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IMPROVISATION AS LIBERATION: ENDEAVOURS OF RESISTANCE IN FREE JAZZ

LA IMPROVISACIÓN COMO LIBERACIÓN: ASPIRACIONES DE RESISTENCIA EN EL FREE JAZZ

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Abstract

This investigation seeks to explore connection points between music and societal processes, by linking improvised music to cultural networks and social practices. Exceeding musical and action-theoretical reflections, the improvisation is regarded from a cultural sociological perspective, which asks how improvisational practices can be integrated into cultural, historical and discursive contexts. Taking free jazz as the scope of the investigation, it is argued that there is a necessity to discuss its characteristic improvisation, in connection to the critical, radical and aesthetic practices of the African-American community. The musical practices of free jazz, therefore, can be seen as social practices, in which a form of resistance is manifested through an intended liberation of the current musical and cultural order. Improvisation processes expressed in free jazz hence reflect an ethnically motivated strategy, in which the ruling system of values is questioned, while simultaneously offering alternative modes of expression.

Keywords:

Improvisation, free jazz, musical practices, cultural resistance, emancipation.

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Resumen

En esta investigación se propone explorar puntos de conexión entre la música y los procesos sociales, vinculando a la improvisación musical con redes culturales y prácticas sociales. Más allá de las reflexiones musicológicas y de la teoría de la acción, en el artículo la improvisación es considerada desde la perspectiva de la sociología cultural, la cual se pregunta cómo las prácticas improvisatorias pueden ser integradas en contextos culturales, históricos y discursivos. Así, se toma el free jazz como objeto de investigación y se argumenta que es necesario discutir sus modos específicos de improvisación, en conexión con las prácticas críticas, radicales y estéticas de la comunidad afroamericana. En este sentido, las prácticas musicales se pueden considerar como prácticas sociales en las que una forma de resistencia es manifestada a través de una liberación intencional del actual orden musical y cultural. Los procesos de improvisación, como los expresados en el free jazz, reflejan una estrategia étnicamente motivada en la que se cuestiona el sistema imperante de valores, a la vez que ofrece modos alternativos de expresión.

Palabras clave:

Improvisación, free jazz, prácticas musicales, resistencia cultural, emancipación

Improvisation, in its social and cultural contexts, has so far scarcely been the focus of much scientific research. It is still “a surprisingly understudied musical and cultural phenomenon” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 18). Sociology, in particular, hasn’t thus far reflected the scope in the appropriate adequacy of its discipline. Improvisation processes are, however, always positioned in a specific relationship proportional to the culture in which they occur (Belgrad, 1998; Fischlin & Heble, 2004; Guttandin, 1996). In this sense, music doesn’t have to be considered a detached entity of social reality, since it interferes in various ways with societal dynamics: as an “impulse taker and tendency indicator” (Stahl, 2004: 34); it instead, is in a direct relationship proportional to them.

The aim of this investigation is to explore connection points between music and societal processes, linking improvised music to cultural networks and social practices. The improvised principles that occur in free jazz, thereby form the central scope of this

investigation. The focus of this analysis will demonstrate how elementary improvisational practices of free jazz can be placed in a socio-cultural context. The social dimension of improvisational processes draws particular interest, especially in free jazz, as its emergence falls into the midst of a period of the rebellious and emancipation aspiring African-American Civil Rights Movement (Jost, 1982: 171-176). It shall be analysed whether these connections between improvised music and attempts of resistance and emancipation are merely assumptions (without significant evidence), or if they can effectively be successfully linked and are directly compatible. Therefore, this analysis pursues the critical question: to what extent can improvised based free jazz be associated with mechanisms of protest and liberation, which go beyond the musical practices.

With regard to its structure, the work presented contains three chapters. In the first part, inner-musical characteristics of free jazz, which enable a clear differentiation to the

superordinate category “jazz”, are presented. Since the improvisation is the central characteristic associated with free jazz, as will be shown below, the musicological and sociological reflections of the concept of improvisation –which are most relevant for the task– will also be discussed.

