Working practices of free improvisation musical ensembles and potential applicability to groups outside of music

By Whitney Curry Wimbish

A master's dissertation submitted to the Moray House School of Education
University of Edinburgh
In fulfillment of the requirements of the MSc in Social Justice and Community Action
August 2023

Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how musicians playing within the genre of free improvisation work together in practical terms to produce music. In free improvisation, musicians play without a notated score or a leader, such as a conductor or composer, and spontaneously create a musical work in real time. My aim is to learn ways these musicians make decisions about playing and handle dissatisfactions that arise, and whether those methods offer insights into group work more broadly.

I asked three research questions: In the absence of notated music or a leader to predetermine how everyone should play, how do free improvisation musicians decide who plays, what to play, when, and for how long? How do ensembles resolve dissatisfaction over those matters? Do participants believe working practices or norms of free improvisation ensembles could be applicable to groups outside of music that wish to organise themselves without designated leaders?

I gathered data via semi-structured expert interviews, which I analysed using thematic analysis. The following themes emerged: musicians select free improvisation for both artistic and social reasons; make decisions based on personal as well as collective desires; acknowledge that leaders may emerge despite the rejection of the concept of leaders; and view the art form as having no set rules other than a requirement that everyone listen deeply to their fellow ensemble members.

My analysis successfully addressed each of my research questions. Participants reported that decisions about playing are based largely on rules and norms that are socially determined by the members of each ensemble and typically reflect their shared values. Parameters can vary significantly between groups, but all share the common underlying expectation that fellow ensemble members will listen deeply and attentively to their musical contributions, and that the same is expected of themselves. Failing to be heard was identified as the cause of serious dissatisfaction. Participants resolve such dissatisfaction through group discussions, usually when a strong social connection exists within an ensemble. When it does not, however, participants said they would resolve the issue by withdrawing their participation. Participants identified a range of practices and skills that could apply to other types of groups. They also identified limits to applicability.

This study contributes to the small body of research into free improvisation that examines the art form's social processes – an area of study that is less frequently addressed than the larger body of work focusing on free improvisers' physical processes (Wilson and MacDonald, 2012), such as where musicians direct their gaze to signal certain messages to other musicians whilst playing (Moran, 2010). It also contributes to the small body of work that examines free improvisation as an expression of anarchy (Attali, 1985; Bell, 2014; Small, 1987).

Further study is needed to learn the extent to which free improvisation modes of working may apply outside of music. Further study is also needed to understand the extent to which participants' comments regarding community relate to scholarship on community building.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Drs. Claire Bynner, Andie Reynolds, and Sarah Ward, without whom I would not have attempted writing a dissertation or even continued beyond the certificate stage. Your rigor and depth of knowledge expanded my thinking and encouraged my curiosity. Drs. Reynolds and Ward, thank you for helping me stay focused and hopeful during the frightening early months of the Covid-19 pandemic and my forced repatriation from Scotland back to the US. Dr. Bynner, thank you for helping me complete this project and for your ongoing solidarity with my union drive and contract negotiations.

I also wish to thank Dr. Margaret Petrie for her encouragement to pay close attention to community during my instigation of a union in my workplace in 2020. Dr. Petrie's insight helped our union drive succeed and gave me confidence that my thesis idea was valid.

Thank you to my husband, the composer and musicologist Dr. Malcolm Russell Curry Wimbish, who offered unconditional love, encouragement and support, and without whom I would be lost.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

This research is a qualitative case study animated by David Harvey's (2010) directive that in order for members of the left to successfully topple capitalism, they must 'look to build alliances between and across those working in the different spheres' (p. 252). To do so, he said, activists should identify and establish new kinds of social relations, mental conceptions and 'organizational innovations oriented to the pursuit of the common good' (p. 253). Harvey builds upon leftist organisational principles established by Freire (1976, 2018), which hold that expertise can be hidden within certain communities, making such alliances crucial for building power on the left, as well as upon Marx's (1989) premise that ideas are a material force in history.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to enumerate all of the ways in which capitalism has failed, recent findings regarding the allocation of wealth illustrate the point, such as the sharp rise in global poverty (Sánchez-Páramo, 2021) that exists alongside skyrocketing executive compensation (Bivens and Kandra, 2022) and record levels of corporate profit (Piketty, 2014). Conditions such as these highlight the need to re-evaluate capitalism, and while capitalism can exist within a variety of social structures (Piketty, 2014), a post-Keynesian perspective would hold that capitalism and hierarchy are entangled (Sindzingre and Tricou, 2021), thus making alternatives to hierarchy relevant in the search for alternatives to capitalism. Given that musicians playing in free improvisation work without a leader, they hold unique knowledge and experience valuable to that project.

Therefore, in response to Harvey's directive, this study examines how free-improvising musicians organise themselves and work together, with an eye towards surfacing information that may be useful to groups outside of music whose members want to operate without a designated leader or leaders. The findings of this study show that the socio-musical practices free improvisation may indeed apply beyond the field of music, offering a path to strengthen or build new alliances between free improvisation musicians and such groups. This study also documents practices within an understudied artistic community.

For the purpose of this project, I define free improvisation based on the parameters set by Borgo (2002) and MacGlone and MacDonald (2018) to say that it

is a non-idiomatic musical form (Borgo, 2002, p. 1) that occupies a discrete position in modern music. While it typically uses neither notated music nor conductor or conduction, a musicological term for the act of impromptu conducting in order to organise group improvisation (Long, 2013), it frequently 'intersects with many other forms, including classical music, free jazz, experimental music, and experimental art' (MacGlone and MacDonald, 2018, p. 3). It is 'spontaneous' music that is 'model-bound, rapidly created, and simply conceived' (Nettl, 1974, p. 11). Free improvisation is not necessarily a separate concept from composition, but relies significantly on a musician's own creative choices in real time and frequently pivots upon the decisions of individual musicians rather than a specified leader such as a conductor (p.11-19).[1]

My research sought to learn how members of free improvisation ensembles make decisions whilst playing, deal with dissatisfaction, and whether free improvisers believe any of their ways of working have applicability outside of their musical ensembles. My questions derive from the lack of existing scholarship on free improvisation as a site of group work. This is an area of investigation that is lacking in the small body of research that considers how improvisation is an expression of anarchy (Attali, 1985; Bell, 2014; Small, 1978), based on the fact that musicians playing free improvisation create extemporaneous work in real time, with each member holding ostensibly equal creative power. But this scholarship does not consider how individual musicians operate within a free improvisation ensemble or contend with the concept of leadership, nor does it contemplate what may prompt a musician to remain or depart from an ensemble, or how the anarchical expressions of free improvisation may or may not carry implications for anarchical groups outside of music. Additionally, while scholars have considered how improvising musicians signal their decisions to one another (Moran, 2010; Seddon, 2005; Wilson and MacDonald, 2012, 2020), they do not contemplate how musicians come to their decisions or the forces that may influence their decisions.

[1] To offer a general and colloquial summary that may be useful for non-musicians: free improvisation is a recognised form of music in which musicians make up a song as they go along. There's no sheet music or conductor, and every performance usually sounds different from the last. I offer this summary only as a way for someone unfamiliar with the form to imagine it more clearly and will not use this phrasing elsewhere.

Thus, my research questions are: In the absence of notated music or a composer to predetermine how everyone in a musical ensemble should play, how do improvisational musicians decide who plays, what they play, when, and for how long? How do ensembles resolve dissatisfaction over those matters? And, do those methods offer ideas for groups outside of music that want to organise themselves without leaders? By asking participants how they and other musicians make decisions whilst playing, I am identifying ways leaderless groups function and methods members of groups use to participate. I believe this information may be a small but practical contribution to the project of learning from other spheres, as suggested by Harvey; to any group that wishes to operate without leaders; and to the ongoing effort to bring about alternatives to the hierarchical social arrangements in society at large. The latter point has seen renewed interest during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, inspired by the work of leaderless mutual aid groups and other grassroots organisations that stepped in to provide crucial care when government officials could or would not (Littman, 2022; Preston, 2020). With that in mind, I believe this area of study is a matter of urgency and speaks to some of the unique concerns of our era.

II. Literature review

This project draws on a range of research that intersects music and politics. Literature that informs it can be categorised along the following themes: theoretical scholarship and research of improvised music as a reflection of a political ideology (Attali, 1985; Bell, 2014; Small, 1987), which in some cases can be contextualised by the broader body of musicological research into the various ways, and opinions on how, free improvisation musical ensembles can be organised (Mitrović 2019; Prouty, 2008; Suissa, 2016). Among other matters, this body of work includes debates over the extent to which free improvisation can truly be leaderless.

My research is further informed by literature about the practical communication methods improvising musicians utilise when performing with each other without a conductor. This body of research, such as that conducted by Moran (2010), Seddon (2005), and Wilson and MacDonald (2012, 2020) examines how

musicians participate in playing with one another whilst playing in real time, and in some cases describes the personal qualities necessary for a productive musical interaction when there is no conductor guiding the playing or notated music to follow. It is granular in terms of findings but lacks information about a key aspect of coming to decisions: the social dynamics that may influence and/or subvert the nonhierarchical intent of a group. Wilson and MacDonald (2012) argue, for example, that there is an uneven focus in research about improvising musicians, in that it looks primarily at the 'physical processes at the expense of social processes' (Wilson and Macdonald, 2012, p. 569).

The third body of research that informed this project relates to the ways in which members of disciplines outside of music could draw lessons from musical improvisation (Morgan, 2019; Oakes, 2009; van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer, 2018). These scholars identified certain aspects of playing musical improvisations, such as how improvisers can think quickly and creatively to express an idea, and sought to understand whether or how lessons could be applied to a range of non-musical disciplines.

I will discuss each theme in turn.

