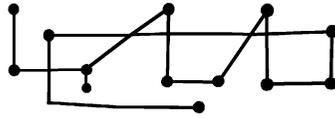


# FREE MUSICAL IMPROVISATION AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF GILLES DELEUZE



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This ferment came to the forefront and made itself heard in its own right; and through the molecular material thus wrought it made audible the nonsonorous forces of the cosmos that have always agitated music—a bit of Time in the pure state, a grain of absolute intensity . . . The words “tonal,” “modal,” “atonal” do not mean much. Music is not alone in being art as cosmos and in drawing the virtual lines of an infinite variation.

—Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 96

## 1. INTRODUCTION

IN THE EXCERPT BELOW, I quote from my doctoral thesis, “The Musician as a Milieu and the Territories of Free Improvisation”<sup>1</sup> (Costa 2003), a descriptive analysis of a performance of the group *Akronon*.<sup>2</sup>

On the mark of 2'06", the long note of the violin begins to be set as a center for a new texture. There is actually a slow and imperceptible transformation of the texture from the gradual introduction of these objects that are sustained and tonic and are produced also by other sources (saxophone—2'21", and electronic processing). This transition takes shape as it remains in the current texture, sparsely, objects of the previous texture (mainly in the electronic layer) and the former saxophonist instrumental gesture is “contaminated” with the new object: the fast fragments of scale are resting in its end in long notes. This new configuration of layers—fast fragments of scale leading to sustained tonics sounds, granules resulting from processing and transpositions, “islands” of diverse iterative sounds (pizzicatos, short attacked blasts on saxophone), etc.—will promote a gradual dilution of the density of texture that goes up to the mark of 3', setting up a new “landscape” sound. These transformations are not premeditated. They happen in the context of performance and are perceived in a retrospective analysis. In a more general level this analysis reveals a trend of performance where complex objects (gestalts, textures) are established gradually in layers more or less independent. These layers can move at different speeds in ways that often there are interpolations: objects are being made while others will be scattered. Everything is connected step by step. To the extent that there is not a specific territory (idiom) that unifies the performance, it is the sonic objects that give musical consistency to this practice that otherwise could plunge into a kind of cosmic chaos, undifferentiated. The objects are an expression of a metamorphosis of repetition. Repetition, in that they only set from a repetition of components. Metamorphosis—which is the mode of being of the performances—because small local transformations gradually delineate (transitions) the appearance of new objects. This whole process takes place in full concurrence and in real time, and depends on a high power of concentration of the musicians, which gives musical objects volatility. They are like clouds that form in the sky and break up every second. Thus, each object (both layers and complex objects) has a different degree of power which

depends primarily on its emotional content. This power determines the time of permanence of the objects. In reality the length of stay in the same musical object depends on a number of constituent factors that will determine whether this object is capable of fruitful changes without losing its identity or whether its fabric is sterile and will fade quickly. In this context the attitude of the musician can be of two types: the response (which is a sort of harmony with the elements contained in the object), in which he integrates into the existing object, transforming it from the inside, and the proposal, by which he proposes new directions for the performance and build bridges with the new objects that are coming. The advent of proposals may or may not result in changes of direction. Indeed the spirit of the response and proposal are complementary. It is simply a matter of degree. (Costa 2003, 152–154)

Although the terms used in the description refer mainly to the categories created by Pierre Schaeffer—more specifically the concept of sound object—we will rely on it to discuss the relations that can be drawn between free improvisation and the concepts created by Deleuze. Firstly, we can see in the performance that pure sound, divorced from any system or language, not the note, is the molecular material put into play through interaction between the musicians and that, despite the absence of a pre-established system, somehow the sound-flow tends to get consistency.

## 2. STRATIFICATION

For Deleuze, from Spinoza, there is a philosophical ethics that can be formulated as follows: to affirm the vital power that is necessary to increase the power of connections/compositions (*happy meetings*), and reduce the power of de-compositions (*bad encounters*). For us, free musical improvisation is like a picture of this flow of connections that occurs in various forms and under various modalities.

