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The Free Music Improvisation performance and the emergence of new musical creations

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Abstract

Improvisation is defined as the creation of a musical process, as it is being performed. This simple definition exposes how the performance is intrinsic and cannot be dissociated from the Free Music Improvisation practice. This paper will analyse the free improvisation performance and it will show how this musical practice produces new music each time. We will show how improvisers change their performance capabilities for each situation and how they can adapt to all kinds of situations that can arise during the performance. By analysing the performance of the large improvisation ensemble *Grand8*, the importance of the performance in the improvisation practice will be demonstrated and how crucial it is to the emergence of new music. This paper will examine how the ensemble adapted itself to the pandemic crisis, where the ensemble had to redefine its performances to continue the improvisation practice.

Keywords: Free Music Improvisation; Performance; *Grand8*; complex system; emergent properties; feedback; pandemic music.

1. Introduction

The New Grove defines improvisation as "The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed" (Horsley, 1995). This simple definition exposes how the performance is intrinsic and cannot be dissociated from the Free Music Improvisation (FMI) practice. It has been demonstrated the need of the performance in FMI by analysing the creation phases of different forms of musical creation. We observe that in FMI we have two phases: the personal musical training and the performance itself. The musicians generate and develop new musical ideas while they are performing in front of an audience. They rely on their musical experience to adapt their technical capabilities and interact, in real time, with the environment surrounding them.

In this paper, I would like to propose an analysis of the free improvisation performance and question how this music practice produces new musical creations at each event? How can an improvised music ensemble manage to continue producing new music over a long period of time and what is the importance of the performance in this process? How can improvisers change their performance capabilities for each situation? How can they adapt to all kinds of situations that can arise in the performance time?

I will focus on the large improvisation ensemble *Grand8* with whom I have played since 2016. I will propose an analysis of the *Grand8* performances to demonstrate the importance of the performance in the improvisation practice, and how crucial it is to emerge new music. I will show the multiple factors that *Grand8* explores in its performances to ensure that new musical creations arise each time they stand before the audience. I will show, based on my improvisation practice with this ensemble, how musical actions and interactions cause the transformation of the sound flow and thus the performance.

I will start by presenting the *Grand8* ensemble. Then, I will briefly analyse the improvisation phenomenon through the complex system theories. For this, it will be necessary to analyse the elements that compose the FMI practice enlightening their importance in the performance.

Finally, I will analyse the musical production of the year 2020 and 2021, during the pandemic crisis, where the ensemble had to redefine its performances to continue the improvisation practice.

2. The large ensemble *Grand8*

Grand8 was created in 2016 by some improvisers with the aim of creating a space dedicated to improvisation with a large number of musicians. The ensemble follows the following lines:

- There is no supervisor
- The improvisers are from the South region of France with rehearsals in Marseille
- Theoretically there is no institutional attachment – it has changed when we were hosted by the GMEM, a national center for creation after a fire in our rehearsal room
- We want to improvise as a big ensemble
- It is not a place for diffusion (as there is no money involved) as (until 2021) *Grand8* musicians were never paid for the performances
- Of course as an improvisation ensemble it is a space of freedom, artistic freedom.

All members are professional musicians, aware that in the FMI the goal is to preserve the artistic pleasure of making improvised music in a big orchestra. It is important for the members to assume this posture even if frequently the members have to skip *Grand8*'s performances to attend to paid jobs.

Since the end of 2016 the ensemble has held a concert each trimester. From 2019 until the 2020 lockdown, they organized a concert each month in subgroups of musicians composed by the members of the ensemble, eventually with guests. It is important to notice that in these latter performances the idea of improvising in a large number of musicians is not mandatory. Instead, new small configurations of the ensemble musicians allow the search for new musical experiences. The musicians' availability for the ensemble and the regularity of its production generates a stable confidence and reliability in the performance. *Grand8* is currently composed by the following musicians and the respective instruments:

- | | |
|--|------------------------------------|
| • Vincent Lajü (violoncello) | • Olivier Bost (trombone) |
| • Emmanuel Cremer (violoncello) | • Geneviève Sorin (accordion) |
| • Soizic Lebrat (violoncello) | • Nicolo Terrasi (guitar) |
| • Bastien Boni (double bass) | • Raymond Boni (guitar) |
| • Guillaume Lys (double bass) | • Ed Williams (guitar) |
| • Catherine Jauniaux (voice and objects) | • Vincent Roussel (percussion) |
| • Cati Delolme (voice) | • João Fernandes (electronics) |
| • Philippe Lemoine (saxophone) | • Sean Drewry (synthesizers) |
| • Laurent Charles (saxophones) | • Pom Bouvier (savage electronics) |
| • François Wong (saxophones) | • Sébastien Bouhana (percussion) |

There are several activities parallel to the performance in this ensemble: organizing concerts and festivals, looking and applying for grants, creating a netlabel with the production of albums¹, etc. It is important to mention these activities, as these extra-musical interactions are reflected later: in the performances as different affinities between musicians are created and within the public. For instance, elements of the jury of the grants we applied for have been present in the audience of the performances generating some extra motivation, tensions, etc.

