

CHAPTER 26

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IMPROVISING IMPROMPTU, OR, WHAT TO DO WITH A BROKEN STRING

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IN APOLLO'S HALL

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ON Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater, New York City, musicians and singers come to the stage to compete for public recognition of their talent. Participating audiences issue their judgments sometimes with expressions that drown out the performances. Where there's a noticeable failure to please, a designated "executioner" pulls the performers away.

The Apollo Theater inherited its name from an institution of dance, "Apollo Hall" founded in the 1860s by a Civil War military man, Edward Ferrero. In his treatise, *The Art of Dancing*, he articulated his aim to secure an Apollonian harmony and civility for his art while acknowledging its more turbulent origins in the Dionysian and bacchanalian cults of antiquity.¹ After his death, the institution saw several transmutations, through burlesque and vaudeville, through blues, jazz, swing, R & B, Motown, and soul, eventually to become what it is today, a theater of diverse musical offerings.² Nevertheless, for all the changes of musical style, street address, and clientele, the continued presence of the executioner suggests something that has never left the hall: an agonistic atmosphere that recalls the ancient gods contesting the terms of order and inspiration in society and the arts.

In the ancient myths, surprisingly many musicians were maimed or killed—if not by Apollo himself, then according to his divine principle: Marsyas was flayed, Orpheus beheaded, Linus knocked out, and Thamyris blinded.³ Homer wrote of Thamyris, here in Pausanias's description, that he "lost the sight of his eyes"; that his attitude was "one of utter dejection"; that his hair and beard were "long"; and that "at his feet" lay "thrown a lyre with its horns and strings broken."⁴ What had he done to deserve so extreme a punishment? He had shown hubris in claiming, first, that his musical performance was

superior to that of the divine Muses, and second, that were he to win, he would take the Muses in sexual intercourse. When he was punished, he was stripped equally of his art and his eros. Nowadays, on Amateur Night, the Apollonian executioner does not actually physically maim the amateurs when he punishes them, though he does still have license to unstring the spirit of dilettantes who distress the assembled audiences. In other contemporary settings, however, the situation is not always so restrained.

In this essay, I draw on an agonistic background of contest, judgment, and punishment to help articulate a concept of improvisation that I call improvisation *impromptu*. I distinguish this concept from the more familiar concept of what I call improvisation *extempore*. I draw these two concepts apart, despite a substantial overlap, as a contribution to a critical theory that regards our lives, practices, and concepts as constantly contested. Improvisation *impromptu* is a concept of wit and fit, of doing exactly the right thing or wrong thing *in the moment*. Although the concept can be articulated independently of the agonistic background, its agonism brings its use into a sharp relief, especially when it's used to mark a *winning (or losing) move*. To speak of agonism is not necessarily to speak of explicit contests: even in everyday situations of life, we can take our lives, positively and negatively construed, to be "on the line." Suitable to its content, the concept is also very hard to pin down or to circumscribe with clear lines. It is a dynamic, even a tightrope concept, closely tied to judgment, that speaks to the differences between acting with humility or with hubris, with divine exhibition or with egoistic exhibitionism. I illustrate its tense application through a history of more subtle philosophical thought, juxtaposed with several rather blatant examples of competitive musical situations from very diverse traditions, from the "cutting contests" of jazz and rap, to the "cutting edge" performances of the concert hall, to the deathly "cutting down" of karaoke singers in the Philippines.

A strong motivation I have for articulating the concept of improvisation *impromptu* is to address the concept of improvisation *extempore* insofar as the latter has been used to bring down the work-concept of the practice of classical music. I begin the essay by explaining this motivation and conclude with an example that illustrates the argument as well as any single example could. It is drawn from a 1940 film of the Harlem Renaissance, in which an old violinist, a father, must contend with a broken arm and a young violinist, his son, with broken strings. *Broken Strings* is the film's title and part of my own. The film pits the work-music of the classical tradition against the improvisational freedom of swing, not, however, to perpetuate the division between two *types* of music—classical versus jazz—but between two qualitative ways of *making* music, *whatever type of music it is*. The film brings attention to what is most divisive, cutting, or prejudicial in our social categorization of persons and in our social conceptualization of music.

CONCEPTS AND CRITIQUE

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When musicians make up music in performance, *from this moment forward*, their act falls under the familiar umbrella concept of what I'm calling improvisation *extempore*.