From this assumption and as a result of it, Deleuze provides a fundamental concept of his philosophy: stratification. For him, “The strata are phenomena of thickening on the Body of the earth, simultaneously molecular and molar, accumulations, coagulations, sedimentation, foldings . . .” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 501). For him, out of stratification there is no form, substance, organization or development. The sound objects mentioned above in the description

of the performance also result from this type of stratification process and are composed of layers and substrates.

For Deleuze, the dynamics of nature is a constant process of stratification/destratification. And excessive stratification or destratification may lead to “death” (for example, in fascism and schizophrenia, respectively). Therefore, in the environment of free musical improvisation it is important to strike a balance between these two processes. To the extent that it is a becoming in which the present is faced at every turn by the musicians who interact, both the constant variation of materials (destratification) and setting up of temporary states (stratification) constitute themselves as fundamental dynamics. We believe that in the description of our performance this dynamism is clearly delineated from the idea of metamorphosis. For Deleuze, says Ian Buchanan, in this process:

form organizes matter into a succession of compartmentalised and hierarchised “substances” or “formed matters” or what, in a critical language is called “content.” But this content is viewed from the double perspective of selection and succession. . . . Like sedimentary rock caught in the grips of the earth itself, this content is transformed into a stable and functional form which is then actualised in everyday life, producing new sets of contents. (Buchanan 2004, 7)

From this point of view we can also think about the idea of unity and diversity within the same stratum. For Deleuze, the strata have unity of composition, but they are not inert, as they are in constant change from one stage to another of existence. As the result of connections between energy flows, the strata and substrates (or layers, as they are formulated in the description of the performance) are complex and dynamic configurations interacting and working tirelessly on their inner and outer boundaries. So is the performance of free improvisation: more stable moments alternate with other more unstable on a constant coming and going. The degree of permanence of a sound-texture and its transition to another depends on a number of factors. We could say that the sound-texture of the performance (which can be thought of as a sum of strata with their substrates) is always changing as a result of the complex interaction between its internal components in continuous processes of stratification and destratification.

### 3. THE BODY WITHOUT ORGANS

According to Buchanan, for Deleuze, “Stratification is the thickening of the surface of the body without organs” (Buchanan 2004, 13). The body without organs, originally formulated by Antonin Artaud, is not a concept but a set of practices which, for us, could very well be figured in free improvisation. According to Deleuze, “You never reach the body without organs, you can not reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit” (Deleuze, cited in Buchanan 2004, 12). To the extent that free improvisation is a practice free from any pre-established system, based mainly in desire, interaction, and listening, we can say that it is aiming at the body without organs. But how in free improvisation does a group of musicians interacting—without the support of any system or common language—from this idea of body without organs—reach consistency<sup>3</sup> and its successive transformations? “How could unformed matter, anorganic life, nonhuman becoming be anything but chaos pure and simple?” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 503). According to Deleuze, “we cannot content ourselves with the dualism or summary opposition between the strata and the destratified plane of consistency” (Buchanan 2004, 13). To exemplify this non-dualistic dynamism in nature, Buchanan cites the transformation of state of a milk-cream that turns into butter. For him, this thickening manifests more a propensity of the substances than the introduction of some outside agent. It is therefore an immanent transformation. Likewise, in a flow of improvisation based primarily on the idea of body without organs, all changes are immanent, and the transient states (dynamic textures and sonic objects described) that follow in the course of performance manifest this process of consolidation and thickening of substances involved. In this case, a given organization never establishes itself in a rigid or definitive way, since the horizon of the body without organs continues to exert its destratifying power. That is what we mean when we say that the sound objects are like clouds that gather in the sky and break up every second.

### 4. MILIEU AND RHYTHM

To further clarify this kind of dynamism, Deleuze makes use of the concepts of means and rhythms.