Improvised music as a reflection of a political ideology

Various scholars and researchers have described the practice of free improvisers as carrying political implications, often concluding that it is 'anarchic', as David Bell (2014) argues when he theorises that those who complain that there is no political music anymore fail to acknowledge the political nature of free improvisation. He contends that 'when people take part in collective musical improvisation they are practicing an anarchist form of organisation' (Bell, 2014, p. 1012), making it pedagogically valuable to anarchists because 'it shows how it can work as a mutually empowering form of organisation, but also (and perhaps especially) because it is frequently challenged by many of the dangers that threaten anarchism' (p. 1026). He concludes a paper on this topic by saying that 'techniques used by improvisers could be adopted in more explicitly political forms of anarchist organisations' (p. 1026), but does not say what those techniques are.

Likewise, musicologist Christopher Small (1987) holds that 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 a performance, a society whose closest political analogy is with anarchism,' with everyone involved contributing to the 'wellbeing of the community' (Small, 1987, p. 208). French economic theorist Jacques Attali (1985), writing on the role of music within the political economy, says that improvised music creates new forms of social interactions and dynamics, regenerating social theory (Attali, 1985). But how? As with Bell, Attali and Small do not say.

Under my previously stated definition, the musical form of free improvisation can be viewed as upholding principles of anarchism as defined by Peter Kropotkin (2019) to mean a society structured by various free agreements made between individuals rather than by a government. His description maps neatly onto a group of people playing music together based on implicit and explicit agreements between each other over who will play what, when they will play it, and for how long, rather than based on the direction of a conductor or composer. Kropotkin's theories hold that members of an anarchical society represent an 'interwoven network' of individuals working together to meet all of their material needs, such as maintaining a sewerage system and teaching children how to read, as well as intellectual, artistic, and social needs of participants (p. 7). That could similarly correlate to a leaderless group of improvising musicians and their mutual interdependence: how they work together must produce a musical offering and interaction that satisfies each member at least enough for them to willingly remain a member of the group. The relationship between the ideology and the musical practice is further highlighted by Kropotkin's caveat that 'such a society would represent nothing immutable' (p.7) and that one aspect of the community is that it would exist in a state of 'ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium' between those involved; a concise way to describe the ebb and flow of an improvised musical performance.

But it is my opinion and personal experience as a player of free improvisation (I will explicate my positionality further in due course) that subtle power dynamics between individuals can complicate the tidy narrative that a harmonious anarchical society is reflected in improvising musical ensembles, and for that reason it is worth

exploring further to determine not only the methods a group uses to communicate the decision of who gets to play next, what they should play, and how long, but how the group arrives at the decision in the first place. After all, as Friedrich Engels wrote in 1872, just because anti-authoritarians abolish a particular social hierarchy does not mean that authority has disappeared. It may simply have changed form (Engels, 1978).

Musicological scholars acknowledge that while free improvisation offers the chance to create a leaderless group of equals in which all share equal power, given that it utilises no conductor or notated music, that outcome is not guaranteed. Ken Prouty (2008) argues that it is especially unlikely in an academic setting. He believes 'a relatively codified system for improvisational instruction that sought to place jazz on an equal footing with the pedagogical traditions of the Western classical cannon' (p. 10) has resulted in the same types of relationships that exist in other forms of music, in which every musician has a predetermined and fixed role, with someone at the top, acting in the same role as a conductor or composer and dictating who will play what (Prouty, 2008). Judith Suissa (2016) goes further, saying that improvisation by itself means little to moral or educational undertakings, only that the practice has the potential to enable ethical judgment and agency.

Individual musicians engage with that potential in different ways. For example, as Radoš Mitrović (2019) points out, musicians can use the concept of improvisation as a way to grab power rather than share it. He records that the composer John Cage, for example, views improvised music 'as a kind of artistic struggle for power in the collective performing of music' (p.111), and that such improvised music constitutes an opportunity for musicians to assert their dominance over one another.

Mitrović also notes that composers who believe that improvised music and leftist politics are related can disagree on how much and to what extent. In a discussion of two composer friends and colleagues active in the late 1960s, Cornelius Cardew and Frederic Rzewski, Mitrović illustrates one way individuals who broadly agree may diverge over doctrinal differences (Mitrović, 2019, pp. 109-121). He recounts that Cardew and Rzewski were sympathetic to the social movement and struggle of their era, generally supported left-leaning politics, and saw improvisation

as a way to prefigure a nonhierarchical society. Yet their differences were politically meaningful: Cardew believed there must be some organisational structure for and control of improvised passages and considered himself the primary leader of his musical ensemble. He required each performer to occupy a certain role within that ensemble, but allowed them to choose for themselves what it would be (p. 113).

> Therefore, a certain kind of democratic organisation of interpretation is possible, based on the independent and group determination of the interpretation's limits. It is not about anarchy, or total democratic order within the music, but about a strictly regulated system based on hierarchy. The system provides the freedom of decision, as long as everything is within the set frameworks that enable the functioning of the entire improvisation collective.
>
> (Mitrović, 2019, p. 114)

Rzewski, meanwhile, approached improvisation with the idea that it should be entirely unconstrained and rely on 'a new form of multidirectional communication (p. 119)' between players (and between players) and the audience. His ensemble was one 'where all the possible ways of playing the instruments were available, [which]… could serve as a model to larger, more revolutionary system changes (p. 118)'. To him, Mitrović wrote, 'improvisation was an experimental form of social practice that heralded a future utopian society based on the complete realisation of anarchy, i.e. a society without money, government or a repressive state apparatus' (p. 119).

This body of work set the framing and background for my research in that it highlighted ways in which free improvisation is a contested space, in which musicians are confronted with questions about the extent to which they may exercise their personal desires and values, and the knowledge that there may be misalignment between what they and other ensemble members want. Given that free improvisation ensembles rely on the personal contributions of individual musicians, we can expect that dissatisfaction will arise from time over what to expect or how to behave within that contested space. The insight within this body of work framed not only the questions I asked during participant interviews, but my expectation for the conclusions I would be able to draw, because they illustrated that there is no one-size-fits-all approach for how to play the musical form.

Thus, an important component of my research was to ask participants what power dynamics they observed in free improvisation ensembles, how those dynamics influenced their decision making, and whether participants believed they could fully avoid hierarchy in their ensembles, or if certain expressions of hierarchy may appear despite best efforts, such as more-established musicians being expected to act as leaders in various instances.

Practical Communication Methods to Make Music Without a Conductor

The way improvising musicians determine who will play what, when, and how has been of interest since at least the 1960s, to musicologists, psychologists, and other scholars interested in how individuals experience and express creativity. Contributors to scholarship in this area of literature are frequently interested in communication between improvising musicians, as Frederick Seddon (2005) was when he studied a small group of students engaged in an improvisational ensemble. His research broke communication into two sections, verbal and nonverbal, and acknowledged that much of his subjects' playing behaviours were determined outside of playing, through conversations beforehand about what would be played, and afterwards to evaluate the performance (Seddon, 2005, p. 53). Seddon found that the musicians drew on shared knowledge, but that the qualities of sympathy and empathy were key in creating a coherent performance. He also noted that at times musicians did not necessarily agree that certain musical interactions or improvisations were successful, and that some of the participants considered the contributions of their less-experienced colleagues less successful than their own (p.58). Seddon's observations highlight the social nature and interpersonal nature of improvisation, how a leaderless group might fracture, including along the lines of privilege or class, and suggest a dynamic that may undermine an intention to run a non-hierarchical ensemble. Seddon's study does not explore the later point further, however, nor did it explicitly explore further how power dynamics may inform a group's performance.

Nikki Moran (2010) identified how improvising musicians may execute the nonverbal component of communication during playing, with research into 'looking behaviours', or where players directed their gazes when during performances (Moran, 2010). She found that her subjects tended to gaze at certain places for

between one to four seconds – at the audience, another player, or at their hands or lap – to signal ideas to one another. The duration could be associated with 'possible universal mechanisms underlying general, communicative social behaviour' (p.4), she said, and noted that additional study could help develop ideas about socially interactive understandings of musical communications. While Moran's research focused on the method of communicating a decision or idea, it did not explore how musicians arrived at decisions or dealt with instances of dissatisfaction over decisions within the group.

Seddon and Moran offer insights into practical methods of communication, and general principles one may find when examining how improvising musicians interact; Graeme Wilson and Raymond MacDonald (2012, 2020), meanwhile, approach interactions from the perspective of psychology, and expand on practical considerations to show how their meanings are highly situated and individualised. Their 2012 and 2020 research shows how ideas of self, including how one regards oneself in relation to a group, inform musicians' behaviours, which leads them to suggest that principles-based statements about creative interactions may have greater universality than rules-based ones. Improvisation is necessarily a socially-constructed and idiosyncratic process, Wilson and MacDonald argue; they say the decisions one group of musicians make during a performance relate not only to individual ensemble members positionality, but to fundamental beliefs about what improvisation is, the qualities that make an improvisation more or less legitimate, and who is qualified to identify themselves as an improvisor (Wilson and MacDonald, 2012, pp. 558-573). Thus, various musical actions can hold different meanings for each person within an ensemble, they found, even when the ensemble has 'a strong awareness of, and enthusiasm for, a collective identity (p.569).' For example, players may alternatively consider another musicians' decision to stop playing as 'a rallying signal; an act of minimal creativity; a warning of individual or group problems with the music in play; a stop sign; an indication of inhibition; a lack of concern with the quality of the music; or an act of aggression' (p.567), all of which stood to inform how each individual would respond.

This body of scholarship informed my research because it clearly outlined possible avenues of inquiry. Moran explicitly calls for additional research into social

understandings between musicians, while Seddon, and Wilson and MacDonald suggest that examining underlying beliefs and positionality may shed light on how members of a group may relate to one another. In addition to informing the questions I asked participants, their work also informed my decision to use thematic analysis to analysis the data, supported the idea that participants' experiences would be highly individuated, and further illustrated the social nature of free improvisation. I will discuss my methodology in further detail later.