These implications form an essential basis for the following chapter, which constitutes the central part of the investigation. This chapter will pose the article’s crucial question: *if and if so, to what extent* the improvisation as a constitutive attribute of free jazz can be associated with liberation and resistance movements. This intention is grounded in Alfred Schütz’s underlying principle, whereby music has to be understood in a *meaning-context*. This meaning-context is not bound to a semantic conceptual scheme; nevertheless, it is based on a communication process (Schütz, 1972). Following these considerations, this exploration, on the one hand, asks which possibilities the non-verbal and non-conceptual musical communication offers. The particular interest is how far the musical practices in free jazz are to be understood simultaneously as social practices, and to what extent attempts of insurgency and emancipation are articulated through the musical practices found in free jazz. On the other hand, it will be highlighted to what extent these efforts are exceeding the musical performance platform.

For this proposition, a brief outline of the history of jazz remains indispensable; it is relevant, in particular for free jazz, that its ground-breaking improvisation cannot be understood without referring to its lost practices of communication, through music and community building in the African-American tradition (Charles & Comolli, 1971; Fischlin & Heble, 2004). The presentation of the article, therefore, should be comprehended as a sociological analysis in a historical sense.

It seeks to generate bridges between musical practices and social relations; bridges which, at the outset, are not always evident, but which are taking shape on closer examination. In doing so, it is less a matter of proving how effectively free jazz was in its explicit details for the efforts of emancipation. It will, more importantly, seek to identify how multifaceted the potentials of resistance are, which are being precipitated through improvisational practices.

In the concluding part of this article, the knowledge gained from the first two chapters will be summarized; thereby, the possibilities of resistance expressed in free jazz will be illustrated. The closing chapter will also deal with eventual limitations of these rebellious endeavours. The paper closes with some forethought concerning the future potentials of improvised music.

Improvisation as a key factor of free jazz

The development of free jazz in the 1960’s marks “the most radical break in the history of jazz” (Jost, 1982: 170) and precipitates a “musical revolution” (Baskerville, 1994: 492). Its emergence causes a “serious transformation” in the progression of jazz, which hence lies in the fact that the musical modes of expression in free jazz are diametrically opposed to those commonly being subsumed under jazz (Noglić, 1990: 267). The following inner musical specifics form the basis of free jazz (as opposed to “jazz”) (Charles & Comolli, 1971: 220-250; Jost, 1982: 180-182; Sterneck, 1998; Stahl, 2004: 35):

- Renunciation of guidelines of the functional harmony and tonality.
- Dissociation of a default basic rhythm.
- Breaking with traditional formal patterns.

- Bridging of the divide between sound and noise.

The terms “renunciation”, “dissociation”, etc. already suggest that free jazz is characterised –generalising expressed– by a move away from established musical structures. Unlike the compositions of classical music, the various styles of popular music and the different trends in the history of jazz, the free jazz doesn’t possess a predetermined song structure. Instead, in free jazz it is generated through the process of playing itself (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 187-188). Where fixed structures would normally exist, an “open form” enters, which inevitably enables scope for improvisation. Since all defined formal patterns are dismantled, the improvisation can take place over all musical parameters. Whether in melody, harmony, tempo or rhythm –in almost every musical genre–, predetermined musical formalities are produced in free jazz, during play (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 187). Due to the openness of all musical dimensions, in free jazz there exists positively unlimited possibilities of improvisation, to which also the term “free” points to which is where the name of the musical genre is derived from. The abandonment of traditional order patterns go hand-in-hand with a free, “total improvisation” (Noll, 1977: 3-4), which is unaffiliated to musical regulations. Hence, the essence of free jazz lies in its improvisational principles. But how can free jazz’s constitutive improvisation be explained through music theory and action theory?