From chaos, *Milieus* and *Rhythms* are born. . . . Every milieu is vibratory, in other words, a block of spacetime constituted by the

periodic repetition of the component. Thus the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, and an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions. Every milieu is coded, a code being defined by periodic repetition; but each code is in a perpetual state of transcoding or transduction. Transcoding or transduction is the manner in which one milieu serves as the basis for another. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 313)

With this definition of milieu, Deleuze seems to account for the many dimensions of the identity of a “body” or an organism that appears and acts in a particular environment. With regard to improvisation, we can imagine the external milieu as one in which the musicians are placed, including all the elements of history, geography, and surroundings external to individuals. In it are found the materials.

The interior milieu refers to what actually characterizes these individuals: their techniques, personal solutions, manners and mannerisms, ways of being. This is all that was created in the assemblages of this individual with the external environment. The musical experiences that can refer to the idioms are also part of this milieu. The appearance of this interior is what Deleuze calls a *face*. On the other side, attitudes and processes that ultimately generate this interior milieu are what Deleuze calls the *refrain*.

The intermediate milieu—membranes—relates to the limits in the form of being of each one. It is through the “pores” of these membranes that happen the exchanges with the outside world and with the forces of chaos. It is related to sensation and configured perception. We should remember that in this environment of connections, we are always open, in a greater or lesser degree, to the turmoil that comes from chaos or from the external environment in the form of new information, influences, and, mainly, feelings. So also in a practice of improvisation, at a given moment, what expressed a musician’s identity embodied in a particular procedure is transformed from an event to a striking sensation that arises from the external milieu. And this feeling is absorbed from this membrane which is the intermediate milieu.

The attached milieu is a segment to the external milieu with which the interior one establishes connections and energy exchange in the present—the spider and the fly, a wedding, a group improvisation. It is something between. It is a more specified and limited milieu and there are several possible kinds of connections between the milieus which

connect this way. This dimension is critical to the environment of free improvisation, since much of its operating power is based on energy exchange between the musicians. For Deleuze, “to really begin to ‘breathe’ the stratum needs to capture new energy sources—that is what the associated milieus are, ‘sources of energy different from alimentary materials’” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 51). And besides, according to Buchanan,

Capture requires the perception of susceptible materials, that is, the sensing of materials the stratum can incorporate into itself, and the corresponding ability to undertake that incorporation. . . . All confrontation with the other takes place in the space between this outer ring of the associated milieu. (Buchanan 2004, 10)

The combination of milieus described above—that we might call the plane of consistency—refers to the interaction processes that occur in a performance of free improvisation: each musician captures new sources of energy from the perception of susceptible materials, which are those that can be incorporated into its own performance. In describing the performance of the group Akronon, this kind of dynamism is illustrated by the idea of response and proposal. In this context, the plane of consistency is the environment where the milieus are annexed and where, from the plans, are traced the processes of territorialization. Improvisation—both idiomatic and free—requires an environment conducive to these connections. For Deleuze these connections traverse the molar and molecular levels.

## 5. TERRITORIES AND REFRAINS

The territory is much larger than the stratum or the milieus or even the rhythms, although it relates to them. “The territory is in fact an act that affects the milieus and rhythms, which ‘territorializes’ them. The territory is the product of a territorialization of milieus and rhythms. . . . Territorialization is an act of rhythm that has become expressive, or of milieu components that have become qualitative” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 314–315). Later in the same text, Deleuze relates the idea of refrain with the idea of territory: “we call a refrain any aggregate of matters of expression that draws a territory and develops into territorial motifs and landscapes” (Deleuze and

Guattari 1987, 323). In improvisation the idea of idiom is related to the concept of territory.

The tendency of any plan is to territorialize and deterritorialize itself continuously and alternatively. In improvisation the same process takes place, and idioms are likely to arise. To better understand this type of operation, let us examine briefly the case of “evolution” in jazz. This is actually a process of successive transformations of a plan towards territorialization. We might say that this territorialization takes place from three surfaces outlined by Deleuze.

