

Grupo MusicaFicta: Groundwork for Free Improvisation

Cesar Villavicencio – cevill@usp.br
Fernando Iazzetta – iazzetta@usp.br
Rogério Luiz M. Costa – rogercos@usp.br
University of São Paulo, Brazil

Abstract: In recent years, free improvisation has increasingly become a topic for discussion in the academia and is now considered an important field of research. The environment of free improvisation is built through the interactive instrumental actions among musicians, who interact, in real time, through multiple and unpredictable ways. Based on our practice with the group MusicaFicta, this article aims to reveal the dynamic features and behavioral traits of the interactive environment of free musical improvisation. This article also discusses the use of extended instrumental techniques and the role of new technologies. Considering the observation that electronic devices create new forms of interaction, the possible increase in the degree of unpredictability is addressed.

Key words: improvisation, technology, extended techniques, rhetoric, Pierre Schaeffer.

1. Introduction

This article intends to reflect on the experimental processes employed by the free improvisation ensemble MusicaFicta. The group was created in 2008 by researchers and musicians Cesar Villavicencio (recorder/live electronics), Fernando Iazzetta (percussion/live electronics) and Rogério Costa (sax/live-electronics) with the purpose of engaging in an academic investigation around the subjects of interaction and improvisation. MusicaFicta also acts as a residence ensemble for a research project named Mobile. Carried out at the Music Department of the University of São Paulo, Mobile is a multidisciplinary project aimed at using and developing interactive processes in the creation of music mediated by the use of technology.

During the performances, each member of MusicaFicta acts in a particular way in the search for possibilities to expand the expressive potential of the instruments. The objective is to build a creative process based on the multiple interactive possibilities through the interplay of sounds and intentionalities in the search for content and form. In this way, the members of the group become, at the same time, composers, performers and also luthiers. If on one side the use of free improvisation brings about adopting strategies away from the established musical styles, MusicaFicta, on the other side, explores strategies for structuring the performances. Two strategies will be discussed in this paper. First, the idea of sonic object based on Pierre Schaeffer's reduced audition concept (Schaeffer 1966) is presented. Second, the application of strategies derived from rhetoric for understanding and conducting interactive processes in contemporary improvisation, is discussed.

We understand free improvisation, or contemporary improvisation, as a practice that starts without any idiomatic reference or pre-established form. In this paper, we will explain how, in our manner of performing music, there is an inherent search for new ways of producing sound. One way is through the use of extended instrumental techniques and, a second manner, is through the incorporation of synthetic sounds from the electronic interfaces. The result is the use of those sounds in the process of making music through action and interaction, which exposes the social dynamics inherent in elaborating the sonic discourse.

Moving towards a discussion about the elaboration of the musical discourse, we present ideas concerning the symbiotic relationship between content and form and its particular dynamics in the practice of free improvised music. In this matter, we raise the hypothesis that, in the complex environment of this practice, there is an inherent ethics that derives from the commitment of making music collaboratively. In this way, we propose a rhetorical perspective of this practice since it seems to put together fundamental rhetorical elements – such as ethics, logic and decorum – for achieving consistency in the discourse, and eloquence in the delivery of the music. In this manner, we could think about this collective musical

activity as a human experience, in which the intrinsic necessity for collaboration induces an appreciation aimed not solely at the sonic aesthetic result, but also at the process of sociogenetic musical creation.

2. Extended techniques

The idea of extended techniques is denoted by the search for alternative sounds that may be produced when using other resources than the ones presented by traditional instrumental techniques. Certainly, the traditional instrumental techniques might have changed through times by the standardizing of some extended techniques, like the use of harmonics in string instruments or pizzicatti, or, in the case of wind instruments, the frulato and the multiphonics. However, those changes took place within the boundaries of amplifying the potentiality of a musical practice still connected to the logic and discursive linearity of the tonal system. In other words, there was a concern about broadening the field without breaking the established borders. In the 20th century, with composers like Schoenberg, Webern, Varèse, etc. and, later, with the advent of electroacoustic music, starts a process that upholds a reordering of the traditional elements of music (note, melody, harmony and counterpoint) and a focus on the qualities of the sound itself. In such contexts, the idea of extended techniques and the communication of musical expressive ideas broadens greatly, embracing an approach that may turn out to be experimental.

Amidst the growth of technical expansion, the interaction with electronic media proved to be a rich source of possibilities. MusicaFicta has used, from the beginning, processes of technological mediation in the form of live-processing in combination with acoustic instruments. Creative possibilities are greatly stretched in this environment. The expansion brought by electronics, takes us improvisers, to a unique level of invention and discovery. It is as if we dealt with a super-instrument whose technique has not yet been fully discovered, mapped and systematized. It is also possible that, because of the constant changes in technology, such systematization might never happen, keeping the instruments open for new and unpredictable possibilities. The opportunity of creating and using new unusual

sounds at any moment during the performance is what we think to be an ideal environment for free improvisation.

On the other hand, it can also bring the restriction of having to struggle to control new features of the instruments. Playing a hybrid instrument – an acoustic instrument with an electronic extension – is, by far, more demanding than playing an acoustic one. But, since the compositional activity in contemporary improvisation is a generative process that strongly relies on the relationship in collective performances, it is possible that the instrumental technique ought also to be malleable and developed by means of empirical discovery.

