

Interaction Dynamics: The Core

Aside from soloists and electronic music, most kinds of live music rely on human interaction, the malleable, shifting nature of which makes it an intrinsic musical dynamic. It's part of what makes a great band better than an OK one. Lindsey Buckingham leans into a guitar solo, and Mick Fleetwood gooses the drums—they feel it, look at each other, and smile. But whereas in other kinds of music it manifests in nuanced detail, in improvised music interaction dynamics is the core.

The Car

A car is driving down the street. A handsome one, bright, with white racing stripes. A foreign model;

it's a few years old but still pristine. You admire it, take for granted how effortlessly it rolls along under its own steam; you adore its aerodynamics, the faux-leather interior, the pop-up headlights, the way it purrs. It's an entity, an immaculate machine. But under that fetching hood, there are hundreds of little mechanisms, all doing their own thing, linked up to one another, calibrated to make the car stop and go. The mechanisms have complex relationships. They signal one another, turn one another on and off, heat up, cool down, spark, explode, contain and concentrate energy, regulate speed and intensity and flow. They exist individually, apart, but engaged in a complex system. The separate parts conspire to give the overall impression of a single functional automobile.

Sit up straight. Look smart. Pay attention. This is the most important section of the book or, as my father-in-law says, the tastiest part of the pig.

Free improvisors tend to avoid or reject certain standard elements of the musical tool kit—steady rhythm, conventional harmony, melody. In the place of these usual objects of fascination, there's

this other thing to pay attention to: interaction dynamics. How are the players relating to one another? What kinds of exchange are going on? Or not? Are they listening to the others, or are they off playing on their own? How does what they do correspond to the actions of the others?

Individual improvisors might be likened to the parts of that car: separate but interrelated. This is the single most exciting thing in the music, what sets it furthest apart from other kinds of music making, so you should perk up and learn what to listen for. The question is does the car metaphor hold?

At once the most visceral and the headiest aspect of improvised music, interaction dynamics might well be what you see when you look under the hood. All the idealism that is sometimes mapped on to free music—the notion that it's like a miniature model of egalitarian society; that it represents a communal way of working together—is extrapolated from the way players interact. The palpable sense of give-and-take and the excitement of watching musicians building something jointly

are focal points for the inscrutable interaction-dynamics diagnostician.

Interaction dynamics are presupposed in many other kinds of music. This is true in large part because the various instruments tend to have prescribed roles. The drummer keeps time and pushes things along. The bassist helps with timekeeping and lays down a basic harmonic framework, elaborated upon by piano or guitar. Linear instruments like saxophones and trumpets and vocals and sitars tend to deal with melodies, most often played in the keys laid down by the harmony instruments. The relationships are like those between the carburetor and drive shaft and sparkplug—all organized in a known way so that the motor can move the chassis and the driver can count on the car doing its thing.

Not the Car

In improvised music, all those presuppositions go out the window.

When jazz drummers introduced the option of playing without pulsed time, for instance, they

didn't just do so to be contrary or unorthodox or to make music that was difficult to listen to. They called their prescribed instrumental role into question. The drummers—specifically, it was Milford Graves, Sunny Murray, and Rashied Ali—wanted to open the music up in order to let some new things develop, and they realized that the conventional instrumental roles were an impediment to possible new directions. Pretty soon all the instruments were asking that same question: What is my supposed role, and what if I don't want to live by it?

If you want to hear one of the most radical moments in this alternative way of thinking, listen to the Albert Ayler Trio's *Spiritual Unity*, which was recorded over fifty years ago. The saxophone and bass and drums are doing something quite different from what they normally do—the bassist (Gary Peacock) is melodic, skittish, and virtuosic; the drummer (Sunny Murray) gathers pools and eddies of sound, mounting and dissipating volume, his cymbals awash in nervous energy; the saxophonist (Ayler) only plays a smidge of

melodic material, concentrating on ecstatic shouts and cries, swooping across the others in big slurs and swipes, lightning flashing across a turbulent sea. The conventional roles of the instruments are suspended, reinvented.