The first one is the production surface. There is only the plan, the materials, energies, and not formed or stratified forces. There is no quality yet, no permanence to become so. There is no analytical or systematic discourse. Neither is there a capture machine. There are only virtualities being actualized all the time. There is, as a consequence, *the shock*, the enchantment of this event as an effect in the other. It is Charlie Parker inventing Bebop. What he does seems to be from another world! But he also comes from a former territory—Jazz already has a story—and destabilizes it (deterritorializes) with lines of flight.

On the second one—that we could call the capture surface—takes place the registration and control, the systematization, the scholasticism, and the models. Here a territory is made explicit. It is the “kingdom” of correct copies. Everyone wants to play like Charlie Parker, learning their techniques, their patterns, their procedures. It is when there emerge schools to “teach” improvisation. Stratification then takes the form of a methodology. This is the case of some jazz schools formulated to teach (and sell) models. It is not necessarily negative. In an environment of popular culture, often it is important to stay within the territory.

On the third surface a kind of bricolage happens. It is when, again, chaos, as lines of escape, invade the plan. It is when the milieus are annexed and the idioms are intertwined from their molecular level. There are unusual collages and montages. There is again production, deterritorialization. It is Miles Davis, as a Charlie Parker disciple, inventing cool jazz.

In territorial music, traditional, folk (East or West), where there is improvisation, the identity—the “membranes”—of the idioms seems to be stronger. The delimited territory, for example, in the Indian music—a system in which converge several other systems: religious, social, cultural, etc.—manifests itself in the performances of its artists, who are not interested in actualizing new virtualities, but instead, in being agents of an idiom that speaks through them. Improvisation is a

way of being of these systems. They only exist through performance, so much so that there are rarely texts, theories, or systematizations written about them (except by the musicologists). Here the refrains territorialize, and “territorialization is the act of rhythm become expressive” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 315).

In the case of free improvisation there seems to be only the first surface. It is the production that generates provisional territories in an environment of constant deterritorialization. Or, if we recognize the—inevitable—*faces* of the musicians involved in performance as various stories that store experiences in several territories, we recognize a complex, multifaceted surface operating molecularly, not delimited by a specific reference system, but as result of interaction among musicians. Improvisation works on their faces, “defacing” them. Rarely are configured abstract systems for the organization of musical parameters in the context of a practice of free improvisation (such as tonal or twelve-tone system). If this occurs, we may assume that the practice failed to be free and generated a new system. Most groups of free improvisors seek to escape from this kind of situation that may weaken the practice. Once free improvisation craves the body without organs and operates in a predominantly molecular level, its future is shaped as a succession of sensations, yet not hierarchical or structured. The only rule of free improvisation is linked to an ethic of listening and interaction. We believe that this approach is clearly described in the performance of group Akronon.

## 6. MOLAR AND MOLECULAR

In the environment of free improvisation, the molecular level, which crosses the molar levels, predominates. These molar levels would be, for Deleuze, manifestations of stratification, and should relate to the external environment of the strata. On the other side, the molecular environment would relate to the interior. On the molar level, there are particular stratifications of the molecular, and hence there is a gestalt perception that produces differentiation of an identifiable whole (styles, idioms, systems, gestures). According to Deleuze, it is necessary to aim the molecular to overcome the idioms and systems. The well known Deleuzian idea that *art is not to reproduce or to invent forms but to capture the forces* is essential to understanding this concept of molecularity. The “forces” are present at the molecular level. It is here that the sound, thought of as a power line (with its energy his-

tory), becomes the original material, powerful for a musical practice free from any pre-established system.