The second, less familiar concept, I'm calling improvisation *impromptu*. The latter refers to what we do at singular moments—in *the moment*—when we're put *on the spot*, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle. Closely associated with both concepts is a *quality* or *characteristic* of the *improvised* or *improvisational*, although, in qualitative assessments, we tend to say that a person, a performance, or an act is *inspired* or *innovative*, or, by contrast, *uninspired* or *dull*. In an extensive literature that extends far beyond the musical domain, the *extempore* and *impromptu* acts, along with the *quality*, tend to be run together without very explicit distinction. I think it necessary also to hold them apart. For, this way, we may put one of the concepts to work, to upstage or, better, unstage the other for the sake of critique.

Many contemporary scholars attach the concept of improvisation first off to the art of music and to a specific type or genre of music, most often jazz. With jazz regarded as the primary example of improvisation, the term *improvisation* has come to mean improvisation *extempore*, making music up in performance from this moment forward. After this, the terms *jazz* and *improvisation* have become thinned out or unmarked enough to signify a free music-making anywhere in the world. This way of making music has then become utopian in intent: to pave the way for a free music or a free future in a society of constraint.

This utopian claim has assumed a blood-red persistence: although rule-governed and conventional in many ways, jazz improvisation—especially free jazz—has been made to stand for the general resistance to a regulation assumed by a standardized or pre-made music or a pre-packaged concept—and most typically the work-concept. In this discourse of resistance, a practice regulated by a work-concept is a practice where compositional determination is taken typically to occur prior to the performance such that the performance is seen not to create the music but only to reproduce what is already created. Accordingly, whereas performances improvised *extempore* are taken to be productive, performances of works are taken to be only *re-productive*.

Although few would affirm this crude opposition, the opposition has nevertheless structured a way of thinking that assumes that more or less around 1800, the work-concept emerged in the practice in part as a contrary concept to that of improvisation *extempore*. Increasingly, it came to overtax musical practice, and not just classical music practice.⁵ To diminish its power or authority, improvisation *extempore*, especially as tied to jazz, came to be accorded an emancipatory potential. But then, and this is the additional step I want to add to this discourse, this concept came to overstep its bounds, too, by coming to serve as though it exhausted all that improvisation and emancipation can mean descriptively and qualitatively, musically and socially.

But where does this leave us? I believe with the thought that just as it has been necessary to limit the work-concept, it is necessary to impose limits now on the concept of improvisation *extempore*. One way to do this is to re-release the power of the work-concept, to show that it does not exclude improvisation, given that improvisation can mean much more than improvisation *extempore*. Another way is to re-release the power of a way of thinking about improvisation that has fallen out of the picture the more the idea of improvisation *extempore* has dominated. This way of thinking corresponds in part to the *quality* of improvisation, as when we say of persons or their acts—of whatever

sort—that they are inspired, innovative, or creative. But it also corresponds to what I am calling improvisation *impromptu*, which is both a particularly apt concept and in fact the more traditional concept to serve the purposes of an emancipatory critique.

Critique articulates concepts at the extreme to render explicit their negative and positive social tendencies in the different practices in which they have found complex and concrete applications. To so articulate the concepts is not to let the descriptions fall into mere caricature, although as in smart caricature, the descriptions are exaggerated and provocative enough to reveal an often-concealed truth-content or truthfulness. To claim that improvisation *impromptu* can help to deflate the conceit of improvisation *extempore* is thus deliberately to disguise all that potentially runs these two concepts together as one.⁶ In what follows, one might think that most of what I say about the *impromptu* concept belongs just as well to what others think of as improvisation *extempore*. It is reasonable and accurate to think this way. The risk it runs, however, is then to think that a practice governed by a concept, such as the work-concept, which almost “by definition” has come to exclude the practice of improvisation *extempore*, has no claim on improvisation, which would be an unreasonable way to think. Drawing the conceptual distinction clarifies the point.

THE POSSIBILITY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

In an oft-quoted, unpublished interview of 1982, Jacques Derrida described improvisation as occurring within a space of free fantasy in which we are able to imagine ourselves as liberated from repressive concepts or, as he put it, from the “great number of prescriptions [or names] that are prescribed in our memory and culture,” such that all seems always already to be “preprogrammed.”⁷ In articulating his utopian appeal to improvisation, Derrida did not tie improvisation to a particular type of music, art, or action. Instead, he construed improvisation negatively, following the terms of a dialectical critique, and thus, as he used this term, as an impossibility. “One is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation, and I fight for improvisation, but always with the belief that it's impossible.” Part of what he meant was that what we desire but can never actually achieve is a free space in which improvisation is what we do completely *spontaneously*. The free space thus becomes a matter less of *what* we do than of what we *appeal* to, to resist all that restricts this spontaneity. The space of imagination is a space for broadening and opening up our thoughts to counter spaces that are filled up by that which is already familiar, given, pre-packaged in the culture. But to open up the imagination to counter such spaces is so extremely difficult that improvisation becomes well-nigh “impossible,” yet, as Derrida insists, he, and we, must continue to believe in it.