3. Sound object and reduced listening

If in contemporary improvisation there are no prescriptive materials or fixed strategies, how will the sonic discourse reach consistency and eloquence? Obviously, there must be some relevant issues that are involved in the dynamics of this interactive and creative musical environment. Among these issues, it may be important to rethink our attitude towards listening, based on the ideas of Pierre Schaeffer about music (Schaeffer 1966). For us, free improvisation develops better in an environment based on the idea of reduced listening, which is, according to Schaeffer, a type of listening that tries to escape from both the intention to comprehend any meaning (semantic, gestural or the idea of music derived from a particular idiom) or from an identification with instrumental agents. This kind of listening is directed to the attributes of the sound itself, or in Schaeffer's words, to the sound object. The unconditional way of hearing, brought by reduced listening, makes our audition permeable to what is unpredictable, unknown and not yet structured. As we have said above, for Schaeffer, reduced audition is one that seeks to escape from comprehending any sort of “meaning” from sounds. All attributes are supposed to be in the sound itself as if it were an object. These sounds are put into a myriad of combinations, presenting novel timbres as result of the use of extended techniques, introducing also new concepts of rhythm, form and ample expressive possibilities. In short, the idea of the sound object is more

inclined towards an attitude that allows us to appreciate the sound as it is, divorced from musical systems strongly consolidated.

In this way, we could imagine that the practice of contemporary improvisation may embrace, as John Cage would say, the sounds as simply sounds (Cage 1961: 68) – sounds that have not yet acquired any sort of representation or context. In this matter, the use of new sounds (including noises) produced by extended techniques and electronics helps us improvisers try to achieve a perception of sound as it is.

Then, the next thing to discuss would be the intentional aspect of this music. Sounds in the improvised environment, apart from the possible intentionalities involved in the process of their creation, may also express intentionalities through the transformations brought by the collaborative interactive processes. Arguably, it is necessary to yearn for listening through the concept of sound object, and at the same time, to look for intentionalities that can be associated to the sounds.

Theoretically, observing the sound as an object grants us a connection with the sound as raw material, acknowledging its intrinsic characteristics through a posture of deep listening. The other angle of observation focuses on how performers deal with this raw material, learning how to interact with the eventual intentionalities that are attached to it. The group then produces music by observing both layers simultaneously, the purely physical and the intentional aspects of sound.

4. The rhetoric of content and form

Delivering music collectively also brings a particular relationship between content (res) and form (verba)¹. As the musical discourse is shaped, a particular symbiosis between res and verba takes place in the elaboration of the ensemble's collective eloquence. In the construction of music through this process of socio-gen-

¹ Also defined by Aristotle as *logos* and *lexis*, res and verba represent a rhetorical division between what is communicated through language and how this is communicated (<http://humanities.byu.edu/rhetoric/silva.htm>, under Content/Form, accessed 26/04/2011)

esis there is an interpolation between content and form that is composed by both what is going to be delivered and how is it going to be delivered.

Lets consider that, embedded in the development of our individual creativeness inside a group of free improvisation, there is a symbiosis between *res* and *verba* in which the invention influences the form and vice-versa. Next, if we think about a cluster of these individual processes it becomes evident that there might be a significant multiplication of “inventions” and ‘forms’. To deal with the complex environment of this type of music making it is necessary for individuals to create decisive moments and to learn how to take advantage of the alternatives.

In the context of interactive performances, to seek the alternatives is in essence an activity that requires our thoughts and actions to be ethical. In this sense Robert L. Scott defends that the ethical knowledge is what rhetoric needs to achieve commitment. He presents this line of thought when he introduces an epistemological idea of the discourse:

If persons take seriously the possibilities that may be opened by rhetorical interchange and their commitments to their reality of social life, then developing the sensitivity necessary to seek rhetoric as a way of knowing is to enable one to take more fully the responsibilities generated by living with others. (Scott 1976: 260)

From our experience in *MusicaFicta*, we cannot say that, in the process of creation, our awareness is consciously focused on the issues of content, form or rhetorical thought. However, we think that the circumstances in which we develop our musical activity are impregnated with the dynamics of human interaction and the commitment with composing something together. This is a rhetorical perspective, which puts what is called *decorum* at the center of the play. In our group, *decorum* is acknowledging the circumstances for the realization of the activity by searching for ways to connect (logic) and considering the musical ideas of others (ethics). The responsibility of this collective enterprise engenders commitment that, in combination with skill and what we know as inspiration, may help in delivering the musical discourse consistently and eloquently.

5. The dialectic between the unpredictable and the undetermined

Contemporary improvisation relies upon processes that have some kind of organization and in which the performers act with some sort of control. This practice depends on the ability that musicians have to react to the sonic contexts that are, to a certain extent, unpredictable. In some way, their technical skills have to adapt to various unstable musical situations.