In the axis of stratification/destratification, free improvisation would happen within the ambitus of the molecular level, while idiomatic improvisation would take place in a more stratified context. In fact, it is absolutely necessary that the musician who participates in practices of free improvisation establish a policy to overcome the idioms in which perhaps he is immersed. In other words, the musician must stand in a constant process of deterritorialization, destratifying all the time (with caution not to fall into the black hole of chaos).<sup>4</sup> For this, from his face (their refrains and territories, their techniques, systems and styles), the musician should seek the molecular level—that's where it is possible to accomplish an interactive practice released from molar stratification (idiomatic, stylistic). Only within this perspective can there can be a collective performance (conceived as a kind of game or conversation) between musicians of different backgrounds. This is a practice based on the idea of body without organs, and allowing at each time and at each performance a potent becoming. Obviously, the face<sup>5</sup> doesn't disappear. Therefore, free improvisation is not necessarily against the idioms. It just does not submit to them.<sup>6</sup>

Even in a possible practice of transterritorial or transidiomatic improvisation, the connections between the strata (molarity) occur primarily within the molecular means through the intermediate means. We can illustrate this idea with a meeting between the *Orquestra Errante*<sup>7</sup> and the Chinese musician Luo Chao<sup>8</sup> that occurred in September 2010 at Teca Music Workshop in São Paulo.

The beginning of the performance took place in an environment clearly idiomatic (molar), where instrumental gestures evoked the territories of traditional Chinese music. This environment was being deconstructed during the performance and, after a certain point, the interactions among the musicians began to take place in a clearly non-idiomatic environment (molecular), where what came into play was the "powerful" sound, free of any idiomatic membership. In this kind of performance, there is a strong intensification of listening. The movement is of destratification and on the horizon, it outlines the body without organs. Obviously, for the performance not to sink into chaos, there is a continuous process of stratification. These strata never last too long, but soon dissolve, giving way to always new configurations.

For a synthesis of these ideas we could state that free improvisation connections occur both horizontally, linearly (in the sense of an extended, melodic, formal, gestaltic, and molar thought), and vertically

(of a harmonic, polyphonic, local, intensive molecular thought). The performance grows more by continuous transformations, contagion, crossed and disordered contamination, turmoil, than by any “thematic” unified principle. This is how the musicians relate to each other and relate to the sound result of the performance. *The paths that are done while walking*, are the result of the multiple possibilities that arise continuously and are presented to the musicians as a maze. Moreover, in free improvisation viewed as a musical fact, there coexist the possibilities and lines of force emanating from the use of idiomatic (gestural, molar), figural (thematic, *hors temp*), and textural (molecular) kinds of musical thought, in an unpredictable context which ensures deterritorializations.

## 7. CONCLUSION

From what has been stated in the above items we wanted not only to demonstrate that the concepts of Deleuze serve, to some extent, to support the functioning of the environment of free improvisation, as well as to propose that—conversely—free improvisation is able to assist us in understanding the philosophy of Deleuze, insofar as it is possible to understand his concepts in operation when we examine the functioning of a performance. In this sense we can say that free improvisation takes place in a kind of denial of territory or from an overlay (gluing, overflow) of idioms.

Summarizing and trying not to make too much explicit use of Deleuzian concepts, we could say that free improvisation is only possible in the context of a quest to overcome the idiomatic, the symbolic, the representation, the gestural, the systematic, the controlled, the foreseeable, the static, the identified, the hierarchical, the dualistic, and the linearized, in favor of the multiple, the simultaneous, the unstable, the heterogeneous, the motion, the process, the relationship, the living, the energy, and the material itself.

A few questions still are worth considering: under what point of view can an improvisation be free? Free of that, anyway? We could say, among other things, that free improvisation is the opposite of idiomatic improvisation. One can also think of free improvisation as a possibility for a pragmatic music open to an infinite variation in which the systems and idioms no longer impose their abstract grammars and yield to a fruitful action, to a *time in a pure state*, not causal, not hierarchical, not linear. Through free improvisation, perhaps we could achieve “that secret neuter language without constants and entirely in

indirect discourse where the synthesizer and the instrument speak no less than the voice, and the voice plays no less than the instrument” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 96).

According to Deleuze, it is an issue of replacing the matter–form pair by the pair material–energy—as in Edgard Varèse, who makes his music grow from the proliferation of the material itself: an energetic material that generates its form.