Derrida's view draws on an extensive history in which “improvisation” has been appealed to, more in its *impromptu* than *extempore* form, to capture a way of acting in the world with what Emerson, for example, described as a certain “elasticity” of mind,

attitude, and ability.⁸ What exactly this elasticity comprised came, in the same history, to be drawn out through what Nietzsche, at the same time as Emerson, referred to as an entire “mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms.” Yet what the history also shows is that such an elasticity or spontaneity of mind and action cannot in fact do without a certain habituation, training, or preprogramming of our practices. Without fit, no wit. When Derrida said in his interview that one cannot do or say “whatever one wants,” was he only lamenting the loss of freedom or was he also recognizing, dialectically, that one must “reproduce” the discourse to some degree, in order to show one’s productivity? Most theorists who have articulated a critical concept of improvisation have done so not to dispense with all habit, discourse, or fit, but to counter a situation where our habits become too habitual or our discourses too stereotyped or fixed. If they overstate the claim to make it seem as if they really think freedom is possible without any compliance or fit, then it is to put a high note and often a blue note on the extreme difficulty or near impossibility of fighting all that which strikes others simply but falsely as self-evident.

ON THE EDGE OF HAPPINESS

Improvisation *impromptu* is equally distinct from a music *freely* or *entirely extemporized* and one *worked out in advance*. It refers to what we do in any sort of activity or performance of life when we’re suddenly confronted with an obstacle which, to win, continue, or survive, we must overcome. But to overcome the obstacle, to get “out of a jam,” offers no guarantees and no certainty that the world or our lives, social or individual, are improved thereby. We need always also to ask to what end our overcoming is directed. Conceived as without guarantees, the concept has nothing essential to do with this or that kind of music, or even with the art of music at all, and much more to do with how we live our lives precariously and contingently—on the edge.

Before Derrida, Nietzsche argued for improvisation to overcome a certain forgetfulness of what it means to *live* life. We have become passive as though we sit in an audience looking and listening to our lives without participating in their making. Our society and culture have become antiquated, even deadly, because we act as though what we know is always already known: pre-packaged or certain in advance. Nietzsche urged a rebirth of a perspective that would put us back onto the stage, where the not-knowing with certainty how the drama unfolds would leave us dancing joyfully “in the dark.” To be “joyful,” he wrote, we must become improvisers of our lives. “The day and the dance are beginning, and we don’t know the programme. So we have to improvise—the whole day improvises its day.”⁹

But having written this, he then tempered the thought. A life in which all our habits and knowing were suspended, a life that “demanded improvisation” without any abatement, would be “impossible,” “intolerable,” an “exile” from all community: indeed, a “Siberia.” On the other hand, he recognized that the habits, values, and know-how

needed to live life tend to fall all too easily and quickly into stagnation: before we know it, we have forgotten how to improvise, how to live in a way that shows us to be active, even “alive.” Between the two extremes, he articulated the fragile or almost “impossible” terms of an agonistic life lived on a tightrope *with* and *between* joy and suffering, affirmation and doubt, experimentation and habit.

To illustrate, he distinguished two types of “happiness,” saturated with connotations of good fortune and luck. In this distinction, he captured everything with which my essay is concerned: the agonism of living life; the two senses, separated, of improvisation *extempore* and *impromptu*; and the *quality* of being inspired derived from being able to act with *readiness* “in the moment.”

There is one happiness, he began, of those who, despite their youth, grasp “the improvisation of life.” These persons are those who, less than grasping the *extemporaneous* character of life, are able to act *impromptu*, in the moment. They are the persons who astonish us, for while engaged in “the most daring games,” they are never caught out making a mistake even when they make one. Nietzsche drew an analogy to those “improvising masters” of the “art of tone,” to whom we ascribe the *quality* of a “divine infallibility”—*göttliche Unfehlbarkeit*—of the hand. That these masters *are* mortal means that they do make mistakes, he explained, but that they are “divine” means that they make it seem as though their mistakes were no mistakes at all. Whenever, through “a mood” or “jerk of the finger,” “an accidental tone” enters their performance, they are able to overcome it then and there, *impromptu*, by animating the tone “with a fine meaning and soul.”