Ties between improvisation and other disciplines

Because this study sought to identify practices of free improvisers that may be applicable to non-hierarchical groups outside of the sphere of music, it is important to identify the applications a few researchers have already suggested in the context of music that incorporates improvisation. These scholars focus on high-level themes and tendencies, particularly on the time improvisers spend preparing for a musical encounter. Manuel Santos and Kevin Morgan's 2019 research into how a volleyball team could benefit by adopting certain practices of jazz musicians, for example, homed in on musicians' collaborations ahead of playing a piece of music together. They tested whether Seddon's (2005) findings about preparation could apply to the athletes in question, and found that holding longer discussions before a game 'raised awareness about the complexities of the game and [helped players consider] them within their own decision-making process' (p. 124). They also found that it helpful for the athletes to group various actions on the court into 'motifs', the way musicians may think of rehearsed phrases of music that they can employ during an improvisation, and that the teammates' communication during play became 'more frequent, clear and concise' (p. 124), as well as more creative and collaborative, when they studied how jazz musicians work together.

Steve Oakes (2019) similarly focused on musicians' planning period in his theories about whether the metaphor of jazz, and its attendant freedoms and constraints, has utility in guiding service providers' approach to interactions with customers. Oakes describes a parallel between musicians who rehearse a piece of music ahead of a live performance and service providers who memorise a script for customer interactions, and notes that both may face various disruptions during their

performance or interaction. When that happens, he notes, the jazz musician is impowered by her preparation to recover through improvising back to the originally intended idea. He argues that a service provider can harness the same power by building confidence in speaking extemporaneously and can draw lessons in doing so from the sense of creativity, imagination, and self-expression of the jazz musician (p. 482). He acknowledged that his theory was untested in the context of service jobs and that further research would be required to understand whether it works in practice.

Allard E. van Ark and Marjo Wijnen-Meijer (2018) argue that doctors and other medical professionals similarly stand to gain by studying the way improvising musicians work. While they repeat conventional wisdom that musicologists sometimes contest – that jazz is a 'language' used to 'converse' (p. 203) – they also draw similar conclusions to Santos, Morgan, and Oakes about the utility of borrowing practices from jazz to use in a very different setting. Like them, van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer say they believe medical professionals should attune their listening skills to the level of improvising musicians with the goal of 'understanding the patient rather than collecting the facts, while being aware of the subtle non-verbal clues that the patient provides' (p. 204). To do so requires attention to the same types of factors musicians consider, including 'space and silence, listening, personal voice, curiosity, and conversation' (p. 204), which requires specific attention and practice, the same way a musician practices her instrument and practices playing it with her fellow ensemble members. The researchers add that jazz ensembles offer lessons for medical teams, too, given that each member must strive to be a partner within the team to promote a climate of psychological safety. They note that like musicians, members of a medical team act based on mutual trust and members' adherence to a set of non-negotiable and foundational rules (p. 205). The observation coincides with Seddon's 2005 research that found improvised musicians displayed high levels of empathetic attunement towards their colleagues.

This third body of research draws connections between improvisation and a wide range of other disciplines, and is important to my research because it illustrates ways that self-expression and mutual interdependence can coexist within a group, as well as specific individual qualities that create the satisfying or successful

interactions that encourage individuals to remain in a group, and their wide applicability. Thus it is reasonable to believe that free improvisers possess knowledge that is useful to groups that are focused on very different activities from musical ensembles and that may outwardly appear highly dissimilar.

The scholarship that informed my research included a range of work within the spheres of musicology, which included politically-focused literature, as well as research within managerial and business disciplines. Musicological scholarship that intersected with political theory included research into the ways in which free improvisation embodies leftist politics, especially anarchy, and the ongoing debates over the extent to which the connection can be drawn (Attali, 1985; Bell, 2014; Prouty, 2008; Small, 1987; Suissa, 2016; Mitrović, 2019). A key point from this material is that there are varying ideas about the extent to which members of free improvisation are truly free to make decisions entirely based on their own desires and free will, and the extent to which they can or should reject set roles (Mitrović, 2019). Additional key points from musicological scholarship include that free improvisation requires a high level of attunement to other ensemble members, both in terms of the level of skill and experience required to interpret various actions (Moran, 2010; Seddon, 2005) and in terms of empathy, positionality, and knowledge of fellow musicians' values (Seddon, 2005; Wilson and MacDonald, 2012). Thus the social aspect of free improvisation is established in this literature as crucial for an ensemble to endure. Lastly, research into how improvisation can inform a variety of disciplines outside of music pointed to the ways in which my findings may apply to a range of groups and suggested a path for further study (Oakes, 2009; Santos and Morgan, 2019; van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer, 2018). A key aspect of this body of scholarship is that researchers theorised that those who perform free improvisation hold unique knowledge about ways to foster trust and psychological safety within a group (van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer, 2018), indicating an area of future study to discover how that is done in practical terms.

I will briefly acknowledge that this study is not concerned with the opinions and experiences of audience members and focuses only on the experience of the musicians themselves. I mention this given that some readers may approach this work from the perspective of a consumer of music rather than a creator, and wonder

why those in their position go unmentioned. The interrelationship between modern musicians and audience members is examined in an extensive body of research, to which major philosophers have contributed, including philosopher Theodor Adorno via his essays on modern music (1998). But that is beyond the scope of this project, so I will leave Adorno and the topic of audience members here.

III. Research methodology and design

Methodology

'Working practices of free improvisation musical ensembles' is a case study of how free improvisation musicians with no designated leader make decisions about what to play and how to play it, and whether that information could apply to other groups. As stated earlier, my research questions are: In the absence of notated music or a leader to predetermine how everyone should play, how do free improvisation musicians decide who plays, what to play, when, and for how long? How do ensembles resolve dissatisfaction over those matters? Do participants believe working practices or norms of free improvisation ensembles could be applicable to groups outside of music that wish to organise themselves without designated leaders?

As these questions seek to surface meaningful data across multiple individuals, I decided upon a qualitative methodology. Per Rosaline Barbour (2006) and John Cresswell and Cheryl Poth (2017), qualitative research is best suited to understand participants and contextualise their life experiences; explain seemingly illogical behaviours; provide context; and explain differences between participant answers. Given that, I selected thematic analysis (TA) because it offered a reflexive approach that allowed me to develop themes later in the analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

I rejected narrative analysis and its focus on conversation analysis, discursive psychology and biography, as Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2021) note that it is poorly suited to 'the analysis of patterns of meaning across the data items or cases that constitute a qualitative data set' (p. 38). I also rejected Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), because it requires that one analyse each case individually (Smith and Osborn, 2015), which I believed would distract from my

objective of surfacing multiple themes from the totality of the data set. More importantly, because I sought findings that could theoretically be applied to non-musical groups, I rejected IPA because it is not typically used to generate theory (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012).

Participant selection

Participants are five internationally recognised free improvisation musicians, who I selected because of their extensive experience with free improvisation, including as performing and recording musicians, and as scholars, teachers, and authors. I also selected the five individuals for pragmatic reasons, given the brief period in which to complete this research. To that end, I used the sampling technique of snowballing by contacting via email and social media direct messaging five potential participants I know socially, and asking if they could participate. Three agreed. The two who could not suggested alternate individuals, also internationally recognised players and scholars of free improvisation. I contacted both via email and they agreed to participate.

The participant group is diverse in age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and spent childhood in a range of economic statuses and distances from urban centres. All have conducted or participated in previous scholarly research on free improvisation, all have a rich body of knowledge and experience from which to draw, and all studied and participated in music in general at length. All are expert not only in musicology but in their individual instruments, which they play at the highly technically proficient standard that is expected among professional musicians. All are sophisticated in their understanding of free improvisation and music generally, and were ideal participants in terms of the breadth of knowledge and experience.

All participants were inclined to participate potentially due to their personal connection to me or to another participant, and/or because they themselves have conducted scholarly research into musician behaviours and enjoy collaborating on such projects.

Data collection

After contacting participants and securing their participating, I briefly described my research design plan to them over email and invited feedback. My initial plan had included that I would watch recorded performances of free improvisation ensembles, with the intention of viewing decision-making as it happened. Every participant advised against that component of the project, and said that attempting to view such activity would fail to yield reliable information. Their advice coincided with Seddon's (2005) finding that it is 'methodologically problematic' for researchers to interpret observed behaviours of musical ensembles, because 'musicians may be employing subconscious cognitive and effective processes during improvisation that do not produce observable behaviours' (p. 59). Thus, I removed that from my research plan and did not observe and attempt to interpret video-recorded performances as I had originally indicated I would in my research proposal. Participants indicated the rest of my plan was sound, and I proceeded with scheduling individual interviews.

I conducted the interviews via Zoom, and selected a semi-structured interview format based on a finding of Wilson and MacDonald (2012), who argued that researchers should avoid 'generic interviews' asking set questions without the ability to follow up (p.570), because doing so is unlikely to surface revelatory information. The format allowed each discussion to take unexpected turns, even deviate significantly from my original questions, as Donatella della Porta (2014b) notes can allow for participants to indicate what they believe are the most important issues to discuss, rather than focusing on questions I composed based on research and theory but little expertise in real-world practices. Further, the format allowed me to draw on the skills I have developed over working as a journalist for two decades, including taking nonverbal cues from participants, particularly in moments when a participant sounded hesitant or looked uncertain. As della Porta notes, making room for unanticipated directions can reveal knowledge that the interviewer did not anticipate (2014b), which resulted in valuable insights. Additionally the format allowed me to explicate individual experiences within my small cohort, which was important given the research showing that improvising musicians can experience musical events so differently that the only commonality between interpretations is that they are individual (Wilson and MacDonald, 2012).

After interviewing each participant, I then wrote a brief summary of participants' answers and anonymised all attributions, which I emailed to participants for review. The decision to do so was informed by scholars of activist social research, such as Aziz Choudry (2013, 2014), who holds that researchers concerned with social movements must 'take the opportunity to learn about how others think, analyse and generate research beyond the sometime self-referential loops of academic social movement scholarship' (Choudry, 2014, p.77). I explained to participants in the above email that my goal in sharing the summary with them was to solicit feedback when we spoke again.