## NOTES

1. We could say that free improvisation is a kind of empirical musical practice of concrete experimentation. As in the definition proposed by Derek Bailey (Bailey 1993, xi), we would have two basic forms of improvisation: as the first one, we have the idiomatic improvisation, which is one that occurs within the context of a musical language socially and culturally situated, bounded historically and geographically, as for example, the improvisation in Indian music or in Jazz. The second one would be free improvisation. In the latter there is not a language or a previously established system in the context of which the musical practice will happen. Free improvisation is only configured as a possibility in an increasingly integrated world where the boundaries—linguistic, cultural, social—eventually dissolve or at least lose their rigidity because of intense interaction. In this context, the territories are intertwined and the systems increasingly interact, so that the languages become more permeable. As we shall see throughout the text, this dualistic categorization can not be taken rigidly.
2. The trio Akronon (2002–2004), dedicated to the practice of free improvisation, was composed of Edson Ezequiel (violin), Rogério Costa (saxophone and flute) and Silvio Ferraz (live electronics) and served as a practical laboratory for practical experiences developed during my doctoral studies at PUC-SP during the years 2002 to 2004.
3. For Deleuze, “The organization of qualified marks into motifs and counterpoints necessarily entails a taking on of consistency. . . . Consistency necessarily occurs between heterogeneities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 330).
4. In performance of free improvisation, sometimes the connections between the musicians are not established in a consistent manner. In such cases the flow stagnates, without strength and lifeless.
5. There is no escape from our history, of our body. As Deleuze warns us, “the white wall of the signifier, the black hole of subjectivity, and the facial machines are impasses, the measure of our submissions; but we are born into them, and it is there we must stand battle. . . . Only on your face and at the bottom of your black hole and upon your white wall will you be able to set faciality traits free like birds” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 189).

6. “As Derek Bailey, pioneer and leading figure of European free improvised music has expressed it: ‘free improvisation is not a type of music, it is a way of making music (music making).’ The most basic element of the musical method of the free improviser is to be found in the attitudes of the latter towards musical traditions, idioms, genres, etc. It has been pointed out, and rightfully so, that free improvisation cannot amount to a total exclusion of traditional idioms. . . . The difference between one who is active within the borders of some particular idiom and the free improviser is instead to be found in the way of looking at this idiom. Particular idioms are no longer viewed as prerequisites for the music-making, but rather as tools which, in every moment may be used or not used. . . . in the same way the starting-point of free improvised music contains a refusal to commit to any particular tradition or idiom, it no more favors any experimental or innovative attitude towards music (other than in the trivial sense that nothing is prohibited and that the music is always a product of the musician’s own and, in practice, always unique choice)” (Munthe 1992, 12–15).
7. Orquestra Errante is an experimental group linked to the Music Department of the University of São Paulo founded and coordinated by the composer, researcher, teacher and saxophonist Rogério Costa. The group is dedicated to the practice of free improvisation and is part of a research project on improvisation and its interfaces developed by Professor Costa at USP. The Orchestra consists of musicians from the undergraduate, graduate, postdoctoral, and faculty communities at USP. The creative and experimental practice of the Orchestra is based on overcoming the traditional musical idioms and on the idea that any sound can be used in a musical performance. Thus, Orquestra Errante develops its activities through an absolutely democratic and non-hierarchical practice, directed primarily to the idea of creating music in real time. The group is not committed to playing pre-existing repertoire. Each performance is unique, and there is no intention to create “masterpieces.” The process is what matters. In OE, all musicians are both creators and performers, and the only prerequisites for participation are desire, attentive listening, interaction, and respect for the contributions of each one.
8. Luo Chao is a Chinese musician dedicated to the Pipa, which is a sort of Chinese lute. Besides devoting herself to playing music typical of her country, she is the only player to use the Pipa in contexts

of free improvisation and experimental contemporary music. She is known in Taiwan as an excellent musician and virtuoso.

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