In addressing the “great improvisers” of the musical art, Nietzsche had the Liszts, Chopins, and Paganinis of his time in mind, and, hence, a music pre-composed but for a qualitatively *improvised* performance such as a so-named *Impromptu* for the piano or *Caprice* for the violin. Had he been addressing a purely or freely improvised music *extempore*, the very idea of making a mistake or entering an accidental tone would have been less clear, given that, in pure extemporization, *all* tones are, in some sense, either accidental or necessary given that none is determined in advance. In *extempore* activity, making a mistake must be conceived of in terms more of flouting a convention or expectation according to the type of music being made. But the point is that Nietzsche’s description was about far less this or that sort of mistake than what one does when any sort of mistake threatens to derail a performance. He named persons “improvisers” of their art when they are “always ready in the moment”—*im Augenblick immer bereit*—to act, but where the *readiness* does not itself come in the instant. It comes rather from a practice or training in the art—*Übung* (from *geübt*)—and from a certain sort of fortune or divine luck, or what Bernard Williams later articulated as a “moral luck,”¹⁰ such that, *in the moment*, they *can* actually show themselves “inventive”—*erfinderisch*—enough to do what they must do.

Nietzsche then contrasted the happiness of these persons with those whose happiness is drawn not from their ability in accommodating accidental tones, but from a rejection of this ability altogether. These persons focus on their failures and disappointments, he wrote, on how, when “in a scrape,” they’re left with far more than “a black eye,” looking, indeed, over the cliff edge into life’s “abyss.” Almost toppling over the edge, they reason to themselves that the value of life *must* lie elsewhere than in winning or succeeding,

and, accordingly, they remove their “bull’s horns.” They know instead what it means to see their lives as (almost) lost to them. Did Nietzsche regard this second kind of happiness as a cop-out or as strength? He left the answer undecided. Sometimes he saw these persons as simply rationalizing their inability or “dilettantism,” but sometimes as having reached some sort of melancholic or stoic withdrawal, a Schopenhauerian contentment of resignation, arrived at quietly, in solitude.

In Nietzsche’s view, both sorts of happiness are attitudinal in the face of the contingency of life. Both also situate persons sometimes in the most “tragic” situations of knowing and not-knowing on a stage where “accidental tones” turn out to be grave errors that cannot, in the end, be covered up by an “infallible hand.” Sometimes, as in the ancient tragedies, protagonists are blinded in punishment for their blindness in not fully grasping or knowing their situation. But also in this view, a space or possibility is held open for improvisation *impromptu*, in which moments of joy might happen that reveal a divine inventiveness on the part of those who, though perhaps, strictly speaking, deceiving others by covering up a mistake, exhibit a know-how without exhibiting a false sense of their selves.

GETTING THE POINT

Improvisation *extempore* and *impromptu* are both acts and arts of exchange between actors on the stage and between actors on and off the stage. Both demand a *wit* and a *fit*: the wit of flexibility and the fit of propinquity. Whereas, however, improvisation *extempore* asks us to attend to what is achieved in the performance as a whole, improvisation *impromptu* picks out the inspired or exemplary *turn* in a performance when, on the spot, one does (at best) the right or winning thing.

The combined demand for wit and fit recalls Castiglione’s famed description of *sprezzatura*, the particular nonchalance and wit exhibited by a courtier that makes it seem as though all he does—with perfect fit—he does effortlessly. Yet, as so stated, *sprezzatura* captures a quality of behavior and character that is equally distinct from improvisation *extempore* and *impromptu*: it is less a creative quality than a quality of wit and fit. Nevertheless, it is what Castiglione then adds to his description of the courtier that more particularly picks out the quality associated with improvisation *impromptu*: namely, when the courtier displays a readiness—*prontezza*—for or of ingenuity, to do what must be done in the moment and *at just the right moment*.¹¹

Like the term *prontezza*, the term *impromptu* or, from the nineteenth century, *promptitude*, captures the immediacy and quickness of the movement, gesture, and decision. This quickness was well described by the German Romantic aphorist, Friedrich Schlegel, in terms of a social wit or a situation when one must, as we say, “have one’s wits most about one” or “be on one’s toes.” Schlegel aphorized this quick wit variously. He spoke of it as capturing the suddenness of the act or its singularity, momentariness, or fragmentariness, as when we deliver a punchline of a joke and deliver it well. To not

deliver it well usually means trying too hard, as when, Schlegel quipped, the English try too hard to be witty in the name of mere sociability. He further distinguished the wit of a divine or mystical flash of imagination from one led by a Roman nose that has a prophetic instinct. In this “flash,” he saw a quality of “improvisation” that could provoke, release, or “explode the confined spirit.”¹² Yet he knew that not all explosions are worthy ones. Where there is too much freedom without control, or vice versa, there is no genuine provocation of the spirit. In the improvised style of his own aphorisms, he captured the tension between freedom and control as first staged in the ancient mythic contests, the agonistic tension between two sorts of human and social characteristics: the divine or godlike and the animalistic or satyr-like. Though *inspiration* was attached to the former—the high—and *instinct* to the latter—the low—it wasn’t always clear, especially in his more ironic moments, which he preferred.