I then conducted a second round of semi-structured individual interviews to learn how participants interpreted the responses of others and to discuss how I interpreted participant answers generally. This component was also informed by activist social researchers, who often refer to this step as a 'member check' to assess whether a researcher's conclusions are accurate (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In summarising Choudry, Rebecca Tarlau (2014) notes that such an approach reflects '[d]edication to an open dialogue…before, during, and after the research and writing process' (Tarlau, 2014, p.75).

The second interview also allowed me to explore two other points della Porta makes: that conducting a follow-up interview may offer a chance to compare individuals' statements with their actions, and may also offer chances to see individuals' reactions to other interviewees' statements (della Porta, 2014a). My interview guide is included in the appendix.

The process I have outlined helped me explore my data from multiple perspectives, and gave me the opportunity to share my thoughts with participants and receive feedback, including counter explanations and rejections of my interpretations. In this way, my project aimed to emphasise equal partnership in knowledge production, which, as Lindsey Horner (2016) argues, indicates a foundation of democratic values and a commitment to pursue human progress through participation. Such an approach 'is also characterised by its transformative potential' as well as a commitment to unite theory and practice (Horner, 2016).

I transcribed interviews by hand. That is my typical practice as a journalist and I find it helps me more thoroughly understand and consider interviewees'

statements than when I generate a transcript through an electronic service provider. I anonymised participant data with pseudonyms and stored data in the requisite manner.

Analysis

Because participants held a variety of unique viewpoints, opinions, and interpretations, I used thematic analysis (TA) as my analytical methodology, as this group of methods seeks to discover recurrent themes within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2020).

I drew on Richard Boyatzis (1998) to develop a coding system to analyse my interviews and observations, as well as the methods of Braun and Clarke (2020) to reflexively examine my coding process using their method of repeatedly reading the interviews six times, each one taking in turn the phase of 'familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up' (Braun and Clarke, 2020, p. 39).

The highly personal way participants related to and interpreted free improvisation led me to themes and principles within the entire body of resultant data, which Wilson and MacDonald (2012) suggest may have greater universality than rules.

Positionality

Before discussing my findings, I want to describe here my own positionality. As Seddon (2005) noted, researcher observations about musicians' approaches to free improvisation can be shaped by the researcher's own biases. Thus, it is important to state that I play several instruments, read music, play free improvisation casually, and studied improvisational music as an undergraduate, all of which give me some insight into this subject. However, I am not a professional musician, have never publicly performed free improvisation, and completed my undergraduate studies almost 20 years ago. Importantly, my relationship with improvised music is one of discomfort. I feel embarrassed and shy when performing music that is not notated; I am often worried I'm doing it wrong and feel constrained by what I imagine are other musicians' disappointed expectations of my contributions. As a result, I tend to

follow rather than lead, and err on the side of playing less rather than more. This tendency is a unique bias; it also provided the insight to ask participants about their own level of confidence, which in turn led to interesting discussions about the subtle dynamics of personal psychology that can influence someone's position within a group. My method of counteracting any biased or inaccurate interpretations due to my positionality was by checking my analysis with participants in the second interview.

IV. Presentation of findings and discussion

Introduction

This research aims to show how members of free improvisation music ensembles work together when creating a piece of music in real time and consider if that information may be useful to other types of groups that likewise seek to operate without set designated leaders. As previously stated, I defined free improvisation as a non-idiomatic musical form that musicians play without a notated score or a designated leader, and which may intersect with various musical forms, such as jazz.

Themes to emerge from participant interviews include that free improvisation musicians make decisions based on personal as well as collective desires; select free improvisation for artistic, social and political reasons; acknowledge that leaders may emerge despite the rejection of the concept of leaders; and that participants view the art form as having no set rules other than a requirement that everyone listen deeply to their fellow ensemble members.

I will discuss each theme in turn, and in doing so answer my three research questions.

Making decisions based on personal desires and on collective welfare

All participants stated that the reason they were drawn to free improvisation and its overall appeal is its ability to allow them to make musical determinations and execute musical ideas without being told what to do. All described this as a sense of 'freedom', and noted that that tenant informs how they work with other musicians. For the purposes of this research, musical 'freedom' refers to a perceived autonomy

in terms of the creative generation of tonal, rhythmic and timbral material, how this material is applied during a performance, and how individual musicians creatively interact with other members of an ensemble (Wimbish, 2020).

At the same time, however, all participants expressed that decision-making freedom over those matters must coexist with consideration for the other people with whom they are playing, or else it is unlikely the group will endure for the long term. Thus, participants said that groups with enduring membership typically conform to various agreements, conventions, norms or rules for a period of time, or all the time, for a particular musical encounter, or for all musical encounters, that they themselves set and to which they agree. Participants indicated that these rules or norms can be discussed explicitly; they can also emerge without discussion and over time come to constitute implicit expectations about how members of the group will behave. In the latter case, participants said they would likely only discuss such implicit agreements if they wanted to change them. Most agreements within an ensemble relate to what members value in terms of the music produced and how they prefer working in a group, participants said. Rules may include an order in which ensemble members play, an amount of time for which they play, that one musician will initiate the first musical motif to which others respond, or numerous other organisational iterations, participants said. Though musicians may draw on various ideas for parameters from other ensembles or previous musical encounters, deciding which to use at any given time is entirely up to each free improvisation ensemble. As Maya put it, '[A]s far as I'm concerned, improv has no rules apart from the ones we make'. In other words, to say that free improvisation is entirely free, or completely without rules, is inaccurate in practical terms. However, the constraints and rules are determined and negotiated within each ensemble by individual ensemble members working together, may change over time, and may or may not resemble the rules set by any other ensemble.

Thus, the answer to my first research question (how do free improvisation musicians decide who plays, what to play, when, and for how long?) is that determinations of when and what to play are largely dependent upon socially negotiated terms. Said in colloquial terms: it depends.

Una MacGlone and Raymond MacDonald (2018) note that musicians' early and formative musical experiences, primary music-related work, and knowledge of

other genres influence what rules and terms they set in free improvisation. For that reason, I will briefly list in the below table participants and a few of the early and/or influential experiences they noted during interviews.

Table 1: Early/influential musical experiences cited by participants

Participant **(pseudonyms)**	**Influential experiences**
Aziza	Childhood participation in brass band. Research interests include music and disability. Builds instruments by hand to explore sound and the physicality of musicmaking.
Duncan	Early career as a performing and recording rock musician in London, dissatisfaction regarding its associated business considerations.
Ian	Childhood piano lessons; performance in the Scottish and English punk scenes as a young adult. Researches the psychology of free improvisation.
Isla	Childhood participation in youth orchestra and musical ensembles, including free improvisation ensembles. Professional work includes music therapy and leading international skill-sharing projects for children living with disabilities.
Maya	Childhood instruction in voice, classical devotional ragas and Western classical music. Scholar and advocate of decolonizing musical pedagogy and of social justice.

(Source: Participant interviews)

Participants said that early musical experiences influenced their approach to free improvisation and added that their professional interests and political orientation did as well. For example, Aziza, Isla and Maya, all of whom are active in disability rights and representation efforts, said they may use free improvisation as a space to explore the physicality of music making.

For the entire sample group, all of whom are professional musicians, technical proficiency is a highly important aspect of free improvisation because it enables them to execute ideas in the moment with precision. Aziza, Isla and Maya all noted that their classical music training had given them a high level of proficiency at their instruments, making it possible for them to execute new ideas quickly during performance. Duncan and Ian likewise noted their technical proficiency supported

their creative expressions, and said they may also draw on techniques derived from punk and rock idioms, given that those were some of their earliest musical foci. The theme of technical proficiency is important because requires that they hold consideration for themselves and the group simultaneously. Maintaining a high level of technical proficiency places significant responsibility on individuals to continuously practice their instrument, typically on a daily basis and apart from the group, in order to fully participate in the group.

Another important theme that emerged could be considered the one constant of all free improvisation ensembles: that all members must listen deeply to others in the group. All participants said that was their expectation for others and for themselves, regardless of whether they were playing in a long-term group or in a one-off musical interaction, regardless of members' backgrounds, and regardless of the geographic location of their meeting. Participants said that all choices about playing and working together had attentive listening as a foundational expectation.

Additionally, themes emerged from participant interviews that were connected to listening and that revealed insights into what qualities make a successful free improvisation ensemble. Those included the theme of togetherness, the importance of the social aspect of free improvisation musical ensembles, and the theme of free improvisation as a reflection of political identify and rebellion. Another clear theme was participants' complicated views on the nature and nuances of leadership within free improvisation ensembles.

I will explore listening, social relationships, political implications, and leadership in the following sections.

Listening

Participants said that for them to remain in a particular free improvisation musical ensemble long-term, or to feel positively towards a one-time musical encounter, they must feel 'satisfied' by their interactions with fellow members. The overwhelming factor of achieving that feeling is the sense that others had 'listened' to their musical contributions. Every participant expressed that listening deeply was a quality they expected other free improvisers to share, regardless of their geographic location or background, and that positive interactions stemmed from players' trust

that everyone in an ensemble shared that core value and the skill to listen and demonstrate listening. Beyond that, the factors that constitute a satisfying encounter may fluctuate over time, including over the course of a single musical piece.

Participants said that believing or trusting that their fellow musicians were listening to what they played contributed to feeling they were ‘supported’, ‘respected’, ‘valued’, and ‘appreciated’ by other members. Some participants described feeling a sense of ‘cohesion’ when they believed fellow ensemble members were listening to them closely. Richard Sennett (2012) describes similar values and interprets them as expressions of ‘cooperation’. Though his observations are made in the context of classical music rehearsals (p. 14), where musicians play notated music, occupy set roles, and follow the direction of a conductor, his analysis is relevant because it speaks to the importance of listening in group work beyond that of free improvisers. Sennett notes that listening carefully also conveys a sense of empathy, which reinforces the urge to cooperate (pp.14-22). Participants said that they understood that their colleagues were listening closely when they responded in a way that demonstrated they had heard what the participant had just played. Aziza noted that hearing a response she expected or liked was not a determining factor in whether a fellow musician had fulfilled her trust; the key factor was showing they had listened to her. Duncan and Ian made similar comments, with Duncan observing that playing free improvisation is similar to participating in a conversation or a personal relationship, both of which he said must be flexible enough to accommodate another person’s point of view or to move into unexpected topics.