In musicology, the concept of “improvisation” has long been neglected. In 1938, Ernst Ferand is the first musicologist to look more profoundly into the subject. Ferand identifies improvisation in opposition to the aesthetically, more highly appreciated, composition. This dualism can be traced back to a development theory principle underlying Ferand’s assumption, where improvisation has to be

considered as an intellectually less valuable preliminary stage to the successful peak of the composition. Ferand’s observations thereby reflect the spirit of ethnocentrism of the time –prevalent in the tradition of “Western” art music–, whereby the “elaborate, rational” composition has to be preferred to the “immature, irrational” improvisation (Lothwesen, 2009: 34; Kurt, 2009: 181-182).

Only in the last quarter of the previous century, a paradigm shift, which is matched to an egalitarian understanding of composition and improvisation, is gradually gaining ground. American Musicologist Bruno Nettl doesn’t conceive composition and improvisation as antagonism anymore, but rather, as the two end-points of a continuum (Kurt, 2009: 182-183); an approach which thereupon continues to prevail in musicology. Improvisation and composition, therefore, form the two extremes of a broad “scale of possibilities”, which is characterised through multitudinous “transitions and intermediate forms” (Dahlhaus, 1979: 15). Typically, improvisation can be distinguished from composition, as a different handling of “time” being determined. Whilst at one end of the spectrum is the composition, it is being abstracted in time, i.e., the musician resides outside of it, and the focal point lies in the past. At the other end of the spectrum is the improvisation, where the present time comes to the fore (Essl, 2004: 507-508; Lothwesen, 2009: 32-35). The action is defined by the “here and now”. The sequence proceeds in real time and therefore includes moments of the unexpected and unprepared (Essl, 2004: 507-508; Kurt, 2009: 193-195). The spontaneous, “in the moment” of playing that occurs in improvisation (which appears in free jazz as virtually the ideal trait), makes it sociologically interesting, specifically from the perspective of actor-related action theory.

In contrast to classical action theories, whereupon individuals act upon conventional

behaviour patterns and upon foreseeable regularity; improvisation in free jazz, however, does not need to be understood as an implementation of preformed actions (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 185-188). It is not teleological, i.e., not orientated to a specific task; whereby the means-end scheme, which usually explains actions in a logical sense, recedes (Lothwesen, 2009: 33). Free jazz improvisation isn't devised in advance: the action takes place beyond the basis of delineation of action and related action-directed conception. Rather, the improviser works under "real-time conditions" and is "bound to the running time" (Lehmann, 2005: 923). The actions of free jazz musicians are developing in an actual playing situation, which is unscheduled, incomputable and unforeseeable (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 190). Hence, the musician has to manage the difficult task of adjusting their musical activity within fractions of a second to those of the other musicians (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 190). The individual action thus follows the progress of the jointly created music. During the playing process, numerous options of action are offered to the musician; options whose choice is modified situation-specific. In this context, Stahl speaks of "perennial point of time decisions", of which the improvisational practice in free jazz is composed (2004: 35).

With regard to its openness and multitude of its action possibilities, improvisation in free jazz can be interpreted by recourse to the so-called "material" (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 187). Material is to be understood as an incorporated sound repertoire, i.e., the musical and sensorimotor skills, which the musicians have acquired over the years (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 189-189). To enable of improvisation processes, the material plays a crucial role, as it is adopted in the practical situation: the challenge of a free jazz musician lies in putting their own material in relation to those of the other participating musicians, in order to give

rise to the "dialogical dynamic" (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 198), which is fundamental to free jazz. Since in free jazz, no musical order is developed in the first place; the processes of perpetual order are of decisive importance: the "mutual tuning-in" (Schütz, 1972: 149) happens during the playing time, in which free jazz musicians refer its own material relatively to those of the fellow musicians. This reciprocal relationship is built through the two patterns of repetition and imitation (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 200). Repetitions and imitations tie in with a palpable action to the other and thus establish a bond between the musicians.