What Schlegel wrote about acts of life, he also wrote about philosophical thoughts. He wrote of enigmatic or riddled meanings as being those that are grasped with immediacy when exactly the right word is “hit upon.” He used the term *getroffen*, from *treffen*—fitting—to capture the immediacy of an exclamation, such as “bull’s eye!,” which is clearly painful for the bull but pleasurable for those who have shot the arrow straight. The English term “hitting” does similar work. In presenting someone with an unfamiliar concept, as Wittgenstein later repeated, it’s preferable not to hit persons over the head until they “get it,” but to offer just enough that the concept suddenly *strikes* them as making sense. In describing what it means to master a term in a language or a rule or concept in a game, Wittgenstein noted that one grasps the meaning of a particular application “in a flash” [*blitzartig*]. He often used the dynamic term *fitting*—usually *passend* instead of *getroffen*—to capture the final relation between a term and a particular use that at first seems not to fit. For Wittgenstein, to experience something as “fitting” is often also to engage aesthetically with the thing, as when someone cuts a fine figure in a suit, but it is also to speak of getting a joke without needing, either before or after, an “explanation.”¹³

SHOWING AND SHOWING OFF

In his *Institutes of Oratory*, Quintilian wrote of how after a long education, the fruits of all our labor are meant to culminate in the ability to speak “*ex tempore*.” Yet a primary reason for training this ability, he added, is to meet conditions *impromptu*. There arise “innumerable occasions” when there are “the most pressing or sudden emergencies,” when it’s absolutely necessary to speak in *the instant*—in a court of law, say, when new evidence is brought forward that one isn’t expecting. The point of the training is of course to be prepared to do something *in the instant*. For it wouldn’t be right for an advocate just to stand there dumb, waiting for “his voice and lungs [to be] put in tune,” to beg for “a voice to save” him, or to ask for “time for retirement and silent study till his speech is formed and committed to memory.” No, what such emergencies demand is a wit or know-how that entirely fits and springs from the situation, and if one doesn’t have

it, Quintilian concluded, one would be better off staying home, avoiding public life, and seeking another profession.¹⁴

But when Quintilian then tempered his remarks on the wit of improvisation, he introduced his remarks on fit, on a fittingness, as he explained, that shows but does not simply *display* one's ability to overcome an obstacle *impromptu*. When improvising in the moment, we must not suddenly digress into "*extempore* effusions." For to so digress is to show our lack of patience in waiting "for the thought to supply the matter." Here we exhibit only "a passion for display" that shows no respect for method or training, but relies only on an inarticulate hubris that a "magnificent inspiration" will suddenly come to one. He offered a deliberately manic and cultish image of persons rocking their bodies to and fro, booming and bellowing as though they had "a trumpet inside," "gesticulating wildly," and wagging their heads "with all the frenzy of a lunatic."¹⁵ He evoked this image to differentiate the exhibitionist or hubristic tendency to display from the more sober act of finding a fitting solution on the spot. In this view, humility was clearly to be preferred to hubris. And improvisation *impromptu* had come to mean less an act performed fast than one performed at the right time with just the right amount of time in perfect response to an obstacle that had occurred unexpectedly.

Much later, in his observations on the delivery of jokes,¹⁶ Freud picked up less on good timing than on bad timing, on the tendency specifically toward display or exhibitionism stemming, as he saw it, from a deeply engrained narcissism that saturated not only individuals but also the society as a whole. Wanting to fill up an uncomfortable silence, he explained, or wanting to free ourselves from a pressure, we act out, as we dream, in *involuntary* or *sudden* ways. Following Karl Groos's 1899 diagnosis of the sickness of civilization that attends our human games (*Die Spiele der Menschen*), Freud analyzed the satisfaction of delivering a joke in terms of a release of an instinct, either lustful or hostile, that is repressed given "an obstacle" that stands in its way. He identified the obstacle as the entire disciplining or civilizing tendency of a society that had made saying "excuse me" (or "please pass the salt") a cover-up for wanting to kill an interlocutor (or a parent) who feels much more like an opponent than a friend. Freud's analysis was more to show that the prevalent "psychopathological" condition of our lives was such as to create constant obstacles, such that, even when the moment seemed "everyday," we would produce endless slips of the tongue, sleights of the hand, or accidental tones, which, more than overcoming in glorious acts of the soul, we would simply cover up as best we can. In these everyday contexts, Freud believed that we would usually not even realize that we had made a mistake or that there had been an accident until we were forced to the analyst's couch, at which point our agonizing mistake would be revealed to have been, in another sense, quite determined.