Constant changes in the sonic features hinder the possibility of musical contexts to become stable at all times during the performance. Consequently, free improvisation occurs as if it were a game; a game in which there is always a risk involved. At all times, musicians have to infer upon new musical situations in order to draw possible answers to these situations. These answers carry an intrinsic hope, since there is the constant gamble in determining which of the player's actions is going to become part of the musical context. During the interactive game, each of the musicians articulates an answer that may be unpredictable, but, at the same time, could bring coherence to the context. Furthermore, each answer is in itself a new proposition, which responds to what has been just at play and points towards possible new directions.

These constant processes of change, permeated with unpredictability, demand alertness from the musicians. They have to constantly evaluate their actions in a process of feedback: an answer to a determined proposition exposes new contexts, which in turn will engender new proposals. This chain of events induces a concentrated attention to a) the articulation of sounds heard at the present moment and b) the sounds prepared to happen just after. Contrary to other musical forms, which enhance the importance of more extended structural matters, contemporary improvisation tends to bring a series of punctual and momentary relations that are created by the musicians. Then, it is possible to establish a sequence that is recurrent in this music and that represents a general process of interaction:

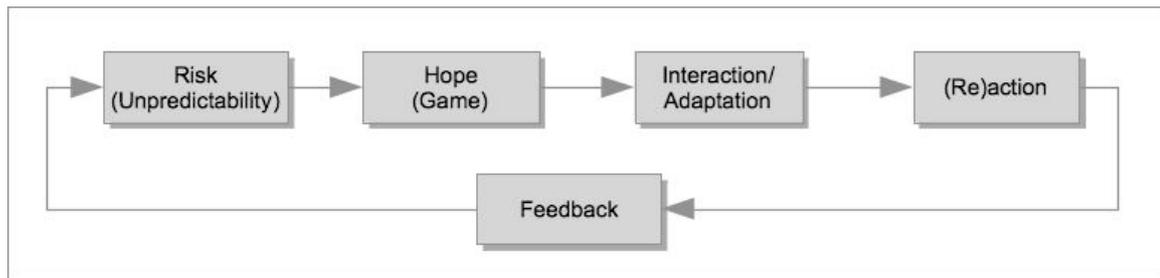


Figure 1. The interactive sequence of improvisation

Parallel to a state of unpredictability that stimulates the play factor – the risk and the game involved in each of the musician’s actions – there is also a situation that is indeterminate, which is at least in part generated by the absence of pre-established formal structures. Indeterminacy has a different role from that of unpredictability since it permits the musicians to choose, at different moments, actions that have not been established in advance. In the work of MusicaFicta there is always a counterpoint between these two forces. On one side, the unforeseen, that stimulates the interaction (the game), and, to a certain extent, can be seen as responsible for triggering the answers. These answers are not the result of chance, but of actions that are shaped by our own particular life experiences, skills and states of mind. On the other side, the indeterminate (lack of scores, styles, tonalities, cadences, etc), a single “unforeseen stimulus” may result in a variety of pertinent answers. The richness of this practice resides in the observation that, since in the absence of the indeterminate only one or few answers would become accessible, making the result more predictable, unfixed materials may allow a greater amount of possibilities to become available for building the musical discourse. Therefore, sui generis to this practice, the unpredictable occurs because of the indeterminate. At the same time, the indeterminate feeds from the unpredictable. To a certain extent, it is this dialectic relationship between the unpredictability and the indeterminacy that characterizes contemporary improvisation if compared to other musical practices.

6. Final considerations

Our experience with MusicaFicta has granted us the possibility of experimenting with new ways of structuring music performances. Also, inherent to the adoption

of these new elements is a concern in the ambit of musical expression. In spite of the natural freedom of this practice, in which the interactivity does not endorse any pre-determined system or musical language, how does it become feasible to create an environment that can be artistically consistent? Citing Deleuze: "How the unformed matter, the inorganic life, the becoming not human would not be anything but a pure and simple chaos? (Deleuze and Guattari 1997: 217).

In the course of this article, we hope that we have been able to contribute with some rationales for the subject of sociogenetic musical creation of contemporary improvisation. We believe that the combination of concepts like the sonic object, reduced audition, and the strategies derived from rhetorical thought, plus the idea of an intrinsic dialectic between the unpredictable and the undetermined, may point out some of the angles that can provide a qualitative and strategical discussion around this musical practice.

It is also important to mention some of the basic characteristics of any type of musical expression in the realm of the vitality of the performance. The will in which the interaction develops, the preoccupation with clarity and musical eloquence, immersed in the ambit of what we call inspiration – which is difficult and maybe pointless to contextualize – are fundamental in granting improvisers the ambiance for successfully achieving consistency in this kind of collective musical practice. Finally, we hope that this can be appreciated in our performances and that we will be successful in immersing our audiences in a rich musical experience.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP proc. nº 2008/09633-8 e nº 2008/08632-8) for supporting our research projects.

Bibliography

Cage, John (1961) *Silence*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix (1997) *Mil Platôs*. Vol. 5, São Paulo: Editora 34.

Schaeffer, Pierre (1966). *Traité des objets musicaux*. Paris: Seuil.

Scott, Robert L. (1976) On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later. *The Central States Speech Journal*, volume XXVII, number 4: 258-266.