¹ <https://grand8.bandcamp.com/> and <http://grand8.org/>

3. FMI and complex systems

A complex system is made up of something (anything, presumed identifiable), who in something (environment) for something (purpose or project) does something (activity = functioning). (Le Moigne, 1994) It is defined as a set of heterogeneous elements interacting with each other and with the environment. These systems are characterized by their non-linear interactions and whose overall behaviour cannot be obtained by simple composition of individual behaviours." (Aniorté, Gouarderes et Cariou, 2006)

The elements that we can identify that could constitute the complex system of FMI are: the musicians and their instruments (digital or acoustic), the public, the sound diffusion system (in electroacoustic music) and the performance space. From the above definition we can say that these elements (something) come together, in a performance space (a milieu) inserted into the environment to produce a concert, a performance or a rehearsal (in something, for something). They perform a multitude of actions (do something) to develop a creative process in the domain of sound – the musical improvisation. From this creative process results this ephemeral product of improvisation which will be the emerging consequence of these sound interactions.

In this article I will not develop the whole theory of complex systems and FMI (analysed in (Fernandes, 2019)), but I will describe the main characteristics that will help understand how new music emerges from the interactions between the musicians.

As stated before, a complex system is composed of heterogeneous elements that can themselves be complex systems (like the musicians as complex living beings). These elements are open to external influences: the chaos from the environment. The improvisers in performance have to be alert to all situations and integrate (or refute) them in their music. This is easily understood while improvising in the public space where all sorts of interactions can take place. For example, musicians responding to birds singing.

In order to preserve its identity and autonomy, the system needs to possess self-organizing properties (through different types of interactions) (Varela, 1996). Feedback is an important feature for the self-organization of the system: each musician captures the variations of their environment and uses this information to change its functioning according to the performance (the system) purpose; this change will therefore affect the performance sound flow. Each musician will then adapt himself to the new sound flow, transforming it at the same time. Indeed, it will be in the envy of musicians to undertake this common purpose of a coherent creative process that this self-organization can take place. It also generates the uniqueness of each improvisation performance, where musicians in their interaction with the instantaneous sound flow of the system can self-organize in a unique and new process.

This means that the system must be able to evolve for the emergence of new music. In fact, complex systems are characterized by the emerging properties that result from the interaction of its constituents. The complexity of a system comes precisely from the unpredictability of these properties. The functioning of the system cannot be predicted or calculated by the individual functioning of the constituents, but it is in the collective behaviour that it exhibits that the emerging properties of the system arise.

We can then ask ourselves: what are its emerging properties and how does this happen? If we start from the definition given at the beginning, the goal of the complex system of FMI is to collectively build a process of musical creation. From the interactions between the constituents, a sound flow is created and, at each moment, the sound of the whole emerges. Sound proposals are sent to the system and the musicians adapt themselves to these proposals with new sound information which, in turn, feeds back to the system. The sound produced by each musician feeds the overall sound flow. At the same time, they depend directly on it, as each musician individually at his local scale has to assimilate this flow to successfully feed it with new information. This all is in interaction with the

environment that can change this sound flow (Borgo, 2005). We can see that the evolution of the sound flow emerging from the system cannot be achieved by a single element, but that it is in the interaction with the other constituents that this flow is created and developed. Local variations will converge the sound flow, at every moment, in a new coherent state of the system.

3.1. Performance space

This space is extremely important for the development of creative actions and it has an active role. The acoustics of the room changes the way the instrumentalist plays and his perception of musical information. The position of the instrumentalists on a stage, the position of the audience, the space available for each of these components, the contents of the room and the acoustic insulation can change the perception of the message.