To return to the car metaphor, it would be like driving an automobile in which the relationships between the parts of the motor are repeatedly reinvented. All those hoses and fans and gears constantly reconnected, retooled, recalibrated. En route. The sparkplug suddenly not sparking, instead deciding to channel antifreeze. Perhaps not the most efficient motor vehicle. When it breaks down it's a disaster, but when it's humming along, like it was in the Ayler Trio's case, it sure is a fine ride. Rather unlike a car, in fact, it could be a vehicle created by Jean Tinguely, the metal sculptor whose kinetic machines took themselves apart as they whizzed and banged along. The relationship between the parts is different when the show is over than they are when it starts. Interaction dynamics? Hey, now: dynamic interactions.

Before we detail any of these interaction dy-

interactions dynamics
dynamic interactions

namics, first an overarching observational schema. In relation to what the others are doing, what each musician is contributing can be characterized as either (1) matching, (2) complementary, or (3) contrasting. The overall energy of the music might be said to be (1) concentrated or (2) diffused.

There are many different kinds of interaction dynamics. A few of the most common species follow here, enumerated and slightly elaborated, for your dining and dancing pleasure.

1. Dialogue

The easiest kind of interaction to recognize is the conversation. Just to keep it simple, take a duet. One player suggests something, the other responds and offers a bit more, the first one builds on the response, and so on. Carried out too obviously, dialogue can turn into a musical seesaw, one up/one down, not really going anywhere or developing. But it's elemental, an essential part of musical communication. As in daily life, when you hear people exchanging ideas this way, it tells you one key thing: they're listening to one another, paying

attention to what the other is saying. That conveys a certain kind of respect and dignity, and when it's really working, it can have an organic quality, rolling effortlessly like a late-night bull session. Also, adding more players makes dialogue exponentially more complex and difficult. Like a roundtable discussion, dialogical improvising has an upper threshold of participants. Anything good with more than six players is pretty unusual. (Or it requires a moderator, like a musical score or a conductor.) A really good, really big free improvising group, like a ten-piece, is nearly mythological.

2. Independent Simultaneous Action

Picture two old folks in a room, a George Booth cartoon: a woman, standing at the ironing board, chattering about her garden; her husband, chest deep in a bathtub, cigar stub in mouth, newspaper open, furrowed brow; two dogs and a cat scattered around the space, each looking a different direction, every sight line going its own way like a demagnetized compass. Together alone.

On the other end of the spectrum from direct

dialogue, there are improvisations in which the participants don't seem to pay much attention to one another at all. On the face of it, this seems disastrous, counterintuitive; but it can lead to some wonderful music and is often an important ingredient in the overall fabric of an improvisation because it introduces tension and takes away the Ping-Pong-ness of conversational interplay.

Saxophonist Evan Parker, an uncommonly articulate commentator, has suggested that improvisations fall into those that express agreement, those that express disagreement, and those in which the participants agree to disagree. Independent simultaneous action calls up this last category, in which there isn't direct conflict but there's also no sense of concertedness. Two (or more) players in a space do their own thing, the result being a sonic collage of separate activities, an overlay of sounds.

Most improvisors who practice this kind of non-interplay are quite aware of what the other musicians are doing. Players cultivate peripheral hearing; they train themselves to listen out of the corner of their ears. It takes this studied sort of in-

difference to continue doing your own thing when someone else has made a bold, attention-grabbing statement. And even when players are working together, if one breaks off and starts down a new path, a possible strategy is for the other player not to change course, but to continue as if they were still working jointly, staying on the same path. Take a saxophonist and a drummer, Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink, for instance, bringing things to a boil, playing hot-and-heavy energy music—all of a sudden, paddling the snare with a mighty whack, Bennink slams on the brakes. If Brötzmann continues apace, his tenor sax ferociously barreling along, this has an inherent dramatic effect, like Wile E. Coyote running out of cliff. In this case, you can imagine how the musicians must be palpably aware of their own momentum and the momentum of the total music at the same time. That ability to hear the specific and the general at once is basic to improvising. The musicians have to work together and be prepared to stand apart more or less at any instant.

Improvisation is social music. The shapes it

takes and the methods used to make it are collective in nature, often gregarious, interactional. Like the inner workings of a pride of lions, a parliament of owls, a cloud of bats, a bloat of hippos. But there are antisocial elements in the music, too, solitary, uncommunicative moments, times when the collective is shunned in favor of the individual. The antisocial impulse helps keep the music from growing predictable. Just like our beloved introverts and eccentrics do in daily life.

