences may demand that he or she do so (recording artists are constantly under pressure to perform exactly 'as on the record') but the great and questing artist will remain constantly in search of the performance which fits a given situation most completely, and will remain sensitive to the listeners' responses and adapt to them.

Solo artists, as were most of the early blues singers, have of course only their own performance and interaction with the audience to worry about; we have seen how they articulate the listeners' thoughts and emotions, drawing them closer together in an intense and mutually supportive community. When the accompaniment (if one can call it that in view of its role as second expressive voice) is played by a group, who might be playing electric guitar, piano, alto saxophone, string bass and drums, a new and more complex social situation is brought into existence. The musicians are usually not reading from written parts; their performance will probably have been roughed out and rehearsed, but invention is possible at any stage. The music of the blues, as we saw earlier, conforms to quite orthodox progressions of tonal harmony, with endless repetitions of the same twelve-bar pattern, and it is this pattern that mediates the relationships between the musicians. Because it leaves room for a greater degree of spontaneity than those literate forms we looked at earlier, and, because, too, the form and the content of the performance can be determined to a great degree by the response of the audience, performers and listeners are in a more intimate relationship than literate

musicking can create. From the moment when the performance begins, performers and listeners are dynamically engaged with one another; the listeners respond, not with stillness and the formal signs of 'polite' attention, but with cries, handclaps, shouts, movement and dance — which are much better-mannered in black society than silence. Performers and listeners are bringing into existence, if only for the duration of the performance, an ideal society very different from that created by a classical performance; it confronts the values of industrial society with a celebration of the body and its movements, an affirmation of those qualities of warmth, communality and emotional honesty, which black Americans call soul.

An improvised performance, through the constant repetition that is bound to occur in the working life of a professional, or even active amateur, performer, may well become what one might call a non-literate composition; the line between them is thin. Some non-literate cultures place more value on the accurate rendition of the received text than do others; European vernacular traditions, as we have seen, place great emphasis on accuracy, and this emphasis can also be found in some aspects of the Afro-American tradition in which white culture is dominant. Thus we find that the preservation of the text is of more importance in white country music than in black blues. But regardless of whether the performance has grown out of improvisation and settled down into a routine, or whether it is a carefully worked-out arrangement, one feature that remains constant is the possibility of the creative involvement of the performing artist in the very substance of the music. Even when it is traditional material or the work of another musician that is being performed, the performance is the performer's own, and he or she is free to make changes, the permissable extent of which is determined by the idiom in which the performer works, and will be well known to all.

On the other hand, nothing the improvising artist does is completely new. His apparent freedom lies in the recognition of necessity, as represented by the idiom, to which his or her first loyalty is given; the artist is manipulating material which has been received from the idiom through prolonged immersion in it to the point where it becomes part of the

performer's own nature. The apparent naturalness of even the 'primitive' blues singer of the rural American south is thus an illusion; like any other musician the singer has an idea of the effect desired and works hard to achieve it. And thus, too, paradoxically, the individual sound of each musician results from an affirmation of the strength of the tradition and of the performer's place within it. Even the most apparently revolutionary of artists, for example those who created the jazz style known as bebop in the late 1940s were seeking, not to overthrow the traditional relationships but to reaffirm their power in a new context.

Bebop is interesting, in that it represents a quite conscious regrasping of the principles of blues, in eclipse to the white-dominated bands of the swing era; its early development owed more to blues-based bands such as that of Count Basie (and most especially to their rhythm sections) than to the swing bands which were its more obvious predecessors. What the beboppers were out to do was to make the blues swing not less but more; their approach was perfectly comprehensible within the blues tradition. Bebop shares with blues the simple basis of improvisation over an endlessly repeated harmonic sequence, whether it be the blues progression itself, an elaboration of it, or the harmonies of a popular song.

Which brings us back to the passage quoted earlier from Jonathan Harvey's book on Stockhausen, in which we can see further evidence of that profound misunderstanding of the nature of improvisation which seems to be common among classical musicians today. Within that tradition, what Harvey calls functional harmony is the central technique for the creation of that surprise and drama which are essential characteristics of the music, and when he speaks of the impossibility, in group improvisation, of making 'cogent' harmony, he clearly means harmony which will fulfil its traditional function of creating tension and drama through the juxtaposition of chords in time. In this he is correct, since it is unlikely in the extreme that all members of an improvising group will all simultaneously hit on the same unexpected but dramatically apposite chord, but he can see no alternative other than the abolition of tonal functional harmony altogether.