The following paragraph describes a moment in a performance where elements of *Grand8* explore the performance space and try other kinds of interactions:

François uses his sax holder to make noises as he twists it on the ground. Julie hits the stand with her hand. Everyone is making noises. Vincent plays with a harmonica and a flute. Wong searches for a place to make more noise than the floor and finds a wooden desk. Vincent L. scrapes the spike of his cello on the floor. This noise environment stays for a long time. François throws a chair on the floor with which he bangs his sax holder and this very noisy gesture makes most of the other musicians stop playing. A bass sound remains. Another musician stands over a chair with a maraca like the Statue of Liberty and then throws the maraca to another musician, making him stop playing to grab the maraca. The maraca then passes from musician to musician producing the sound of the maraca and stopping the receiver. Cati takes a plastic bag from the rubbish bin and starts to grasp it on the ground. She then puts something in the round trash bin and makes it rollover the room.

The question of performance space arises when we go beyond conventional places, such as the concert hall, for example the public space. We can use the concept of a sound milieu constructed by the listening operations as stated by Makis Solomos: "through the act of listening, [the listener, in our case the improviser or the public] interacts with a sound milieu, resulting in what we call sound. [...] sound is the product of the interaction between the listener and the milieu." (Solomos, 2018)

We can say that it is the resulting (self-organized) sound flow that defines the sound milieu as a section of the environment. Ultimately, we could say that it is the sound in this milieu that defines the performance space, because this is the main purpose of the interactions produced.

And it is also through listening operations that we can separate the public from other people in the public space. It is their attention and implication in the performance that will define them as the public.

3.2. Public

The public in FMI performances can have an important role in the creative process. Moreover, "the act of improvisation arises from the meeting of an improviser and an audience, and from the pooling of shared cultural codes which will make it possible to name improvisation a collective action." (Laborde, 1999) The first information the public sends to all musicians is their presence and number. Its presence changes the acoustic conditions, the heat, the absorption of sound.

Musicians play differently in front of an audience or in its absence, like in a rehearsal. Improvisers need to know how to interpret the information received from the audience. Musicians will then transform their music development process to a state that is satisfactory for the whole system. The performance receiver is therefore not a passive component of the system. His return is necessary. It is the interaction with the audience where the feedback plays an important role for the success of the performance.

Grand8 tries other ways to relate to the public in order to listen to this type of music differently. If initially, performances were organized in the classical concert form, others kinds of configuration were tested. For example, with the musicians around the audience and vice versa, with the audience following the musicians in motion or with the instrumentalists wandering among the audience. Eventually, the interactions can be more than the listening operations but real musical interactions, by integrating the public sounds in the performance. For example, a baby talking in the audience can be imitated by a singer or a saxophonist.

4. Performance and improvisation

When trying to define improvisation, performance has a very important place in this form of creation. Effectively, if we analyse its creation phases, we see that two phases are present: the musical training which confers the ability to play the instrument, where we can include the preparation of the instrument and the performance which is the generation of musical ideas and development processes in real time in the interaction with the elements of the system and the environment (Fernandes, 2019).

The first phase is based mostly on the interaction between the musician and his instrument. The musician explores the affordances of the instrument, and in this repeatedly interaction, he embodies the instrument. With all the instrument expressive capabilities in his baggage, the instrumentalist will be able to successfully face all new situations in performance.

We could also add a third phase dedicated to the collective preparation - the rehearsals. In the case of *Grand8*, the ensemble has monthly rehearsals and does a 3-day residency each trimester (which are theoretically open to the public). However, this preparation is not dedicated to a specific performance. In fact, we could say the concert is part of a larger process of the *Grand8* project, where all the musical interactions are important to create its sound. But having this in mind, what is the importance of the performance?

It's interesting to note that inside the definitions of performance, we can almost find the definition of improvisation in it. Quoting Pradier: "[Performance] means commitment of the whole person, organic and mental, biological and cognitive, involved from childhood in constant interaction with the world on which he acts and which acts on him." (Pradier, 2017) If we add musical interactions and the premise that there is no previously defined model, we basically have the definition of what improvisation is. Of these quotes, it is important to underline "the constant interaction with the world" of the performer, as it is fundamental to the performance's complex system. The generated ideas and the decisions are taken in interaction with accessible information from the performance context and they are based on individual musical, social and technical instrumental experience. The musician is always at a "state of alert" to face all the challenges and unforeseen events coming from this environment. Based on his life and musical past experiences the musician will react to the world's challenges.