Sennett (2012) discusses this matter by examining how personal choices made whilst playing notated music coexist with high levels of attentiveness to other players on a personal level. He writes that a piece of music becomes richer when a string player hears that a fellow musician has interpreted a musical phrase in an entirely different way than expected. The string player may, in turn, respond sympathetically by imitating them, but ‘[t]he empathetic response is cooler: “You do an up-bow, I do a down-bow…”; the difference may be left hanging in the air but a sign of recognising what you are doing has been given’ (Sennett, 2012, p.21). That observation ties closely with how participants described understanding that they had been heard and explicates Aziza’s statement that it is more important to believe a

fellow player has listened, than to hear something expected. Drawing on Sennet's analysis, Aziza's determination is based on an empathetic, rather than sympathetic, understanding of the interaction. In the specific context of free improvisation, Wilson and MacDonald (2012) likewise discuss unexpected musical contributions and found in their research that hardly any are interpreted as intended (Wilson and MacDonald, 2012). Seddon (2005) notes that that is not necessarily detrimental; rather, it illustrates the difference between sympathetic and empathetic listening, the latter of which researchers, like participants, identify as more important for free improvisation (Seddon, 2005). Sennett (2012) highlights this difference and its importance, saying that an empathetic listener expresses their empathy not through imitation or doing exactly what is expected, but by showing they are listening through, for example, sustained eye contact. The message, he says, is '"I am attending intently to you" rather than "I know just how you feel'" (p. 21). The former can result in music that 'may surprise everyone' (p.19), which is one of the goals participants said free improvisation as an art form seeks to achieve.

These points are important in the context of investigating how free improvisers deal with dissatisfaction, because they clarify that unexpected responses to a musical contribution do not constitute the kind of musical interaction that would necessarily cause dissatisfaction. Rather, dissatisfaction would stem from hearing a fellow musician play in a way that indicated they had failed to listen. This may carry implications for other groups outside of free improvisation and could be considered in further research, which I will discuss in a later section.

The sense of not being listened to led participants to make certain choices that speak to my second research question (how do free improvisation ensemble members resolve dissatisfaction about decisions made over what to play and who should play it?).

In some cases, participants experienced feeling unheard as a personal slight, revealing again the importance of listening within the free improvisation community. Maya, for example, described putting her instrument down in one setting when she was playing soft, ambient sounds and another musician responded by playing loud fart noises over her. 'I was literally like, "I'm just gonna stop. He's kind of ruining it for me, you know? … it almost took the enjoyment out, like I was really enjoying

myself and then he started making these weird noises and I was just kind of like, "Nah". … I do remember speaking to someone watching it about just feeling a bit kind of – it felt rude'.

In other cases, participants felt they were not being heard because their fellow musicians literally were unable to hear them. Maisie, for example, described a group in which there were so many musicians she felt no one was able to hear her play even if they had wanted to, and so she has not returned.

> Maisie: I always found [a large UK-based free improvisation ensemble] really difficult because … it's massive in terms of sound. … the kind of weight and the volume of some of the improvisers… it was much harder to come in, to find a way into that, so it's much harder to know what my role might be, and when you're playing such a quiet acoustic instrument and there's like sax, trumpet, vibraphone, guitar, drums, it's really hard to negotiate your way in, to push you way in.

For Maya and Maisie, the way to resolve the dissatisfaction of not being listened to was to withdraw their participation from the groups in question.

Ian expressed another way to resolve dissatisfaction, which he noted may create additional problems. He said that some groups hold a 'debriefing' discussion after playing to discuss what members did or did not like, which can in some cases helpfully clarify participants' preferences for each other. However, doing so can also produce a negative effect. He described one large ensemble for which that was the case.

> Ian: We used to have these rehearsals where we would talk more than we actually played [laughs, covers face], and, you know, talk very, very heatedly about things. And there was very polarised opinions about what was good in music and wasn't in that ensemble. And that got quite wearying after a while. And I think after a while people learned not to do that because it wasn't really helping; it wasn't allowing us to reach a position of consensus. It usually it just resolved itself because people just couldn't face talking about it anymore [laughs] – let's just play something again! … I think it tended to, if anything, to have a suppressing effect, I think there was more exciting music went on before people went on and on at length about what they did or didn't like.

In member check interviews, participants said that the methods described by Maya, Maisie, and Ian summarise the main options for resolving dissatisfaction in free improvisation.

Thus, the answer to my second research question is that free improvisers resolve dissatisfaction by confronting it directly through group discussion, and they may also resolve it by leaving the group.

Togetherness and social interactions

Participants noted that when they believe strongly that their ensemble members are listening to them attentively, they experience a profound sense of togetherness that enables them to engage more thoroughly with the music being produced.

Participants said that as a result of the sense of togetherness, knowing when to play can feel more like a response to the music rather than to an individual person playing it, or more akin to instinct than a deliberate decision. As Aziza put it, 'I know this sounds very esoteric – what the music wants – but I play what the music demands of me … I don't think there's a real explanation, it's an in-the-moment thing'. However, she also noted that there are some instances that do lead her to make a deliberate decision, such as deciding to play something noise-based following a period of someone contributing by playing melodic patterns. What a musician plays is 'a concept you develop by yourself… and other people support you, and you take it somewhere'. The key, she said, was trusting the group would support her contribution, a point Guido Möllering (2006) says can be reinforced over time and through the knowledge that others in the group are in the same position, making a similar 'leap of faith' (p.124).

Maya likewise described decision-making as an idiosyncratic process that shifts over time and that is empowered by trust and togetherness.

> Maya: It's not always so subconscious. Sometimes it's common sense meets instinct. So if you're playing and things naturally start to kind of fade in volume or energy and kind of taper off then it would be perhaps appropriate for some to keep going or do something really loud at the end when there's a kind of mutual everyone's going in the same direction. … In terms of knowing when to come in, there's something about spatial awareness about respecting where there can be silence and when there needs to be something and … a lot of it comes from experience, I think, of the people, experience of who you're working with. I think when … where things feel clunkier, it is because … people aren't used to working with each other, so they haven't quite got into that space of being in synch.

Maya and other participants acknowledged that experience and technical skill are components to achieving the space of being in synch, because both can be necessary to quickly respond to other players. This insight indicates one way in which free improvisation may seem to some as an exclusive or insular group to which beginner musicians are welcome, and which may replicate traditional dynamics.

However, participants also said that experience and technical skill are not enough to sustain a group's enduring membership. As Aziza put it: 'It goes back to, you need to feel understood, valued, safe, trusted. You need to feel you can make a musical contribution'. She also noted that often when someone seems not to fit into a musical ensemble, 'it's more of a personal clash than a musical one', a significant remark because it suggests that the impulse to play free improvisation is entangled with a desire for personal connections with fellow ensemble members. Thus, the interpersonal and social aspects of the genre are highly important for free improvisation musicians, so time spent socialising contributes directly to their work and is not a separate activity or so-called wasted time.

Duncan made a similar remark to Aziza more pointedly: 'I collaborate with people I enjoy collaborating with … [S]o there might be some amazing people out there, but if I don't particularly enjoy collaborating with them, then I don't do it.'

I will return to the social aspect of free improvisation in due course, as it relates strongly to the significant body of work about community and community building, and may offer an avenue for further study.

Some participants noted that the sense of togetherness can be deliberately supported by interpersonal activities away from music-making, an observation that may offer a practical way for other groups outside of free improvisation to strengthen the social ties that support their overall collective purpose.

For Aziza, that took the form of meeting socially ahead of playing. 'We're not rehearsing, but we are going to have dinner at eight o'clock and a couple glasses of wine, and we'll play at ten'. Doing so gave her the chance to 'feel around a little bit about what might happen' during playing, and added to an overall sense of generosity and comradery. 'I enjoyed and understood that', she stated. 'That sense of

community – whenever you talk [over a meal] you get to know each other'. The other participant who mentioned non-musical preparation was Maya, who described the sense that certain performances felt in synch when players shared a group hug before taking the stage.

> Maya: I've done gigs with [a certain ensemble] and we've done gigs where we've felt really in synch and really jelling and we've done gigs where we don't, and sometimes it's like if we have a group hug before we go on stage then we feel like we're kind of in a different place. It's little things like that … even, do we spend time together before we play? Are we being around each other?

She also noted that when things feel out of synch with this ensemble, remedying that may require a similarly gentle personal touch, such as discussing whether anyone was dealing with something difficult in their personal lives and offering support and commiseration. 'It's about shared responsibility, working out … how do we hold each other in that space? … . There's a mutual responsibility for trying to be in the same headspace', Maya said. This stands in opposition to her response to a disagreeable situation with a musician with whom she shared no social bond. In that instance, her method of resolving her dissatisfaction was to withdraw her participation.

The reflections from Aziza and Maya comport with Sennett's (2012) observation that spending time with others and getting to know them on a personal level can create strong and enduring ties that correlate to high levels of empathy. As he describes, one component of working without rules or a leader, broadly speaking, is to spend time together to gain an understanding of one another as individuals. Summarising 20th century American minister and politician Norman Thomas, Sennett notes that 'the more experienced people become in getting along without guiding rules or rules, the more they will come to value one another' (Sennett, 2012, p. 270) – an insight that maps to participants' descriptions of valuing fellow free improvisers for the social component of their interaction, as well as the artistic component.

Ian noted in a follow-up interview that one can experience a sense of togetherness with another free improviser even if they have no previous relationship, because 'there's a wider international community of people who get it or who like playing in that way and who appreciate other people playing in that way'. If he trusts that someone he has never played with before will adhere to the common expectation

towards listening – for example, because of their reputation – then he trusts they will have a satisfying musical interaction. That trust and openness, he said, is the antidote to anxiety about playing with someone new and worries about being judged, which he noted make it difficult to play anything at all.