FOR GEORGE

A perfectly complex passage from Mark Twain's novel *The Innocents Abroad* (chapter 4) finds the character, a young singer named George, being admonished for

improvising—"Come, now, George, *don't* improvise. It looks too egotistical. It will provoke remark. Just stick to 'Coronation' like the others. It is a good tune—you can't improve it any, just off-hand, in this way." To which George responds: "Why I'm not trying to improve it—and I *am* singing like the others—just as it is in the notes." What exactly is George doing wrong? Is he changing the notes, embellishing or ornamenting them, or singing simply in a way that makes him stand out in the (choric) crowd? It turns out that George neither knows the tune nor its notes, which, the writer quips, "was also a drawback to his performances." Not knowing leads George to "turn" his voice this way and that, but occasionally "to fly off the handle and startle every body with a most discordant cackle." But more than this, George honestly believes that he is singing "just as it is in the notes," leading the writer to conclude that George had, therefore, "no one to blame but himself when his voice caught on the centre occasionally, and gave him the lockjaw." In this passage, "to improvise" means to sing the notes of a tune when you don't know them, hence, to follow along slightly behind, which might be done well or, as in George's case, not well. And it means to do something "just off-hand," where "off-hand" carries connotations of acting in a way unceremoniously, that is, without due care, or, as the *OED* further specifies, "*extempore*" or "*impromptu*." Here, the two terms that I am drawing apart are equated to capture not an impressive skill but a tendency to ride roughshod over a practice or to act in the moment, overly confident that one knows what one is doing every step of the way. Luckily, not all Georges in the world are like this George.

MAKING THE CUT

Since the 1920s, there have been "cutting contests" or "jam" sessions, which nowadays have migrated also into "rap battles." Here, "vying musicians" more or less improvise *extempore*, though the agonistic point is to demonstrate their social and artistic ability to improvise *impromptu*. An individual or group starts with a tune, rhythm, riff, or refrain that the opponent then follows with the aim to do it better. ("Anything you can do, I can do better.") Much of the contest asks for one opponent to fit what the other does, so long as he—and it is usually a he—then improves on the performance.¹⁷ To prove his superiority, a contestant must finally cut the other off, using his instrument or performance "as a knife." The winning move is a moment of improvisation *impromptu* with a twist. One wins by overcoming the previous obstacle laid down by the opponent by responding with an insurmountable obstacle. When the obstacle is insurmountable, the loser either "crashes" in performance or simply gives up and exits the stage. Some call the winning move or wit "the fastest shout"; rappers call it "a flyt," by which they also mean a "poetic insult"—which is what we see perfectly demonstrated, and hear in abundance, in Scott Silver's 2002 film *8 Mile* and justified in the film's parting song, "Lose Yourself":

Look, if you had one shot, or one opportunity
 To seize everything you ever wanted in one moment
 Would you capture it or just let it slip?

...

The whole crowd goes so loud
 He opens his mouth, but the words won't come out

...

He better go capture this moment and hope it don't pass him

...

You better lose yourself in the music, the moment
 You own it, you better never let it go
 You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow

The cutting contest staged in Jeremy Kagan's 1977 film *Scott Joplin* dramatizes a contest among ragtime piano players, but it is immediately preceded by a discussion as to whether playing by ear or writing one's notes down is the better way to proceed in the musical marketplace. Joplin comments that without "note music," he will be excluded from a market that will make him famous. This argument, right for the time when popular sheet music was the way to spread the notes, was almost outdated even then, for the technology of recording made Joplin more famous than any sheet music ever could.¹⁸ John Fusco's 1986 film *Crossroads* turns a cutting-contest between guitarists into a Faustian fight to save a human soul. Here, the musical proficiency is demonstrated by the guitarists as they improvise on the tightrope between musical understanding and devilish technique on two pieces: Mozart's Turkish March and Paganini's Fifth Caprice. Once the contest is won and the soul restored, the music turns to rock. In all these examples, as in the ancient contests, the musical contest of who performs best is saturated by social and moral tests of character, judgment, and desire.

Several descriptions of cutting contests suggest comparisons with other and earlier modes of contest and music-making. One brings them in line with what the Romantics described, after Goethe, as an "elective affinity," a utopian-styled agonistic and sometimes Faustian play between repulsion and attraction. This imagery is still found in contemporary aesthetic theory as well as in chemistry and medicine, where we find (in the latter) talk of "reversible competitive antagonisms" that are produced when cells are blocked or cut off by others. Yet another description conceives of cutting contests as staged as though occurring between musicians or even orchestras that accidentally bump into each other on the road and decide to "duel" or "duke" it out, or, as in cowboy movies, to fight to the death. Here the language often turns toward the animalistic, so that the contests can be described also as "hunts," "chases," or "bucking contests."¹⁹ Although cutting contests may show the cooperative, congenial, or collective aspirations of musicians—of answer and response—they also display all the bloodiness and soul-searching of the ancient, mythic contests.