Within the Afro-American tradition, however, effective group improvisation has remained possible because the musicians have changed the meaning of tonal harmony. Blues, as we have seen, uses simple, even banal progressions of a quite conventional kind, which are drained of dramatic content simply by repetition, so that the progression gains strength, not through surprise but through predictability. Bebop improvisation, while its harmonies are more elaborated, still repeats them in cycles of sixteen, twenty-four or thirty-two bars, the conventional lengths of the popular songs on which the improvisations are commonly based. These harmonic progressions, which might be in themselves quite elaborate (many of them are the work of those 'Broadway masters' whom I discussed in the last chapter), are the 'givens' of the performance, the underpinning which holds it together, while the real interest lies elsewhere, in the ingenious and expressive improvised patterns which the players build on that foundation. The fact that the harmonies are drained of all dramatic content means that that personal drama of the individual soul which has been the essence of a composition in the classical tradition from its seventeenth-century beginnings to the contemporary avant garde, is not a concern of the jazz or blues musician; absent also is any sense of climax and resolution, any of the drawing-on of the listener through time, through those often abrupt and even violent contrasts of volume and timbre, tempo and texture, which are essential ingredients of that drama.

We see here a crucial difference even from those great solo improvisations which so excited the listeners of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven: the performers are not trying to invent, on the spur of the moment, a composition which will compare with those which the musician, in the peace and quiet of his study, and with unlimited time in which to work it all out, can elaborate and present through the medium of notation; they are making a performance. A composition, in the classical sense of the word, is a music-object which has an existence over and above any performance of it; the processes of composition and of performance are secondary to the existence of the object, the first taking place only to bring it into being, the second in order to bring it to realization. But

improvisation is all process; there is no product. What we are taking part in is, in the first case, the re-enactment of a drama that was complete and done with before a note of it was heard, while in the second we are taking part, at first rather than at second hand, in the drama of creation itself. The improvisors are playing a dangerous game; at any point many things can go wrong, just as they can in any other living relationship, and only the most skilful, quick-thinking and above all 'accommodating to the others' as Aguzzari has it, can stay the course. This is why listeners see no reason to restrain their applause until the end of the performance, for they are applauding, not one thing, but many skilful and daring acts which are being carried out by the musicians as ritual representatives of the whole community.

When Harvey tells us of the replacement in western music over the last four hundred years or so of improvised by fully-composed pieces, he is describing not, as he seems to think, an improvement but a change in attitude which is profound and which reflects the European preoccupation with things which has developed over that period of time. He is not the only musician to have been misled by the preoccupations of four hundred years of European music; the subject of his book, Stockhausen, has himself been pleased to observe: 'I think that if free jazz musicians also played "composed" new music their techniques and their sense of coherent musical entities would develop even more,'[16] while Boulez dismisses improvisation thus: '... with improvisations, because they are purely affective phenomena, there is not the slightest scope for anyone else to join in... Improvisation is a personal psychodrama and is regarded as such. Whether we are interested or not, we cannot graft our own affective, intellectual or personal structure on a base of this sort.'[17] One should not perhaps think too hardly of these eminent musicians for what is after all a lack not so much in themselves as in the tradition in which they work and in the training which they received. For the modern classical tradition (by which I mean not only the tradition of composition but also that in which performing musicians work) provides nothing in the way of idioms, models or performance situations in which an aspiring improvisor might work; without a score before him he is left

with only the terrifying prospect of being free to play whatever comes to mind, with no guide for procedure, no agreed conventions, no common stock of material, no way even of knowing whether he is doing what he is doing well or badly. No wonder Boulez cannot graft his own affective structure on to such a base; no wonder Harvey, in a passage just preceding that quoted earlier, finds that group improvisation can produce only 'either boringly obvious climaxes or lulls or . . . a veneer of complexity which sounds all too obviously the unsatisfactory handiwork of chance,'[18] when from the very beginning of their musical training these musicians, like virtually every beginner, were in all probability told that 'playing by ear' is inferior to playing from the notes, that they must stick to 'the music' and not 'play about' on their instrument, and were made to play every written note exactly as written.