All participants remarked that it was especially satisfying to hear synchronicity in the music – moments where they felt everyone was playing with the same ideas in mind. They described this as a singular joy that reinforced their desire to remain a member of that group, though it was not necessarily an expectation or requirement for every musical encounter. Understanding all members of the ensemble were listening, however, was such a requirement, and all participants reported that it was a necessary for their ongoing participation in any one group.

Reflections on the politics of free improvisation

Participants expressed that participating in free improvisation was a way to express their political beliefs and/or inhabit their ideal society for a brief period. Several comments related closely to a body of research discussed in the literature review, in which scholars, including Attali (1987), Bell (2014), and Small (1987), explore how free improvisation expresses the political philosophy of anarchy as it was originally intended.

Duncan, for example, said he believes that free improvisation aligns strongly with anarchy because it must allow personal choices and consideration for others to co-exist – a definition similar to Kropotkin's, who referred to an anarchical society as an 'interwoven network' of individuals working together to meet their material, intellectual, artistic, and social needs (2019, p.7). Like the changeable parameters of free improvisation, Kropotkin said such a society would "represent nothing immutable" and that it would exist in a state of "ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium" between those involved.

Duncan's comments related closely to the tension between the personal and the collective that exists within anarchy. He noted, for example, that one of his frequent ensembles is a duo with another musician who plays an instrument that is different than his own, and that among their interests is exploring various ways the

two instruments differ. But even so, he said, that does not mean they simply play whatever they like.

> Duncan: It's an activated space, you know, it's not just, 'I'm going to be very allowing of what you do and I'm going to listen to what you do and then anything you do I will support'. That's not it. It's about the coming together of two personalities, which is the reason you're there.

Ian, meanwhile, expressed a similar but different interpretation revealing one way free improvisers may hold a range of values and expectations. For him, free improvisation is exactly the place to do anything and expect support, which he said requires that he is comfortable with the possibility of hearing something he doesn't like.

> Ian: If I'm playing a saxophone solo in a jazz band, there are conventions, that, for instance, I should be louder than everyone else, that should be the dominant oral instrument that other musicians will try and accompany that, in a sense, and that means different things for different instruments, but there's a sense they won't just go off and play whatever they feel like, they will do something that fits with that, and that can be an exciting thing to do as well, but in free improvised music there's none of that. … [I]t's just kind of utopian anarchism. It's like there really is no leader here, because this music, if we've agreed it is free and can go anywhere and anything can happen, you just have to try and find ways to be part of emerging musical patterns.

These comments are important because they add practical insights into to the small body of work by theorists who argue free improvisation is an expression of actually existing anarchism, such as by Bell (2014) and Small (1987). While both researchers speak in generalities about free improvisation and treat it as a single artistic mode, practitioners themselves describe a range of ways they might decide how to work together. These practical details also add credence to the idea that free improvisation is an example of actually existing anarchy, because both are flexible enough to accommodate the viewpoints and preferences for all individuals, both balance self-interest and sociability, and both are interested 'in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, in lieu of the present hierarch from the center to the periphery' (Kropotkin, 1905, p. 9).

Participants made a unified point about the political undercurrents of free improvisation, independent of any question I asked. All five participants said that the musical form constitutes a rejection of traditional musical norms, including the

career or artistic path mainstream musicians typically take. This may suggest that free improvisation can be more than a musical form and constitutes a political orientation.

All five participants also expressed that playing free improvisation is not typically a money-making activity and can be seen as a rejection of the profit-seeking nature of the mainstream music industry, and of capitalism generally. Thus, when playing free improvisation, musicians can focus on their individual experiences, musical exploration, making an artistic offering to an audience that cannot be replicated, and fellowship with other musicians, without the pressure of appealing to a major record label or event space, or turning a profit. Those factors constitute an explicit draw for participants. Duncan, for example, began to play free improvisation in '90s 'at the relatively old age of 30' because he sought an antidote to the capitalistic focus of the commercial music industry. Exploring free improvisation was 'a deliberate stepping away from the so-called music business – playing electric guitar in bands and things. … [T]he more I learned about it through bitter experience of record contracts and things, I learned that I really kind of found it kind of [laughs] I don't know what the word is. I was going to say "revolting"'. Maya sought similar relief from the norms of classical music ensembles: 'I was just like, "I don't want to do this. I don't enjoy this". … The flute players are really competitive, it's quite a mean bitchy space to exist in, so I didn't enjoy it**.'**

> Maya: Learning about kind of how Western European art music and colonialism are intertwined, really just kind of, it was more nails in the coffin really, of just going yeah I need to [leave], like, improv is this more liberating space that feels like it challenges a lot of things… . [A]ctually, what we were doing was creating freedom.

These points are important to this research because they suggest that free improvisation offers a method of rebellion from typical musical practices, as well as social support to engage with that rebellion, which further explicates why participants make the choices they do whilst playing. For example, answers from participants about how they determine when and what to play can be read as choices that reflect the type of politics in which they believe and/or the society in which they wish to live. Thus, in addition to reflecting anarchism and rebellion, these findings also reflect prefigurative politics, as Wini Breines defined it in 1982, because it seeks

to develop relationships with others in a way that 'prefigures' a societal structure that opposes hierarchy (Breines, 1982). This is important when looking at participants' reflections about leadership, an issue that raises conflicting thoughts for participants, and which I will address in the next section.

No masters?

Participants roundly expressed discomfort over the concept of leaders. They said they are committed to the idea that ensembles playing free improvisation should forego hierarchy, predetermined leaders and set roles, and that they were not keen to assume leadership roles themselves. 'Yeah, no, I don't think it's a useful concept', Aziza said of the idea of leaders. 'If you're in free improvisation it should be horizontal and everyone should be equal'.

Tasks typically performed by a leader should be handled by everyone, and all members should pitch in to the various aspects of playing music together. They noted that that view extended to practical considerations outside of music-making, and acknowledged that tensions can arise regarding certain work that is necessary to enable musical interactions, such as scheduling, ensuring the necessary equipment works properly, or booking a space in which to play.

Duncan also acknowledged a frustration when individuals signal that they have accepted a position of leadership, such as by organising an ensemble and naming it after themselves, and then failing to assume certain of those necessary duties. In one instance, he recalled the person he considered the leader of an ensemble failing to execute such tasks, including conducting a sound-check prior to a performance, to the detriment of the other players and their performance.

> Duncan: I happened to be standing right next to the speakers, which were far too loud to a degree I had tinnitus, and myself and another sax player had to leave the area and go behind the speakers because it was feeding back bass … it was one person's orchestra with their name on it, so I did feel they had some responsibility, and they felt that they didn't have that responsibility, that it was a group responsibility, so there was a difference … between us there, so I sort of felt it was sort of their job to call the sound check, and they had they had they actually asked us to be there four hours ahead before the gig started, which I was, and as you can tell I'm still unhappy about it.

In contrast, Maisie expressed a frustration towards such expectations, which she has encountered when she is the one to organise a group and book a space in

which to practice or perform. Such actions should not be understood as taking the lead, she said.

> Maisie: I'll hold the space but I'm not going to facilitate it. We can play, we can do this together, but I would kind of set out at the beginning … we each have shared responsibility for this space … I find myself saying, you know, that this is a shared space, we're each responsible for what happens, there are no rules – that awful thing of, there are no rules, because of course there are always implicit things. But I feel pushed often in the music to be leading it, or to be making decisions about what happens and this all going on nonverbally … so maybe what I'm saying is actually I'm not entirely sure if that is working in a way that I would [like].

Other participants noted that they sometimes feel someone with more experience or more renown is a leader to whom they should defer.

All of these findings suggest that the common modes of group work that exist in society at large, such as assigning a hierarchy of roles to members, can shape expectations within free improvisation ensembles, even when members say they reject them. That is a condition against which philosophers and scholars of anti-authoritarian have long cautioned, such as Engels (1978), as mentioned. It is important here given that one goal of this research is to surface goals for groups that wish to work without a leader, and can be seen as the type of matter that may benefit from close scrutiny and forethought in order to maintain the satisfaction of all group members. A group of any kind might be able to sidestep dissatisfaction over, say, scheduling a monthly meetup at the pub that is meant to foster stronger social ties, by explicitly acknowledging that organising it is a shared duty, that failing to rotate the task may cause dissatisfaction, and then agreeing to a scheduling rotation for the year. Further study is needed to highlight specific areas of contention that arise within leaderless free improvisation ensembles.

Musicologists have studied and discussed whether leaderless musical ensembles are ever truly without leaders since at least the 1960s, including Cardew and Rzewski **(**Mitrović, 2019), Prouty (2008) and Suissa (2016). But Ian had a novel insight that those scholars do not highlight, which is that it not necessarily possible to know whether there are leaders and who they are in a free improvisation ensemble.

> Ian: You can regard somebody else as a leader, you can think, 'I'll just try to fit in with what they are doing'. And I guess in that sense you might think someone is a leader, but there's no guarantee that they're thinking of

> themselves as a leader and leading you … . I've had instances where people said I was following them, but that actually, I was following somebody else in the group, and likewise everybody thought they had led a change. That is the great thing about it is the lack of leadership, I think you can get very tired very quickly of leadership in the music, and people being and acting as leaders.

For him, the mystery of not knowing who is thinking what – in terms of leadership as well as whether anyone likes what he's playing – is one of the reasons why he enjoys the form. He noted that coming to terms with relinquishing control is part of the freedom it offers to practitioners.

Participants' discomfort over the idea of leaders, and their conflicted attitudes towards questions of responsibility for certain jobs touch on a struggle that can confront any group attempting to operate with a flat hierarchy. Musicians playing free improvisation are in the unique position of contending with those struggles in a variety of ways, including through creative musical production, in social relationships, and in terms of practical considerations such as booking venues in which to play music. I believe this experience positions free improvisers to offer a range of insights into successful group work that could be applicable outside of music. I will explore what participants themselves see as the most valuable insights they have to offer in the following section.

Offering ideas to non-hierarchical groups outside of music and further study

Participants believed there are multiple ways that practices and norms of free improvisers could be useful to members of other groups. The most common answers relate to the aforementioned themes, including the importance of listening deeply, attending to personal relationships between group members, validating other members' unexpected ideas, and acknowledging that members can become irritated with one another when certain tasks are unfulfilled.