From an action-theoretical point of view, the reference to the material remains elementary in order to understand improvisation procedures in free jazz. The material as an incorporated reservoir of ideas is recognised as the prerequisite for the improvisation processes which access it in real time (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 191-198). Of central significance to the musical material, within the action-theoretical interpretation of improvisational practices arises, that spontaneous action cannot take place without certain knowledge. Improvisations are by no means free of precondition, but demand accordingly high abilities (Berliner, 1994: 492)¹. Without any acquired resources, an improviser can hardly resort to automatic operations, to dispose of them in its adequacy to the specific situation, to exert them "in the moment of inventing

1 Berliner notices: "The popular definitions of improvisation that emphasize only its spontaneous, intuitive nature –characterizing it as the 'making of something out of the nothing' – are astonishingly incomplete. This simplistic understanding of improvisation belies the discipline and experience on which improvisation depends, and it obscures the actual practices and processes that engage them" (1994: 492).

and playing”² (Lothwesen, 2005: 35). Improvisation, therefore, presumes an assured knowledge and isn’t a *creatio ex nihilo*: “The improviser doesn’t construct his action spontaneously out of nothing, but instead, creates it out of a repertoire of pre-composed action patterns, which he spontaneously (according to the specific situation) applies, varies, combines, modifies” (Kurt, 2009: 194-195).

As has been shown briefly, free jazz may be defined through a series of characteristics, which allow its recognition as a clearly distinguishable musical genre. A common thread to all these features is their function of paving the way to the incidence of improvisation practices, which has been analysed from musicological and micro-sociological perspectives.

In the following part, it shall be demonstrated in which way improvisatory actions can be integrated into cultural, historical and discursive contexts. It explores the question: how free jazz, as improvised music, can be associated with forms of sociality and its sociocultural background. This intention requires a parallel engagement with the history and genesis of jazz, in general, and free jazz, in particular. The musical peculiarities of free jazz and action-theoretical foundations of improvisation, as mentioned in this chapter, represent an indispensable starting point for the following exploration of the societal dimension of improvisational practices.

2 This observation applies not only with regard to jazz and music in general (Berliner, 1994: 15-18; Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 189-198; Kurt, 2009: 193-197); but it can also be detected in other fields, which are characterised through improvisatory actions (Guttandin, 1996: 61-62; Sawyer, 2001: 7-71).

Improvisation in free jazz as expression of liberation

The emergence of free Jazz cannot be explained without consideration of social developments: the 1960’s in the USA are characterised by an increasing politicisation and radicalisation inside the African-American population (Jost, 1982: 171-176). The decade is marked by much civil unrest, which breaks out as reaction to the racial discriminations heavily present in American society. At this time, free jazz develops against a historical background which is shaped through an “aggravating change of consciousness” in the African-American community (Jost, 1982: 176-177). As the free jazz scene is largely formed in the African-American community, the social changes are inevitably reflected in the music. Its impacts become apparent, especially in view of the “psychosocial framework” of the free jazz milieu (Jost, 1982: 176). The African-American emancipation movement embraces the protagonists of free jazz and also aids and abets the advancement of a new black self-conception. In order to understand the progression of free jazz, therefore, an understanding of the ensemble of cultural, ideological and political struggles of the African-American community is essential, which is also evident in the analysis of the musical matter (Charles & Comolli, 1971: 252-255). With regard to the musical material, it is improvisation which reinforces the aspirations towards emancipation, by giving them an aesthetic dimension, as will be shown below. In order to understand, what exactly free jazz was proceeding to liberate, it is worth providing a brief insight into the history of jazz.

Since its emergence, jazz has always been characterised by racial antagonisms. Its story is one of “a continued resistance towards a racially motivated strategy of planned usurpation” on behalf of the Caucasian dominated