A CUTTING EDGE

Can or do cutting contests occur also in "classical music" practice? Certainly yes, for there have been many sorts of contests where composers, performers, or groups of musicians have upstaged and unstaged each other in formal and informal situations. Here, again, outwitting each other by word or musical deed has often proved as important as showing oneself the better musician: Rameau versus Rousseau; Mozart versus Salieri. But there is also another sort of cut in a classical contest, where we speak not of musicians cutting each other out, but of the performance having a "cutting edge," a sort of antagonistic *wit* that brings the *work* that is being performed to a perfect *fit*.

In this matter, I once heard the pianist Peter Serkin rhythmically outwitting, almost cutting out, the violinist Pamela Frank, in a deliberately "dissonant" performance of a Bach Violin Sonata. While Pamela Frank played "the straight (wo)man," Peter Serkin competed with her "feeds." Yet the point wasn't for Serkin to win; nor was it, as "accompanist," for him to cover or make up for the violinist's errors or dull performance, for she made none and played very well. The aim, rather, was to defamiliarize a "classic," a well-known or standard(ized) work that we all think we know *prior* to the performance. The art of the great performer is to show that, in some sense, we do not know the work at all without *this* particular performance. Even a classic, and *especially* a classic or standard, needs to be played *in a way not heard before*, if, that is to say, we want to hear the work as though it were being re-created or, better, newly-created in the moment of its performance. Here, the enigmatic quality of being newly-created—*improvised*—cuts across the distinction between improvisation *extempore* and *impromptu*. We aren't deceived into thinking that the performer is really creating the music *from this moment forward*; but nor are we in awe of the performer overcoming an obstacle unless, and this is the point, the obstacle is "the work itself," that is, if the work-concept misleads us into thinking that to perform a work is to perform it just as "it is," as though, as Twain put it, it can't be "improved upon." But the agonistic point of the performance is precisely to show that without the performance, and without *each particular* performance, the "work" might be "perfect" but its perfection will remain silent and reach no ear.

Another example of how an agonistic wit may enter an exemplary performance of a work comes from 1969. Preserved as a film clip on *YouTube*, five great musicians are warming up to perform Schubert's *Trout Quintet*: Jacqueline Du Pré, Daniel Barenboim, Pinchas Zuckerman, Itzhak Perlman, and Zubin Mehta. We see them swapping their instruments and beginning to play, compliant with the score but with an extreme infidelity or unfit of pitch. Yet the slightly competitive wit of their musicianship wins the moment. They give us a perfect sense of what is to come, the combined wit and fit of a perfect performance of a work. This is not an example of improvisation *extempore*; it is closer to improvisation *impromptu* although it's not exactly that either. It's more an *impromptu* preparation for a performance for which they are completely prepared. In this in-between conceptual space, it makes sense to see these musicians as having done

something “improvised” behind the scenes that reduces the tension and makes them laugh, a laughter that then becomes a smile carried over in Du Pré’s bodily comportment into the public performance, for which, as Mehta reminds them as they are about to go on, “there’s a serious public waiting outside!”²⁰

WITNESSING A PUBLIC ACT

Improvisation *impromptu* situates persons in unforeseen circumstances and confronts them with unexpected obstacles. It asks what one does “in the moment,” and the question has normative weight. By stressing the element of mishap, where there is a sudden deficiency or lack, the concept asks for a quick recovery. One might say that the concept is all about not screwing or covering up in a situation of pressure, or of not running off the stage when we have stage fright. Yet these thoughts don’t by themselves capture what I think lies at the core of the agonistic concept: namely, its publicity. Of course public actions or matters of exhibition or display are tied to inner obstacles or unconscious wars that persons fight with themselves, but actions of improvisation *impromptu* are typically tied to what is also witnessed by others. At times when we do witness persons overcoming their inner fear, we tend to respond with relief, with a “phew!” When, however, we go to witness an act of improvisation *impromptu*, we want something more. As the eighteenth century distinction has it: we want and need, as witnesses to the act, not merely the *phew* but also the *awe*.²¹

Quintilian saw public speaking as carrying an ekphrastic significance and responsibility, especially in a court of law, to render *compelling* or *persuasive* something *visible* to an audience in a performance, “before their very eyes,” or, more accurately, “before their mind’s eye,” so that, with Derrida, the “mind’s eye” or imagination would be set into motion, but where this means less an aesthetic free-play than a freeing-up or unbinding of our thought and emotion.²² Derrida construed the publicity by addressing again the extreme difficulty or almost “impossibility” of “improvisation.” Where “there is improvisation,” he said, “I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it’s what I will see, no, I won’t see it. It’s for others to see.”