Maya's list of the topics about which free improvisers hold unique knowledge to share with others was the most exhaustive of the participants. She offered negotiation, collectivism, focusing on process, being in the moment, mindfulness, and attention to working in a way that is healthy and physically comfortable as areas free improvisers could help people of any group discuss, practice and/or achieve. In

member check interviews, two other participants highlighted Maya's latter topic to say they agreed that free improvisation allows musicians to play in ways they find physically comfortable, which they noted as important because it allows for disabled musicians to participate in ways that comport with their abilities without criticism that they are playing incorrectly. In that way, free improvisation offers another counter to a dominant societal norms, because it can address the ableism some participants identified in the larger context of traditional forms of music, including the Western idioms of classical and jazz, which itself exists in the context of ableism in society at large. Further study is needed to research those ideas and whether the insights free improvisers have about them are of use to other organisations.

Some participants, however, were skeptical that practices could neatly transfer from free improvisation to other disciplines. Ian was the biggest skeptic, saying that unless an organisation was also focused on creating something new each time members met, the practices of free improvisation were unlikely to offer much. Even if a leftist-minded not-for-profit food co-op appreciates the philosophy of anarchy, for example, he noted that workers must still open the shop on time and follow certain rules to ensure no customer gets sick from improperly prepared food.

However, Ian also expressed that free improvisation practitioners are highly skilled at spontaneity and at rapidly producing new and creative ideas, which could be useful for political activists who wish to employ the element of surprise for certain actions, or who want to expand members' ability to quickly think of, and execute, new ideas and actions.

> Ian: Your objectives [in free improvisation] are to try to come up with something exciting new and different and something that's not happened before, and that's not always the objective to a lot of groups. …So I guess for something like Occupy Wall Street, a group, like, that wants to be unpredictable to an extent – because if you're too predictable, people see you coming, and know or can pen in, or mitigate the action, where actually what you want is to use the element of surprise … something like that, you could see the parallels within an improvised ensemble. Less so in I guess a cooperative that's trying to make sure that its customers have the same stuff in store day to day and they don't poison anybody.

Certain participants also took issue with studies into the applicability of improvisation to other disciplines (Oakes, 2009; Santos and Morgan, 2019; van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer, 2018) and noted that they all looked at applications to groups

working in disciplines that typically assign a leader to guide, if not dictate, how each member should behave. This suggested that the lessons offered by improvising musicians may constitute entirely new information or ideas for participants of those studies, which included volleyball players and their coaches, services providers and their bosses, and doctors and their lead surgeons. Finding application between improvising musicians' behaviours and groups that already see themselves as nonhierarchically organised may require a greater level of nuance and granularity to be useful, some participants said. Additionally, all of the aforementioned studies sought to apply insights to disciplines concerned with drawing an audience, making money, or both, which participants in my study said free improvisation explicitly rejects. The fact that free improvisation is unconcerned with either is a major reason why participants said they engaged with the art form and is a key reason why they can focus on musical exploration and power sharing.

These participant insights speak to my third research question (Do free improvisation ensembles' methods of decision making and resolving dissatisfaction offer ideas for groups outside of music that want to employ non-hierarchical organisation and decision making?). The data produced by this research shows that there are many possible ideas, especially the value of listening deeply and intentionally fostering strong personal relationships between group members in order to generate the trust needed to freely contribute new ideas. Participants listed many additional and related ideas that could similarly be applicable, as stated. However, participants prefaced their responses to questions on that topic with the caveat that there is no one method to determine when and how individual musicians play in free improvisation. Thus, further study is needed to understand the extent to which the ideas raised by participants could truly apply to other groups, including by involving those other groups in the research process to ask them which lessons they themselves see as useful.

Further study is also needed to more thoroughly draw out participants' views on community, given that the subject constitutes a major area of scholarship, which I will turn to next.

Community and further study

As previously stated, some participants indicated that time spent developing social ties with fellow improvisers contributed to a sense of satisfaction that led them to continue to collaborate with certain groups. Some of these participants had not necessarily thought of this activity as 'community building' per se previously, but described it as such in member-check interviews when I asked whether what they were describing was a strong sense of community.

The notion of community opens an avenue for additional further research into free improvisation, and into how free improvisation ensembles could inform other groups. Research into community and community building is vast, and beyond the scope of this project. However, I will note here a few relevant researchers whose scholarship is relevant and coincides with similar themes raised in this study. This body of work may offer an entry point to additional research into how free improvisers approach their work as a group.

Jeremy Brent's 2004 definition that community 'is a desire, continually replenishing itself as people seek voice and connectedness, in all their imperfections' (Brent, 2004, p. 1), for example, summarises participants' descriptions of the qualities that lead them to return to a group without sugar-coating the concept as a perfect utopia. Brent also explores the ways in which the concept of community can be oriented to action, which can be 'messy and conflictual' (p. 4) and/or 'moving, divided and incomplete' (p. 7), all of which comport with participants' descriptions that their preferred ensembles are not necessarily perfect. Sandra Bartky (2002), meanwhile, uses another word to describe a similar concept – solidarity – which may apply to free improvisers in the sense that they see their activity as a rebellion against dominant and oppressive modes of interacting as well as an expression of a more ideal type of society. A sense of solidarity can constitute 'a knowing that brings into being new sympathies' (Bartky, 2002, pp. 71-72). Both researchers note that community and solidarity rely on connectedness and sympathy, which additional researchers have found are necessarily generated through active listening, a major theme in this study. Peter Block (2008), for example, holds that '[l]istening, understanding at a deeper level than is being expressed, is the action that creates a restorative community (Block, 2008, p. 132). Silvia Bettez (2011) likewise links

listening and community, again, a key theme of this study, and in describing her research into a group of mixed-race women who use storytelling to discuss oppression, highlights an aspect of listening relevant to the statements participants in my study made. The women she researched explained, among other things, that active listening allows a person to understand 'how best to move in and out of distinct groups' (Bettez, 2011, p. 4). In other words, listening to members of a community, whether they are speaking words or playing music, can help someone understand whether and how they can participate in that community. Oliver Escobar (2011) likewise draws a link between listening in order to understand versus listening in order to debate, noting that the former is necessary for dialogue and an exchange of ideas, and can move an interaction from decision-making to discovery (p. 41), which corresponds to participants' interest in creating new and unexpected music, and their interest in opening themselves to new possibilities.

Further research is needed to explore the concept of community in the context of free improvisation, and the above scholars may provide entry points to do so.

V. Conclusion

A range of themes emerged from participant data that answered my research questions, provided insights into free improvisation as a site of group work, and provided avenues for potential additional research. Emergent themes included that free improvisers must simultaneously act on personal as well as collective desires, select the art form for personal, social, and political reasons; and dislike the idea of set leaders but acknowledge that individuals may nonetheless occupy a position of leadership. Participants stated that free improvisation has no set rules, other than a requirement that fellow ensemble members must listen to one another closely for an ensemble to endure.

I derived answers to my research questions from these themes. The answers to my first two questions (In the absence of notated music or a leader to predetermine how everyone should play, how do free improvisation musicians decide who plays, what to play, when, and for how long? How do ensembles resolve dissatisfaction over those matters?) were that free improvisation members determine when and what

to play based on socially negotiated terms unique to each ensemble, and that they may resolve dissatisfaction by discussing it as a group, especially when members already share some level of social connection. They may also withdraw their participation, especially when they do not share a strong social connection.

In answering my third question (Do participants believe working practices or norms of free improvisation ensembles could be applicable to groups outside of music that wish to organise themselves without designated leaders?), participants said that there are multiple ways free improvisation practices may inform other groups, especially that attentive listening and intentionally fostering strong social connections can benefit a group by leading to a greater sense of satisfaction, trust, and the desire to remain with the group. Participants shared a range of additional ideas about how free improvisers' unique knowledge about group work may be useful to others. However, some participants were sceptical about the extent to which practices would be applicable elsewhere. Further study is required to determine whether and how practices could be transferrable.

The small number of participants is the primary limitation of my project and also indicates the need for further study. Five individuals are not enough to produce data needed to identify generalisable statements.

Additionally, selecting experts in the field carried certain implications for the study. While I have noted some of the ways in which candidates are diverse, all occupy a privileged status, including among free improvisers. Their international recognition, possession of doctoral degrees, concerted musical education and access to an instrument or instrument, is not the shared experience of all, including all who make music. While participants may have an egalitarian approach towards each other, it's not necessarily true that they would have the same approach towards a musician who lacks those privileges and/or the same level of skill. This is important to note, and to emphasise that this is an exploratory study focused on experts who speak from wide experience. A sample group that includes a greater diversity among participants would be necessary to determine whether their statements are representative of free improvisers generally around the world.

Finally, further study is needed to address two barriers I believe exist in transferring ideas from the sphere of free improvisation to any other group interested in operating without leaders.

The first is that participants' complicated and sometimes conflicting relationship to leadership may make it difficult for outsiders to engage with lessons from free improvisation. An art form that practitioners broadly hold is non-hierarchical, yet in practice replicates hierarchy in unspoken ways, may prompt a level of scepticism among outsiders over whether it is truly welcoming and anti-hegemonic. Harvey cautioned against this pitfall in his 2010 call for stronger ties between various spheres. But he also believed that negative tendencies of all kinds could be approached by 'organisational innovations oriented to the pursuit of the common good' (Harvey, 2010, p. 253), which to me suggests a way to overcome this issue would be to bring free improvisers into conversation with groups interested in learning from and with them.

The second barrier relates to the profit motive. All participants noted that the practice of improvising music is typically divorced from making money, meeting deadlines, and performing in set roles, and in fact offers an oasis from such considerations. This is an important factor because those external pressures may make it impossible for certain groups to engage with their working practices, let alone adopt them for themselves. The body of work that seeks to derive lessons from free improvisation (Oakes, 2009; van Ark and Wijnen-Meijer, 2018; Santos and Morgan, 2019) does not address this issue, though all of the fields addressed in those studies are concerned at least in part with turning a profit or remaining within a budget. Further study is needed to understand whether practices of free improvisers can work in organisations that are committed to a flat hierarchy but must also make money. Further study is also needed to understand whether profit alters or corrupts the practices of free improvisers.