Let us now return to a consideration, which I broke away from earlier, of the kinds of relationship that are set up among the participants in a musical performance, the kinds of ideal societies that are brought into existence. Let us think first of a group of improvising jazz musicians. Having agreed on the tune upon which they are going to improvise, and on a tempo, they are joined together, even if they have never played together before, by the common idiom, the common stock of material and by the melody and its harmonies. But while the players are free to engage in dialogue with one another, to explore, affirm and celebrate their various identities and their relationship, in a more direct and less restrained way than when there is a score to mediate those relationships, they are still bound by the requirements of the idiom; there are ways in which they may respond to one another and ways in which they may not. They are caught in the ancient and creative paradox of all human social life: that relationships can be established between people only through the acceptance of some kind of common language, and yet the very conventions which allow for communication and interaction also structure that interaction and prevent the participants from attaining to more than a certain degree of intimacy. We have seen how the modern symphony concert is a ceremony which celebrates, among other values, the isolation of the individual in western

society, and how even more domestic forms of music making, such as that of an amateur string quartet, aim for and achieve only a certain degree of intimacy in the encounter between the participants. Developments in jazz, on the other hand, at least since the bebop generation, can be seen as a search, not so much for new sounds or new rhythms, as for new kinds of relationship, unmediated by the restraints imposed by industrial society.

In the case of the original generation of beboppers, we read that many other musicians, even if they knew the harmonic changes (which were, after all, common property) were completely flummoxed by the new rhythms and new ways of phrasing and articulating; it was if someone had taken a familiar vocabulary and, by altering the syntax by means of which the relationships between the words were established, had created a new language, tantalizingly similar to the old, but one in which they were unable to converse. And since, as we noted earlier, members of a culture define themselves as much by what they are not as by what they are, this exclusion brought about a greater freedom and intimacy among those who *could* cope with the new twists of language, an intimacy that was not unconnected with the first stirrings of the modern black civil rights movement and with the fact that white musicians for a long time could not cope with the style. The new musical forms and relationships articulated and celebrated new social relationships in which the blacks, free to love one another like brothers and sisters, at the same time received the respect that was their due. It was a society held together not by power (for all are equal in the jazz group and all share equally the creative responsibility which is not delegated to any outside authority, either composer or conductor) but by love and mutual responsibility, a society which can exist only if its members are all fully realized human beings and mindful of one another's needs. That this society did not, could not, exist outside the time and space of the performance, and that it contrasted so cruelly with the actual society in which they had to live and make a living, must have induced appalling strains and have contributed to the destruction of many fine musicians of the time.

The stripping-off of the constraints of tonal harmony

(which is to say, of the constraints imposed by white society not only on the blacks but also on itself) which followed in the sixties and after, and the affirmation of values of community and autonomy can be seen in the titles of many jazz albums that were issued in the 1960s: *Spiritual Unity*, *A Love Supreme*, *This Is Our Music*, and *One Step Beyond* — very sixties preoccupations, a cynic might say, but I doubt whether that is how it would have appeared to the artists. None of them would have found in their performances anything that was incompatible with the ethic or the aesthetic of the old blues; they were as faithful to the idiom, and through the idiom to the ritual and the community, as had been the bluesmen. In renouncing harmony they were perhaps signalling a more austere rejection of the blandishments of American affluence, but then, this has always been a powerful strain in black American culture. As Lawrence Levine says: 'For large numbers of Negroes, the bulk of them at the lower end of the social and economic scale, it was possible and necessary to speak openly about a number of realities that American popular culture needed to suppress'.[19] And as far as the 1960s were concerned, it is possible to argue that the Age of Aquarius, so recently begun, with which that decade was so preoccupied, was no more than a naïve and literal interpretation (a literalness which black Americans themselves were far too experienced to fall for) of those enduring preoccupations, those truths, of which black musicking had been a ritual since the days of slavery; as we shall see, the forms that the white popular music of that time took were, in a manner of speaking, 'literal' interpretations of black American ways of musicking. It was the gift of black America to white society, which did not, and could not, understand it rightly.

The society of the jazz performance has long since been enlarged to include those white musicians and listeners who can accept its premises; the apparent exclusiveness of the original black society is always, it seems, accompanied by an implicit invitation to whites to take part as well — with the ironic proviso 'if you can'. This is the 'trap of reciprocity' of which Edwin Mason writes — a tender trap, one must add, from which both parties ultimately benefit.