music industry (Stahl, 2004: 32). Jazz counts as a created means of expression for the discriminated African-American population, which find themselves confronted with a “system of an ideological and economic exploitation”, from which musicians are directly concerned (Stahl, 2004: 33-34). The music itself is usurped by the colonisation of African-American achievements, wherefore the true origins of jazz are often being neglected by the privileged White population, which instead claims them for itself (Pohlert, 1988: 4-48). In light of this, in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the predominant Swing genre can be seen as paradigmatic: as a “metaphor of the machine world” (Stahl, 2004: 34). Swing represents a relentless subjugation to the arrangement; whereby the Blues roots, the freedoms of improvisation and the broken rhythms –all Black achievements of jazz have been eliminated–. Attempts to resist these developments, find expression in the Bebop genre, which occurs in the Mid 1940’s. As a “first conscious remonstrance” against this cultural misappropriation, Bebop activates initial developmental pushes, which will later culminate in free jazz (Stahl, 2004: 34). Bebop, therefore, can be seen as a precursor to free jazz, as it allows much more room for the creation of improvisation, compared to Swing (Pöhlert, 1988: 24-25; Stahl, 2004: 32-34).

The ultimate, radical caesura in the progression of Jazz, however, is provided by free jazz. Free jazz causes this, not only concerning the inner musical means of design, as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, but also with regard to the “artistic and societal self-understanding” (Stahl, 2004: 35) of the jazz musicians. Free jazz musicians increasingly dissolve their assigned roles and consider themselves now as representatives of a counter-culture. Generally accepted aesthetic regulations are removed *in subitō*: “What happens in free jazz is musically and cultural-theoretically subversive: those ele-

ments that the white jazz critique has pointed out for decades, which are specifically for jazz, are now being softened, even purposely negated, destroyed” (Stahl, 2004: 35). This softening and destruction of existing musical forms has to be interpreted against the background of the described rejection of White values and, therefore, questions not only a musical order, but challenges the cultural system (Stahl, 2004: 35). Behind the reluctance of the given musical order is a purposeful cultural approach: this “cultural strategy”, which uplifts the improvisation as the fundamental maxim, “is an expression of a ‘double process of affirmation and criticism’, i.e., the recollection of its own roots, whilst simultaneously deconstructing the White aesthetic directives” (Stahl, 2004: 35).

This improvisatory practice, as comes to light in free jazz, therefore, isn’t only of central significance in a musical context. Its innovative impulse is obtained especially from the socio-cultural context. It can be understood by recourse on the emphasis of their own socio-cultural African-American identity. As an expression of the endeavours at becoming autonomous, improvisation contributes to the articulation of the lost socio-cultural linkages of the Black community (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 7-8). Culturally connecting practices are hence immediately incorporated in the improvisational process.

Closely associated with this, improvisation has another impact, as it involves a lot of rebellious potential: improvisation processes manifest and express social motives by pointing out resistance and promoting liberation. Heble & Fischlin accentuate that in a greater global context, a liberating aspect is underlying improvised music (2004: 2). Admittedly, the authors concede on their theory and point out that not every type of music based on improvisation correlates with anti-hegemonic resistance and/or alternative

forms of sociality³³. With reference to African-American “jazz-musickings”, i.e., the meaning of performance and reproduction of music, however, a radical mode of improvisatory practice can be identified; in which “concepts of alternative community formation, social activism, rehistoricization of minority cultures, and critical modes of resistance and dialogue” (Heble & Fischlin, 2004: 2) are clearly evident. These revolting, rebellious energies are being exemplified in the improvisation processes in free jazz, which express an ethnically motivated strategy. Their intention is to gain emancipation from the White guardianship of jazz. By use of improvisatory practice, this insurrection against established values and prevailing social conventions is exercised, whereby containing a socio-critical element (Heble & Fischlin, 2004: 16-17).

In this perspective, improvised music has to be interpreted in relation to networks of cultural and social practice, even though or rather, just because their forms of expression are non-verbal, improvised music exposes an intended liberation of the existing value system. The types of interaction instantaneously brought out in the improvisatory practice, implicate a form of resistance, whilst presenting a refusal of preformed cultural norms (Heble & Fischlin, 2004: 8-11). The patterns of alternative community formation are afforded special importance, as they are performed in free jazz improvisation in real time: free jazz improvisation proceeds within the scope of de-centred interaction groups, in which the musicians are in an egalitarian relationship to one another, so in principle all musicians are soloists (Figueroa-Dreher, 2010: 200).