However, it is my opinion that all of these considerations are rich subjects for further discussion between participants, other free improvisers, and anyone from any field interested in how to make a successful group without leaders. Discussing how mainstream ideas about leadership can creep in despite best efforts could be a unifying topic, and could foster a sense of fellowship if discussed as a shared

struggle. The same is true of the profit motive. In that way, free improvisers could be seen as comrades in a collective struggle that all face when striving to subvert dominant paradigms, which could result in a productive, generous and sympathetic exchange of ideas.

VI. References

Adorno, T (1998) *Quasi Una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music.* London: Verso.

Attali, J. (1985) *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Manchester: Manchester UP.

Barbour, R. (2013) *Introducing qualitative research: a student's guide to the craft of doing qualitative research.* Sage Publications.

Bartky, S. (2002) *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bell, D. (2014) 'Improvisation as anarchist organization', *ephemera: theory and politics in organization*, 14(4), pp. 1009-1030.

Bettez, S. (2011) 'Critical Community Building: Beyond Belonging', *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 25(3-4), pp. 3-19.

Bivens, J. and Kandra, K. (2022) 'CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,460% since 1978', *Economic Policy Institute blog*, 4 October. Available at: https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-in-2021/ (Accessed: 21 August 2023).

Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Borgo, D. (2002) 'Negotiating Freedom: Values and Practices in Contemporary Improvised Music', *Black Music Research Journal*, 22(2), pp. 165-188.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2020) 'Can I use TA? Should I Use TA? Should I *not* use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. 21(1), pp. 37-47.

Brent, J. (2004) 'The desire for community: Illusion, confusion and paradox', *Community Development Journal*. 39(3), pp. 213-223.

Breines, W. (1982) *The Great Refusal: Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-1968*. New York: Praeger.

Boyatzis, R.E. (1998) *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage Publications, Inc.

Choudry, A. (2013) 'Activist research practice: Exploring research and knowledge production for social action*', Socialist Studies*, 9(1), 128– 151.

Choudry, A. (2014) '(Almost) everything you always wanted to know about activist research but were afraid to ask: what activist researchers say about theory and methodology', *Contention: The Multidisciplinary Journal of Social Protest*. 1(2), pp. 75-88.

Cresswell, J. and Poth, C. (2017) 'Five Qualitative Approaches to Inquiry', in J. Creswell and C. Poth (eds) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design, Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.

della Porta, D. (2014) Focus Groups. In D. della Porta (ed) *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford Scholarship Online, pp. 289-307.

della Porta, D. (2014) 'In-Depth Interviews' in D. della Porta (ed) *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford Scholarship Online, pp. 228-261.

Engels, F. (1978) *Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.

Escobar, O. (2011) *Public dialogue and deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners.* Edinburgh: UK Beacons for Public Engagement.

Freire, P. (1976) *Education: The Practice of Freedom*. London: Writers and Readers Cooperative.

Freire, P. (2018) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Harvey, D. (2013) 'Organising for the anti-capitalist transition', *Interface*, 2(1), pp. 243-261.

Horner, L.K. (2016) *Co-Constructing Research: A Critical Literature Review*. Arts and Humanities Research Consultation. Available at: https://connected-communities.org/index.php/project_resources/co-constructing-research-a-critical-literature-review. (Accessed: 7 December 2021).

Kropotkin, P. (2019) *Anarchism, Anarchist, communism and the State*. Oakland: PR Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Littman, 2022, 'Values and Beliefs Underlying Mutual Aid: An Exploration of Collective Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, 13(1), pp. 89-115.

Long, B. (2013) Morris, Butch [Lawrence (Douglas)]. New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

MacGlone, U. and MacDonald, R. (2018) 'Learning to improvise, improvising to learn: A qualitative study of learning processes in improvising musicians'. In E. Clarke and M. Doffman (eds) *Distributed Creativity: Collaboration and Improvisation in Contemporary Music.* Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1989) *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*. Russia: International Publishers.

Mitrović, R. (2019) 'Improvised music as socially engaged art: poetics of Cardew and Rzewski', *New Sound: International Magazine for Music*, 54 (2), pp. 109-121.

Möllering, G. (2006) 'Trust beyond risk: The leap of Faith', in *Trust: Reason, routine, reflexivity*, pp. 105-126. Available at: https://www.kent.ac.uk/scarr/events/Mollering.pdf (Accessed: 14 July 2023).

Moran, N. (2010) 'Improvising musicians' looking behaviours: Duration constants in the attention patterns of duo performers', *11th International Conference on Music Perception and Cognition,* Available at: http://depts.washington.edu/icmpc11/index.html (Accessed 10 December 2022).

Nettl, B. (1974) 'Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach', *The Musical Quarterly* 60(1), pp. 1-19.

Oakes, S. (2009) 'Freedom and Constraint in the Empowerment as Jazz Metaphor', *Marketing theory* 9(4), pp. 463–485.

Pietkiewicz, I. and Smith, J.A. (2012) 'Praktyczny przewodnik interpretacyjnej analizy fenomenologicznej w badaniach jakościowych w psychologii', *Czasopismo Psychologiczne,* 18(2), pp. 361-369.

Piketty, T. (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. United States: Harvard University Press.

Prouty, K. (2008) 'The "Finite" Art of Improvisation: Pedagogy and Power in Jazz Education', *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation*, 4(1), pp. 1-15. Available at: https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/346/964 (Accessed: 1 December 2021).

Preston, J., Firth, R., and Firth, R. (2020) 'Mutual aid, anarchist preparedness and COVID-19', *Coronavirus, class and mutual aid in the United Kingdom*, pp. 57-111.

Sánchez-Páramo, C. et al (2021) 'COVID-19' leaves a legacy of rising poverty and widening inequality', World Bank blog, 07 October. Available at: https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/covid-19-leaves-legacy-rising-poverty-and-widening-inequality (Accessed: 21 August 2023).

Santos, M. and Morgan, K. (2019) ‘Developing creative team games players: From jazz to sport coaching’, *International Journal of Sports Sciences & Coaching*, 14(2), pp. 117-125.

Seddon, F. A. (2005) ‘Modes of communication during jazz improvisation’, *British Journal of Music Education*, 22(1), pp. 47-61.

Sennett, R. (2012) *Together.* United States: Yale University Press.

Sindzingre, A.N. and Tricou, F. (2022) Six forms of hierarchy for a theoretical analysis of capitalism, *Journal of Post Keynesian Economics*, 45(2), pp. 210-245.

Small, C. (1987) *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Smith, J.A. and Osborn, M. (2015) Interpretive ‘Phenomenological Analysis’, in J.A. Smith (ed), *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods* Sage Publications, pp. 25-52.

Suissa, J. (2016) ‘Improvisation, Resilience and Character Education; How to Seem Politically Progressive Without Actually Being So’, *Philosophy as Translation and the Understanding of Other Cultures*, Warsaw, Poland, 17-20 August 2016.

Tarlau, R. (2014) ‘“We do not need outsiders to study us”. Reflections on activism and social movement research’, *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, 3(1), pp. 63-87.

van Ark, A. and Wijnen-Meijer, M. (2018) ‘“Doctor Jazz:” Lessons that medical professionals can learn from jazz musicians’, *Medical Teacher*, 41(2), pp. 201-206.

Wilson, G. and MacDonald, R. (2012) ‘The sign of silence: Negotiating musical identities in an improvising ensemble’, *Psychology of Music*, 40(5), pp. 558-573.

Wilson, G. and MacDonald, R. (2020) *The Art of Becoming: How Group Improvisation Works.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Wimbish, M.R. (2020) *From Sight to Sound: Exploring Creativity, Improvisation, and Interactivity in Graphic Composition and Performance*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Edinburgh.

VII. Appendix

Interview guide

Introductory questions

- When did you first begin playing improvised music?
    - Prompt: A memory of the first time you played, or one of the first times?
- What attracted you to the form?
    - Prompt: a memory playing with the group for the first time, or with people in the group?
- What were some of your other early music experiences?
    - Prompt: did you take lessons? Did you own your own instrument?

Methods of working

- How do your free improvisation ensembles prepare to play ahead of actually playing?
    - Prompt: for example, what kinds of discussions do you have, or what kinds of decisions do you work out ahead of time?
- How do players decide what they're going to play?
    - Prompt: How does the group usually start to play?
- During playing, what are some ways you know it's your turn to play, and how do you know when to stop playing?
    - Prompt: Who is the person or people who decide who goes next?
- How do you know when the song is over? Who decides?
- What conversations does the group have about how it is organized or about how decisions are made?
    - Prompt: What roles do you think people play in terms of a position of power in the group?
- What differences are there between groups you play in?
- Which groups do you like the best?

Sharing power while improvising

- What are some methods you've encountered as ways for musical ensembles to divide playing time fairly?
    - Prompt: how do your favorite ensembles approach that?
- Have you ever been unsatisfied as a member of an improvising group because of issues with communicating whilst playing a non-notated piece of music? What did you do? What did you observe others do?
- What are improvisational approaches that don't work, in terms of keeping everyone in the group satisfied?
- What are some of the ways free improvisation musical groups handle situations where someone isn't satisfied? What do you think works best? How do your favorite ensembles handle that?
- What do you do if someone is dominating the group? How does that impact the group dynamic?

- How do you imagine the concept of a ‘leader’ in the context of improvised musical ensembles? Is this an appropriate role? Why or why not?
- What are some differences you’ve observed between how improvisational ensembles approach organisation and conflict versus how traditional, classical, or straight-ahead jazz ensembles approach those considerations?

Political implications

- What are some of the political considerations that come up for you when you think about improvisational music as an art form?
- When you think about improvisational music ensembles, or improvised music, what are some practices or approaches that you think could benefit other groups outside the arts, or society in general?