Let's say the two extremes are complete dependence and absolute independence. Players either slavishly rely on one another or pay absolutely no mind to anyone else whatsoever. In between there's a gray area, where most of the activity really occurs: interdependence. Improvisors are constantly modulating these interaction dynamics in subtle ways, moving along that scale, by turns listening to and willfully ignoring one another. As a listener, the challenge in the case of independence is to hear the composite, to feel the buildup of tension—or perhaps to experience the dissipation of tension—of two or more colliding bodies, each

dependence X independence
complete } absolute

self-contained. There's no guarantee that a passage of independent simultaneous action won't go awry and end up a pile of unrelated sounds. But neither is there any assurance that interdependence will work—it's all a nest of contingencies, different strategies that improvisors use, mostly by intuition, to navigate the unknown.

3. Imitation

Have you ever met someone with echolalia? Someone who repeats everything you say right after you've said it? A little audio shadow, like those slap-back phone echoes you sometimes get on transatlantic calls? The doubled words—hello hello, Mom Mom, can you can you hear me hear meeee?—get tangled, making discourse awkward and stilted. For those afflicted, echolalia is a genuine malady. In improvised music, rote imitation is an extreme interaction dynamic that can be effective in rare instances but is often a mark of younger and more inexperienced players. It's easy to spot. One person plays a high, pinched note, chirping like a car alarm, another continues the same sound on a dif-

ferent instrument. Or the drummer plays a pattern, and the cellist picks it up and repeats it. Imitation is a clear way for one player to indicate to another: *I'm listening to you!* But it can just as easily feel like *I can do that too!* Or it can take on an air of parody or ridicule: *Oh, look what we're doing now!*

This is the most brutal and obvious version of imitation. There are many ways in which improvisors pick up on and vary the material that their colleagues put on the table. Listen for those places where one player suggests an idea—a particularly tone or sequence, a rhythmic pattern, an unusual sound quality—and another follows and develops it. That's one of the most vital areas in free improvised music, the place where sounds are jointly pushed and pulled. But the best players know to proceed cautiously as far as mynah-birding is concerned.

4. Consensus/Dispute

Improvised music is not, by any means, all warm and fuzzy. There's the agree-to-disagree posse, independent simultaneity, but then there's also just

Sing in a duet.

plain disagreement. In the context of improvising, an unusually high level of disagreement between participants is possible. I'd argue that this is one of its unique features. People playing together don't even need to concur in principle on what it means to improvise. In fact, there's quite a lot of variance on that point, players coming not only from very different traditions but also from very different personal points of view, expressing and engaging philosophies of improvising that are not only different but at odds.

This makes for excellent listening, just the way you could imagine it would make for wonderful people-watching. Paying attention to the various ways that consensus and dispute manifest in a given performance is akin to being on a train and listening to folks in the next row snuggle or argue. There's something electromagnetically fascinating about it.

Dispute can come from a source of underlying philosophical disharmony—two players duking it out on behalf of different standpoints. But more often it's a matter of a musician feeling a need

So open
no push

emerge in the music for a little contrary energy, something to allow one, as a senior improviser once told me, not to swim with the school but to bite at the feet of the others.

There's a flow. Things are moving along. This is a normal thing in improvising. The music is going in a direction, pulling all together and forward. But maybe someone pushes against the flow, either diverting it or impeding it. This is a form of subversion. And it can work by many means, not just flailing against the tide. Guitarist Derek Bailey provided a detailed description of the way that Hugh Davies once used his electronics to pervasively protract something that Evan Parker was doing beyond its logical endpoint. Just at the point of Parker's running out of breath, Davies started playing along with him, dialoguing with him, forcing Parker to either artificially interrupt the music or to continue at the expense of great personal exhaustion. It would have been like someone starting a conversation and the partner not responding a few parries in. Ever the gentleman, Parker struggled to continue, which probably gave the

performance a special kind of character: a fragile, almost-falling-apart feeling.

Improvisors can be imps. They like to get a rise out of one another, to nip at the heels, jostle, and cajole. They also like to build things, to work together on a common cause. But working together doesn't mean all doing the same thing. It's not synchronized swimming. Watch for the impish moments, the places where someone makes an abrasive or contrary move. And keep an ear out for the consensual moments, where you have the overall feeling everyone's on the same page, the troops are rallied, the wagons are packed, and the caravan hits the road.