5. Improvising in large number

In collective improvisation, the musician's resources emerge principally in interaction with its colleagues. The individual aligns itself to the stimuli provided by other elements and sends new information back to the ensemble. This is indeed what makes improvisation unique, because each time all these interactions are different and cannot be reconstructed identically in other situations. I will mention two aspects that I consider central for the emergence of new music in improvisation in an ensemble with a large number of musicians: the initial conditions and the structural complexity. The beginning of a FMI performance gives the system a new framework and the way the performance begins will conduct the sound flow towards some organizational convergence of the agents (Furlanete, 2010). An interesting feature of self-organization is that the system can have very

different results from small variations in the initial conditions. Structural complexity is defined by the number of constituents and the multiplicity of possible situations of each of its constituents in this group (Moles, 1972). In a large ensemble, there is a big unpredictability in the occurrence of an event caused by one of the musicians. The probability of interactions that take place in the performance depends on the number of its elements and, therefore, a greater number of musicians causes an increase in information circulating in the system, as the result of a probable larger number of interactions. Within *Grand8*'s activities, these two aspects are very clear when comparing the performances with the whole ensemble and the monthly sessions where subgroups of the ensemble perform (normally 2 to 5 musicians). The performances with the large ensemble can take quickly and more often completely different directions depending on these numerous and unpredictable interventions of the musicians. Besides the number of interactions, there can be a lot of different musical situations: a variable number of instruments playing at a time, the type of instruments playing, their configuration on stage.

One of the important characteristics in musical improvisation is the common goal of the improvising musicians. In fact, there is always an agreement, a negotiation between musicians for the improvised performance to work, so that they act on the same principles, even if they are established during the performance.

In the case of *Grand8*, this common objective was established at the beginning of the ensemble and the subsequent experiences do not involve the construction on-the-fly of this agreement. Instead, the goal is now to explore the environment and the negotiations between the musicians and learn how to renew them. The following list shows how *Grand8* introduces noise into the system to evolve into new states, and thus new music:

- the arrival of a new member with whom the group must reorganize itself (increasing the structural complexity)
- voluntary "disorganization" in performance. *Grand8* always looks for new situations during its performance, in order to explore new paths and to organize itself differently. For example, in performance, musicians who can move, such as wind instruments, change their position or their axis (e.g. turning 90°) so that their listening position is different and thus privileging other interactions.
- the interaction with other artistic forms that questions the type of interactions between the instrumentalists and the resulting sound with other arts.
- the different contexts of each performance.
- new musical gestures

6. *Grand8* and the pandemic

At the beginning of March 2020 *Grand8* held his last rehearsal and "normal" concert. The ensemble began to question how they could continue to make improvised music in these new conditions.

The virtual modalities that many ensembles adopted, were immediately put aside as it was unanimous that the interactions in improvisation are not only about sound, but also bearers of intention with the physical and bodily presence. The presence in a common physical space.

The group experienced the lockdown musical practice in another way, not virtual, but perhaps abstract. On the day scheduled for the rehearsal, the 2nd of April 2020, precisely at 10:00 for exactly one hour, *Grand8*'s musicians improvised alone in their private space. The condition was to

improvise as if they were performing together. What came out of this experience was that it sounded almost as if the players were interacting live.²

When some restrictions were lifted, the group began to experiment with new forms of performance such as playing in the public space. The group started to perform in the city parks. And from 2021 the *GrandAir* project has started with official performances sponsored by the city of Marseille. Several questions arise within this transformation, as not all instruments are adapted to play in the public space the same way they did in the concert hall. For example, an acoustic guitar in a noisy environment or instruments that require a power supply. Nevertheless, the guitarist can get closer to the public if she wants to be heard, or the electroacoustic musician can use portable speakers. The issues of the influence of space and the audience that I mentioned earlier thus make perfect sense. The large ensemble has thus new challenges to discover and to self-organize itself in these new conditions, where the *alea* of the environment is "much closer".

Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to say that the performance is an important step in the life of this large ensemble as the musicians transcend themselves during these moments with a very high level of concentration. Not having a supervisor, means as well that the improvisers are at all moments responsible for the success or failure of the performance. Nevertheless, this success or failure is a very personal feeling. Our experience shows us that musicians are frequently in disagreement about the success of the performance. Not having a supervisor means *Grand8* often has a collegial approach to their activities. By consequence, the performances are analysed and everybody can express their opinion about it. We observe that each musician has a different performance experience and it can be very contrasting. From these discussions, new ideas of exercises emerge for the next rehearsals and performances. With these exercises, improvisers will acquire new experiences and they will add them to their personal musical baggage that can be used on the following performances.

The emergence of new music in performance is almost immediate in a large ensemble like *Grand8*. Their structural configuration is frequently different from performance to performance provoking different kinds of interactions. The performances of this ensemble are held in very different places and the exploration of the context of performance is mandatory. The context of the performances is then always different and new music emerges automatically. Free music improvisation can adapt to almost every new situation, and new music can emerge from the deciphering of the context of the performance.

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² <https://grand8.bandcamp.com/album/avril-distance>

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