3 As a point in case, the authors mention Indian music. In Indian music, the improvisation operates by no means in opposition to the dominant structure, it instead, is part of it (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 2; Kurt, 2009: 38-42).

As Belgrad points out: “In the most successful improvisational art, the give-and-take of conversation functions as a model of democratic interaction: ‘No single instrumentalist or structure establishes absolute dominance.’” (1998: 2). “The free “give-and-take” reflects a democratic, participatory form of musical expression. The interdependency of this group improvisation is thus diametrically opposed to the Western, orchestral-shaped musical tradition, as well as is apparent in Swing: in an orchestra, every single musician is commanded to be under obedience to the musical arrangement, whereby his playful freedom is restricted (Belgrad, 1998: 2). The orchestra takes the composition as the guideline which has to be unconditionally obeyed. It reproduces a social hierarchy, where at the top of it, stands the director, whose ideas the musicians ultimately have to follow, as cogs in the wheel (Belgrad, 1998: 2). The interactive togetherness, as it is demonstrated in free jazz improvisation, is freed of such power relations. The denegation of determined structures and hierarchical relationships hence represent a specific, African-American alternative, to the Western orchestral-shaped music (Belgrad, 1998: 184-185): the free improvisation breaks with the musical ordering structures accepted in Western music and therefore emancipates itself from its ruling system of values and norms which has equally penetrated jazz until the emergence of free jazz. The forms of sociality performed in free jazz, therefore, correlate with the ideal of a freed society.

In the improvisatory practice, a reluctance towards prevailing conventions is made manifest not only concerning the relationships of the musicians with each other, but also in regards to the relationship with their instruments: free jazz dismisses the classical division of roles of the instruments by adding completely new dimensions to the common functions of instruments: the pianist

henceforth can play the role of the rhythmic controller, which is usually reserved for the drummer, as well as the drummer itself is able to dissociate himself of the given expectations of a drummer⁴⁴. These blurring of boundaries between the different instruments are intentionally induced: the incentive of free jazz musicians no longer lies in playing purely and cleanly, rather; alternative noises, where “apparent aesthetics of ugliness” (Stahl, 2004: 36), are conceded as equally accepted sounds. With the preconceived musical order—containing the standardisation of musical notes and sounds—it is being broken by dividing the sound creation of its nominal notation: “In contrast to this standardised moment of playing technique, free jazz improvisation consists of accepting unconventionally generated sounds, ‘mistakes’, ‘discords’, ‘noises’ etc. and of integrating all of those into the sound repertoire of the musicians” (Figuroa-Dreher, 2010: 192).

Since improvised music confronts this standardisation, it ceases to adhere to the given conventions and therewith deconstructs undisputed norms: free jazz improvisation is characterised by a permanent “calling-everything-into-question”, which thwarts the current musical thought patterns: from the structure of a musical piece, to its arrangement, to the point of the musical notation. Through the effort of defying dominant concepts of thinking, something new is generated, whereby options to the existing are exposed. As a “powerful counter-indication to orthodoxies of expression” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 9), improvised music hence brings “ideologically inadmissible possibilities into awareness” (Belgrad, 1998: 9). Through the resistance towards these “orthodoxies of expression”, improvised music induces alter-

native mind-sets. Improvised music provides possibilities which are capable of breaking up conventional ways of thinking. Alternatives thereby exist as part of the social practice during the musical playing: “improvisation (in theory and practice) challenges all musical orthodoxies, all musical taxonomies, even its own. As a fundamental site for confrontation with choices made in a social context, improvisation cannot but engage, animate and critique the social context it speaks to” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 31). The potential of the forms of expression underlying improvised music, is shown to be associated with critical, radical and aesthetic practices of the community which it engages. The elucidated improvisatory practices, which are targeted on deconstructing the prevalent aesthetic designations, can be traced back to cultural endeavours of autonomy on behalf of the African-American free jazz musicians (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 31).

