Book Review: *Improvising Improvisation: From Out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature*

Gary Peters, *Improvising Improvisation: From Out of Philosophy, Music, Dance, and Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. 288 pages.

In 2013, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, an organization funded by the Canadian government, awarded $2.5 million to the support the foundation of the Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (ICSI).[1] ICSI was an outgrowth of the research project known as Improvisation, Community and Social Practice (ICASP), and it upholds the commitment to social justice of its antecedent organization. In the words of executive director Ajay Heble,

> Over the last several years, our work has helped to shape and define a brand new field of interdisciplinary inquiry. . . . With the institute we now seek to formalize that field by creating positive social change through the confluence of improvisational arts, innovative scholarship, and collaborative action.[2]

The institute is the biggest of its kind, and its utopic take on improvisation studies, in particular its commitment to social engagement and collaborative action, looms large. I mention it here because Gary Peters's *Improvising Improvisation* is clearly written against it. Combining personal "memoirs" with extended essays on various artistic forms, Peters leverages a wide range of philosophical texts to elaborate a theory of improvisation defined against what he sees as the dominant one in improvisation studies. I should say, however, that "theory" is probably not a word Peters would countenance; he sees the book as itself an improvisation, not just a book "about" improvisation. "I'm *not* a philosopher; I'm an improviser," he declares at the outset (1). It is not always clear what that distinction accomplishes, though, since the text does seem to mount an academic polemic of the standard kind, valorizing apparently unlikely values while seeking distance from the mainstream in improvisation studies.

The argumentation works by reading improvisational events philosophically in such a way as to counter the utopian perspective. Kant and Arendt are used to "resist the allure of dialogical improvisation," and instead support the idea that improvisation can be solitary (19).

1. See ICSI site, at http://improvisationinstitute.ca/research-site/university-of-regina-regina-improvisation-studies-centre-risc/, accessed 9/1/2019.

2. http://improvisationinstitute.ca/about-iicsi/directors-welcome

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Peters uses Heidegger to "run against the grain of much writing on improvisation," by showing that improvisation can be about "fixing the unfixed" rather than the other way around (23). Deleuze is used to help us move past the "overly dialectical dynamic" in favor of a picture of improvisation that is "diverse but not different" (57). Derrida's *espacement* is used in a discussion of drummer Bernard Purdie to show that even in musical situations that are apparently "legislative" (that is, I gather, highly regular), there is still improvisation happening (68). In a chapter called "Deleuzian Improvisation," Peters asserts that, although it is usually assumed that "the essence of improvisation [is] the avoidance of repetition," in fact "predictability" is the true risk, one that takes place in "at the level of choice rather than decision" (109). Nietzsche and Ricoeur are used to go "beyond the current and predominant improvisatory *doxa*" to show that habit is not necessarily something to avoid (114).

Precision, severity, predictability, solitude, fixity, regularity, habit: all are values that you wouldn't necessarily think of as belonging to improvisation but which Peters, against "most" authors yet with the support of his cited philosophers, affirms. The content is different in every chapter, ranging from jazz to free improvisation to dance, but the contour and personality are consistent: self-assured iconoclasm positioned against what "most" people think.

In the middle of the book, Peters offers a taxonomy of improvisational forms, developed from Derek Bailey's *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (1980). Peters proposes six forms in total: *fixed idiomatic, semi-fixed idiomatic, unfixed idiomatic, unfixed cross-idiomatic, fixed non-idiomatic, unfixed non-idiomatic.* This offers finer detail than Bailey's original, and his taxonomy often feels right. Charlie Parker (semi-fixed idiomatic) does indeed seem to belong to a different category from "jazz-rock" (unfixed cross-idiomatic), although Bailey would probably lump them together as simply "idiomatic."

Peters shows a clear preference for the various "non-idiomatic" forms. For example, "accuracy" is, for Peters, associated with "much improvisation," which is asserted to be idiomatic, and which has, "at best, a negative freedom." Non-idiomatic improvisation, on the other hand, involves "precision," which he celebrates in Heideggerian terms. Accuracy is reproductive, precision is productive. And "of course, the former is the familiar and predominant model" (47). Given the book's unambiguous rhetorical challenge to what is familiar and predominant, there is a clear valorization of some forms over others.