We should note also the supreme importance of the

relationship of the musicians with dancers, and the importance of dance in the development of blues and jazz improvisation. In black culture, we must never forget, dancing is as subtle, as intellectual and as ritualistic an improvised art as musicking. A story from Marshall and Jean Stearns's *Jazz Dance* must serve to make the point. It dates from 1937 and comes from Leon James, one of a band of dancers who used to frequent the famous Savoy Ballroom in Harlem at that time, later turning professional and making a career in Hollywood: "'Dizzy Gillespie was featured in the brass section of Teddy Hill's screaming band. A lot of people had him pegged as a clown, but we loved him. Every time he played a crazy lick, we cut a crazy step to go with it. And he dug us and blew even crazier stuff to see if we could dance to it, a kind of game, with the musicians and the dancers challenging each other'". The Stearns's comment: 'Great musicians inspire great dancers — and vice versa — until the combination pyramids into the greatest performances of both. "I wish jazz was played more often for dancing," said Lester "Prez" Young during his last years with the Count Basie Band. "The rhythm of the dancers comes back to you when you're playing."'[20] Such a peak of social interaction can, of course, occur only when both musicians and dancers are free, within their idiom, to respond directly to one another, that is, when they are improvising.

In his book *Improvisation* (the fact that it is to my knowledge the only book in English which deals with the subject shows the importance which it is allowed in official western music), Derek Bailey, himself a noted guitarist and improvisor, makes a distinction between what he calls 'idiomatic' and 'free' improvisation. The former is the kind of improvisation with which we have been concerned so far, in which the performer works within an idiom which provides the framework for entering into relationships with other musicians and with listeners, and which shapes and limits those relationships. As Bailey says: 'No idiomatic improvisor is concerned with improvisation as some sort of separate activity. What they are absolutely concerned for is the idiom; for them improvisation serves the idiom and is the expression of the idiom.'[21] And the idiom, as we have seen, is the ritual embodiment of the community. The 'free' improvisor, on the other hand,

considers him or herself to be free of any kind of idiomatic restraint, and thus to be relating to fellow musicians and listeners directly without any mediation whatsoever, even that of a commonly agreed musical language. Here is Bailey again: 'For many people free improvisation is about playing with other people. Some of the greatest opportunities provided by free improvisation are in the exploration of relationships between people.'[22] True enough; I have found in my own experience that some of the most intense and satisfying musical experiences, both as performer and as listener, have come from just such free improvisation. It is worth giving further consideration to its nature and meaning.

Primarily, it means that the performers believe themselves to be playing without any idiomatic guide whatsoever, without any preconceptions concerning what they are going to play, without, in fact, any external guide to their actions other than what they decide on the spur of the moment to do, either as an initiative or in response to an initiative by another player. The improvisors do not feel tied even to any set units of pitch or time; there is not necessarily any scale or regular beat to which they play. Nor are they restricted to the use of orthodox western instruments, either those of the symphony orchestra or those of vernacular music; elaborate sets of *ad hoc* percussion made from whatever makes an interesting sound when struck, African drums, South American flutes and any number of home-made instruments are liable to turn up. It follows that orthodox concepts of instrumental tone or technique are also thought unimportant, and even the quality of sound in itself is secondary.

To the listener accustomed to the mellifluous sounds of classical music that must seem like a recipe for intolerable cacophony. Certainly, unless all those taking part practise the most intense discipline, cacophony will result — but the discipline is not so much that of instrumental technique as of care and mutual consideration, careful listening and considerate playing. The free improvisor, in fact, is seeking not an idiom but those universals of music which transcend idiom, and through them the universals of human relationships. Like all close human relationships, it is a risky business, of all forms

of musicking the most dangerous; the musicians show themselves to one another, and to whoever is listening, technically and emotionally naked, without any outside constraints to mediate their relationship. It is often said that free improvisation is fine for the players but hell for the listeners, and while in my experience that is not true, in that when the playing is going well performers and listeners alike are caught up in an intensity of community that can only be called erotic, there is, on the other hand, no need for anyone present to be a mere listener; everyone is free to take part. Just as, ideally, there are no listeners to a conversation, so free improvisation will go best if everyone present is taking an active part in the process. At its best, free improvisation celebrates a set of informal, even loving, relationships which can be experienced by everyone present, and brings into existence, at least for the duration of the performance, a society whose closest political analogy is with anarchism — anarchism, that is, in the real rather than journalistic meaning of the word, a society in which government is not imposed from the top or from the centre, but comes from each individual, who is most fully realized in contributing to the wellbeing of the community — the polar opposite, one might say, of the symphony concert.