Free jazz musicians have attempted to spread their ideal of an opening towards a free, independent expression, as demonstrated in the musical practice, beyond the musical stage: due to the establishment of autonomous, on communality based performance conceptions, free jazz has been able to break away from the ruling culture industry’s rigidity. In this sense, free jazz could get rid of a “deadlocked institutional organisation” (Polaschegg, 2007: 247) in the jazz scene and has succeeded in, at least partially, building up an autonomous counter-culture (Jost, 1982: 209-226; Sterneck, 1998: 170-182). This partial success points to the fact that the liberating energy in free jazz has not been decidedly politically oriented: even though the musical material has occasionally been politically charged⁵⁵, free jazz, as a widely

4 Even the categorisation of what has to be counted as an “instrument”, is driven *ad absurdum*: also table tennis balls, balloons, etc. are used as sound generators.

5 On the one hand, the fractional discussion and denunciation of social and racial injustice has to be mentioned. On the other hand, as Charlie Haden demonstrated, political articulation was

“non-representational music” (Jost, 1982: 189), has scarcely been in a position to carry subversive content (Stahl, 2004: 35): the emancipatory currents in free jazz, therefore, reflect “no political actions in a more narrow sense, but are rather to be comprehended as a liberation of certain socio-cultural aspects in the way of life” (Polaschegg, 2007: 250).

In this vein, Belgrad also argues that improvisation practices in free jazz can be seen as a reflection of a wider social background, in the whole art of the post-World War Two era. The impulse to enhance spontaneous improvisation, “runs like a long thread through the cultural fabric of the period” (Belgrad, 1998: 1). Belgrad notices “the existence of a coherent aesthetic of spontaneity”, whose social significance has to be understood as a critical part of cultural achievement (1998: 1). This aesthetic practice as a “spontaneous gesture as a sign of the times”, forms itself in a series of activities “engaged in the struggle over meanings and values within American society” (Belgrad, 1998: 1), whose strongest influence is manifested in the counter-culture of the 1960s. This “aesthetic of spontaneity”, in which free jazz can be paradigmatically integrated, is not decisively politically orientated, the struggle over social influence goes beyond political channels (Belgrad, 1998: 15, 191-195). As an expression of disdain towards cultural constriction, endeavours of emancipation rather proceed on a more general societal level. The resistance is being shown in an ideologically counter-hegemonic value alignment, which is opposed to the dominant social structure: the driving force lies in inspiring restricted potentials and in offering alternatives to the traditional. In light of

possible through an inter-textual revolt referring to labour dispute songs. In a vast absence of song lyrics, however, the contextualisation is mainly carried out extra-musically, i.e., through liner-notes, song titles or statements in interviews (Stahl, 2004: 33-38).

this, Fischlin & Heble speak of a “disruptive potential”, which is underlying improvised music: “Improvisation’s disruptive potential [has been] powerfully exemplified in the history and practice of African-American musicking, that has so shaped the form and content of improvisational and free jazz” (2004: 35-36).

In free jazz, alternatives are performed as part of the social practice: improvised music provides social possibilities, which are able to crack the conventional modes of thought. Improvisation, therefore, runs “against orthodoxies of the imagination (knowledge)”, against determined “relations with others (community)” and against habitual “relations to the materials of the world around us (instruments)” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 11). As musical practices can be seen as social practices, it is this covert force which allows free jazz, to encounter the conventional system of values in an elegant, intellectual and provocative manner. In this respect, free jazz’s socio-critical and permanently revolutionary moment cannot be denied.

Conclusion

The improvisation processes which are constitutive for free jazz can be impressively visualised by recourse to socio-historical and cultural implications. Improvisatory practices in free jazz can only be registered in its entirety, if one takes into account the social developments, which reflect and create them. In free jazz improvisation, there is a necessity to show its connection to the critical, radical and aesthetical practices of the community in which they occur. Improvisation within African-American musical forms, as exemplified in free jazz, stands within a relationship to a social practice in which common commitment and resistance is manifested. The endeavours of resistance performed in free jazz can be located on a socio-cultural

level. Improvisation as a cultural expression follows an ethnically motivated strategy which aims at liberation of musically and socially imposed bondage, norms and prevalent conventions.