The problem here is not the author's personal preferences, but rather his reification of the notion of non-idiomatic improvisation itself, an idea that has been widely discredited. Postulating non-idiomatic improvisation belittles the forms against which the definition is made. It is as much as to say that *you* have a mere idiom with predictable rules of engagement, while *I* do improvisation *itself*. This idea contains the essence of exnomination, as George Lewis points out in his well-known article, "Improvised Music After 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives."[3] Indeed, Peters acknowledges the ways in which this idea

3. George E. Lewis "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (1996): 91–122.

has problematic racial implications. He even cites Lewis. But he does so in a way that leaves the notion of non-idiomatic improvisation intact (84):

The act of liberating oneself from the constraints of specific idioms, jazz in particular, might. . .also result in what Lewis describes as the "erasure" of, in this case, an alternative black aesthetic that might challenge the often unspoken Eurocentrism of much non-idiomatic improvisation.

Lewis is definitely the right source to cite here, but his insight is not that "the act of liberating oneself from constraints of specific idioms" resulted in the erasure of Blackness from the experimental tradition. It's also not that "much non-idiomatic improvisation" has a tacit Eurocentrism. Instead, it's that there is no such thing as non-idiomatic improvisation, Eurocentric or otherwise. The word "non-idiomatic" is basically an indirect put-down. Peters chooses not to take up this discussion, "at the risk of being part of this self-same culture of erasure" (85). He tweaks and elaborates Bailey's original, but as far as I can tell he remains committed to the idea that there are some musics that have idioms and some that don't, that are pure and abstracted from any idiomatic particularity.

A broader, but related, question is what the philosophers are doing here in the first place. If Peters wants to bemoan clichés about improvisation that are "hijacked in the swinging sixties by assorted liberals and hippies. . .enslaved to a touchy-feely, well-being agenda that would be enough to make Merleau-Ponty's flesh crawl," I have no objection (148). It is when his zeal to counter these clichés leads him to put them in the mouths of musicians, and then to offer his own rarefied philosophizing as a remedy, that I must quarrel. Consider this example, on the subject of Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (82):

> Although Ornette describes this recording as a "collective improvisation," a tag that overdetermines much of the critical response to the album, it would be more accurate to think of it as a *multiplicitous* improvisation, an "assemblage" or "body without organs," to think with Deleuze and Guattari, rather than a communicative community.

I do not believe we really needed Deleuze and Guattari to clarify Coleman here. We have no reason, moreover, to believe that when Coleman says "collective," he has anything in common with the "touchy-feely well-being" agenda that Peters has chosen as his adversary. A philosophy of improvisation that takes the theoretical contributions of musicians seriously need not fall victim to the corny liberal apologetics against which Peters is positioned. Peters cites Miles Davis here and there and deals at length with Derek Bailey, but the vast majority of his citations are from philosophers who did not care about improvisation. Why, if he's not a philosopher, does Peters cite so many philosophers?

As a whole, the book is a series of complex philosophical readings of improvisation, each of which in one way or another reinforces a single broader claim: that most studies of improvisation are overly bound up with "the valorization of dialogue, the collective, the communicative community, and the performative vaporization of hierarchies, boundaries and exclusion" (112).

This broader thesis is not really falsifiable. That is not in itself a problem, in my opinion. However, nonfalsifiable theses always beg the same question: why does the author *want* this statement to be true? And this is essentially a psychological question; the real truth is an

emotional truth. Nothing wrong with that either. Again and again, I wonder what Peters has against dialogue, communality, and the "warm glow of utopic togetherness" (26). In my opinion, all of Peters's complex philosophical work points back to his antipathy for this kind of thing. He can, moreover, be pretty vitriolic about it. So I find it odd that this psychological question is never addressed. Doing so, of course, would cross a line philosophical texts respect absolutely. It would mean dealing with matters of personal vulnerability, taste, criticism, etc. Peters, like "most" philosophers, resists that explicitly: "critique is for the critics" (84). But if any philosophical text would be willing to cross that line, it ought to be this one, since it is so defiantly opposed to everything "most" people do and think. Even if they succeed in resisting the allure of "wishy-washy" (44), "touchy-feely" (148) dialogism, surely improvisations – of which this book is supposed to be one – should still be personal. And in the arena of the personal, perhaps Peters could have gone a little deeper.

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