A final consideration: at times dispute in improvising is left unresolved because it betrays what one experienced figure refers to as "a misunderstanding." That is, the parties involved can't find a way to work together, and despite wanting to, they can't find a joint solution. This kind of kludge makes for very uncomfortable listening, like when you hear people trying to have a conversation but not able to connect.

5. Support/Stepping Up

The questioning of conventional roles doesn't mean improvisors can't adopt roles ad hoc as the music proceeds. For example, within the "building together" modality, something that often takes place is a process of stepping up. And when someone steps up, unless they decide to square off and tussle, the others usually need to find something to do to support the stepper-upper.

There are countless versions of this, but it's pretty fundamental. In jazz it would simply be referred to as a solo, but in freely improvised music it's often a bit more subtle—one player is foregrounded takes it upon themselves to make a statement, and the others back off or find some kind of platform for the statement. That platform could be a low drone or a repeated figure or just dropping out and letting the player step up unaccompanied.

I've seen the saxophonist Ken Vandermark employ this strategy quite a lot, particularly on pieces where he's playing clarinet. Out of a complex, multifaceted passage featuring lots of dense interplay, Vandermark might step up and lay a de-

finite melodic clarinet statement over whatever else his compatriots are doing. This has a narrative, storytelling quality, as if, out of the abstract bramble, there was a tale yearning to be spun. Vandermark's pretty masterful at peddling the story and managing not to assume a controlling position, a selfish move that makes everyone else subservient and can kill forward impetus as fast as a blowout on the highway.

6. Making Space vs. Being Tentative

Someone who steps up all the time might not be leaving enough room for anyone else. This is another observable phenomenon: the activity of making space. If someone's playing is so busy that it's impenetrable, that can make it difficult for anyone else to find a way into the music. It's like someone who never stops talking—this takes the “inter” out of “interaction.” All kinds of narcissism and personality disorders come to the fore in improvised music—it's such a profoundly social music, that it's almost like you could use it to make a psychological profile of the participants. But it's

an art form, too, not just a window on the musicians' psyches; and top-flight players use these dynamics to their own ends, sometimes adopting a persona that's different from the one they have in everyday life. Shy ones become animals; monsters become wallflowers.

An otherwise friendly player might “crowd” the others to get a specific result, to force them to step up, for instance, or to draw out some kind of latent aspect of their playing. On the other hand, when players make space for one another, there's a threshold after which the act can express a tentativeness, overpoliteness, sometimes with disastrous results. Suddenly everyone's saying: “No, after you.” Improvised music is like a balloon, it needs some tension to keep it taut; lose the tension, and the music farts around and falls limp on the floor.

7. Counterpoint

Listening to an improvisation, I sometimes hear the sounds in terms of dance. Here, the dancers are not all doing the same thing—again, it's not

synchronized swimming. But they're working together, notes dovetailing, the music assembling and disassembling like a couple doing the tango, energies conspiring, one moving forward, the other backward—a stop, a spin, and back together. The notion of counterpoint helps. Introduced during the Renaissance, developed in baroque music, and explored extensively by J. S. Bach, counterpoint has to do with the idea that you can have two (or more) simultaneous melodies that are perceived as independent lines and at the same time maintain a harmonic relationship. Remember “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”? A canon. That’s an ultra-simple form of counterpoint.

I have a fond memory of seeing saxophonist John Zorn and cornetist Butch Morris play together. Their interplay was incredibly intimate, featuring tiny little sounds and contrasting loud outbursts. All very oblique, played at high speed, changing rapidly. You could listen to each of them as an entity, an unassailable identity, but there was also clear communication, and what they were doing fit snugly together. This is called free

counterpoint, meaning that it doesn’t adhere to the harmonic requirements of so-called “strict” counterpoint. At any given moment, Zorn and Morris didn’t have to be playing according to a sequence of chord changes. They were entities, identities, unique and apart, but they folded these identities together, tumbling them like rocks in a polisher, the friction of the two identities together creating shiny new ones.

Togetherness and independence: these are basic genomes of interaction dynamics in improvisation. At times one or the other of them rises to the top, but much of the time it’s a matter of being able to listen to the activity with both in mind. In the combo platter of contrapuntal improvising, togetherness and independence find their apotheosis.

contrapoints / *note*

*was a independence:
2 independent
to independence*