The emancipation of predefined value patterns is manifested in the way that alternatives are being offered as part of the social practice. This can be seen in the relationship between the musicians amongst themselves, as well as in regards to their relationship with the used instruments. Musical practices, in which improvisation is a defining characteristic, are, at the same time, social practices which demonstrate visualisation of possibilities. Commonly accepted role models, hence, are rejected in real time and alternatives to it are being offered in the playing situation itself.

Closely associated is a rebuttal of dominant standardised conceptions of aesthetics. The musical material of free jazz thus remains untouched by culture-industrial utilisation. Improvised music, therefore, possesses a rebellious energy that is exceedingly effective: since exempting itself from a logic of mass-produced reclamation; improvised music concurrently preserves its authenticity: “though largely silent in terms of its broader recognition by mass culture, improvised music locates some of the social energies most articulate in sustaining both its originality and its capacity to remain un-co-opted” (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 5).

In spite of the explosive ability to highlight contradictions, and in face of the potential which improvised music reveals, as a medium for articulation, it reaches limitations: “Free improvisation *demands that the listener acknowledge all the possibilities* [emphasis mine] of modern music denied by a hierarchical, commodity-based, fool-the-punter system” (Watson, 2004: 4).

Improvisation hence generates a sensitising of alternative listening and thinking patterns. That these alternative modes have to be recognized, not only by the musicians, but also by the listeners, seems plausible (Reason, 2004: 81-83). With regard to free jazz, it is precisely where a fundamental flaw lies, which is difficult to overcome.

As mentioned in the first chapter, improvisation in free jazz demands strong artistic ability, which impedes the access to a wider audience. Indisputably, the understanding of free jazz improvisation presupposes “already a culturally privileged knowledge, a sensitivity for abstraction processes, which is well grounded in high culture” (Büsser, 1997: 91). According to Bourdieu, the recognition of the potential which is immediately shown in the improvisatory exercise, requires an artistic education: “A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu, 1984: 2). To make this cultural competence accessible to a wide audience is a target which is a difficult target to reach. Free jazz has always been opposed to a mass cultural reception. As Stahl rightly states: “Its reception [those of free jazz] has never exceeded a narrow, bourgeois-avant-garde circle of connoisseurs” (2004: 37). The exclusive, or even elitist image of free jazz being only “music for musicians”, without being able to achieve another level of effectiveness, still hangs over it as a musical genre.

The key to solving this problem of a limited target audience and to make the potential of improvised music more manifest, would probably lie herein: to make the listening and thinking patterns receptive for alternative and experimental means of expression in society as a whole (Gulda, 1971: 42-47): “A liberated musical understanding presupposes a certain comprehension, to become aware of noises

and sounds in its diversities” (Sterneck, 1998: 285).

Improvisation is diametrically opposed to a western-mediated, rationality based perception of music and image of society (Kaden, 1993: 47-63): “For the Westerner entirely standing outside of the norm; improvisation doesn’t fit into their own culture and narrative history” (Kaden, 1993: 47). In improvised music, lies the social energy to oppose prevailing forms of production, which are geared towards rationalisation, uniformity and standardisation: “The social force of improvised music resides [...] in its capacity to disrupt institutionally sanctioned economies of production, to trouble the assumptions fostered by dominant systems of knowledge production“ (Fischlin & Heble, 2004: 22).

Improvised music hence represents an opportunity to facilitate non-conformist thinking, be it musically, theoretically or socially. If it does succeed in conveying an attitude which demands challenging the persisting order, improvised music presumably is able to offer alternatives to present systems of control and subordination, in music as well as in society. A liberated sort of thinking and musical understanding would discourage society from affirmatively consuming musical and cultural phenomena, but instead would embrace all of its possibilities of open, undogmatic and creative meanings of expression.

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