It is thus interesting that free improvisation is frequently a meeting-point for classical and vernacular musicians, the latter largely but by no means exclusively from a background in jazz (we should remember that few vernacular musicians allow themselves to be placed into a single category but are liable to work within a variety of styles and genres). Jazz, of course, requires a very exacting apprenticeship, and those musicians who engage in free improvisation are often those who have, as it were, gone through jazz styles and come out the other side still looking for closer contact with other musicians. Approaching them from the opposite direction have been many classically trained musicians, often fugitives from the centralized, composer-dominated avant-garde. In many cases they have made a conscious break with the social and political implications of classical music generally and of their conservatoire training in particular, from which contemporary classical music offers no escape, however technically

revolutionary it may appear to have been; thus musicians from both sides of western musical culture have found themselves making common cause in the dissolution of idiom and technique, and in the quest for direct interaction.

Does the free improvisor, then, work without any rules or conventions whatsoever? The question relates to the earlier discussion in which I suggested not only that culture is a set of attitudes and assumptions which underlie conscious thought and even perception but also that, as Geertz says, 'a cultureless human being would probably turn out to be . . . a wholly mindless and consequently unworkable monstrosity.'[23] If musical performances establish relationships, no relationships can be established without the existence of commonly understood meanings, and there can be no meanings without rules. Where, then, do the rules come from which enable free improvisors to establish those vital relationships within the group and the intimacy which they seek? Clearly, not from outside constraints such as melodic, rhythmic or harmonic idioms, but rather from those universal patterns of human behaviour and response in which it is necessary for the players to believe implicitly, if not necessarily consciously, before engaging in such a risky activity. What happens in practice is that as the musicians play together they evolve a set of common understandings; they invent, as it were, their own culture — not from scratch, of which I believe the human mind to be incapable, but from the creative blending of the manner of thinking and playing of each musician (since each will bring to the performance habits of playing, favorite procedures and habitual responses) into what can only be called a new idiom. This idiom, because it is unconscious and habitual, eventually becomes as binding on the members of the group as is the flamenco idiom on the flamenco musician, or the idiom of Indian classical music on the Indian musician; to this extent, free improvisation is different from other forms not in kind (there is only one kind) but in the degree to which the musicians rely on their own experience to create the idiom, the syntax, through which they establish their relationships. There is in fact no escape from culture or from the necessary limits which it imposes on relationships; but the attempt to escape may well result in either the creation of new,

or the rediscovery of very old, modes of human social response.

In most of the world's musical traditions the word 'improvisation' has little significance, since what we have been calling improvisation is just the normal way of musicking; they call it, quite simply, playing, and the idiom in which they work is, equally simply, 'the way we play'. It is only in the modern west that a separate word has become necessary for what is, after all, only the assumption by the performer of responsibility for what is played as well as for how it is played, and thus for the kind of society that is brought into existence during the performance, and for the lack of separation between the roles of composer and performer which are so clearly demarcated in the western classical tradition today. This separation, with which may be associated a rise in the status of the composer relative to that of the performer and a devaluation of improvisation, has played its part in the decline of creative energy in the classical tradition which can be seen and heard around us today. It would seem as if there is a direct relationship between the strength of, and the respect given to, a tradition of improvisation (or 'playing') and the health of the musical culture in general. Certainly the state of exuberant proliferation that has characterized Afro-American musicking in our century contrasts strongly with the increasing withdrawal of classical composers from the concerns of even the majority of classical-music lovers, let alone the overwhelming majority of westerners, who, contrary to official assumption, are perfectly capable of creating and certainly of understanding a musical performance. And even within the history of the Afro-American tradition it is possible to see an ebb and flow of creative energy in the intermittent eclipse of improvisation, generally in pursuit of a more perfect, elaborate or predictable music-object, such as occurred in jazz in the swing era, and occurs today in large and expensive performances by superstar rock groups.

NOTES

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14. BAILEY, Derek: *op. cit.*, p 16.
15. *ibid.*, p 26–27.
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21. BAILEY, Derek: *op. cit.*, p 28.
22. *ibid.*, p 125.
23. GEERTZ, Clifford: *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, Hutchinson, 1975, p 68.