Often, as we have seen, improvisation *impromptu* means “going for broke”—showing that one is prepared to go somewhere or take a way out for which others are not prepared. Sometimes it means creating an obstacle in return that one’s opponent cannot surmount. But, from the perspective of reception, it is about visibly or audibly overcoming an obstacle, to show “the victory” as evident to all. This way, it thrills, causing an audience to gasp, to applaud spontaneously, to proclaim the victor without doubt. Etymologically, “to surprise” is to “take hold of” or “affect” somebody else by something unexpected. When an audience is unexpectedly well taken, it affirms the act or performance. When ill taken, it might appreciate many other things but not “that certain thing.”

When improvisation *impromptu* goes well, the performer might well say “I couldn’t have done other than improvise, but what I did turned out to be exactly the right thing to do.” Here, there is a feeling both of contingency and necessity felt by both the performer and the audience. When the performer says, “This is what I *had* to do given the situation in which I found myself,” the words evidence an alertness: that the performer was ready to act in response to anything that might happen, even though the performer couldn’t have thought out the solution in advance because she or he didn’t know the obstacle in advance. The not-knowing is what Derrida meant by the blindness. In improvising *impromptu*, unlike in improvising *extempore*, the not-knowing is threefold: we do not know that we will have to improvise at all, or how we will improvise when we do have to improvise, and we do not know how our improvising will turn out, although, if well-trained, we might well feel secure that we will indeed know how to employ our wit to make the right fit. All this not-knowing is quite different from the ignorant George, the dilettante who, improvising “off the cuff,” offers, as we also say, only a band-aid to cover the wound. When one acts badly like this, one might well meet with a moral stare from the audience suggesting that one’s act was dishonest, deceitful, even artless—which it was. Here, we may say, one is literally caught out in the act.

DOING IT THE WRONG WAY

We come now to another example, not of *impromptu* performance but of *impromptu* judgment. It shows not performers acting badly as much as the audience or responders who fail to get the point of the performance. To an extent, this example mirrors what goes on in the Apollo Theater. When amateurs don’t perform as others think they should, they are “executed,” only now they actually lose their lives. In this example, the execution shows no wit, no fit, and no etiquette as befits the Apollo Theater. It shows, rather, the impotence and rage of an *impromptu* or ill-considered response of “judges” to something they witness on the stage. It has little to be said in its favor.

A *New York Times* editorial of February 7, 2010, reported six cases from the Philippines of karaoke performers who were killed for singing Frank Sinatra’s song “My Way.” The matter was so severe that singing the song was banned. Norimitsu Onishi, the reporter, asked if there was something sinister in the song, something offensively associated with the West, or something about the song’s renown that caused the audience to react as it did. The last explanation was preferred. Because the song was so familiar and popular among those who frequented the karaoke club, only the performance was judged, not the song itself. Indeed, this fits the very idea of karaoke: that anyone, whatever their talent or training, is both free to and meant to improvise on a well-known song *in their own way, not heard before*. What, then, accounts for the killing? A deflated explanation suggests that the performers were killed simply for singing “out of tune”; a more complex explanation says that they were somehow singing “the wrong notes,” that how they sang

the song was “the wrong way” to sing it. Onishi read this latter explanation, agonistically, as a mode of “triumphalism.”

Consider the matter this way. I go to a karaoke club to hear how others sing a familiar song *their way*, yet I believe that *my way* of singing the song is better, maybe even the best or the *only way*. So convinced am I of my own way that I execute those who sing the song in a different way. In this way, I transgress the etiquette of the club: *to each her own way*. The transgression sometimes results in real physical violence. In this case, it is the audience that acts badly, even belligerently, and not the performer, but significantly because the audience is constituted by overly-competitive performers. But killing a competing performer on the spot is not how one proves or shows that one’s own way to sing “I did it my way” is the better way. It would be much better to take one’s competitor on with a song.

IN AND OUT OF THE GROOVE

The account that best captures the positive moral, social, and existential connotations of improvisation *impromptu* is the one that Gilbert Ryle offered in his article of 1976.²³ Though he titled his piece “Improvisation,” he started not with this term but with the associated term, “innovation,” to remind his readers of the admiration and envy that most of us feel toward those who are innovative and who, by being innovative, produce innovative products. He offered a list of qualitative terms associated with character, temperament, and personality—“imaginative, inventive, enterprising, inquisitive, ingenious, witty, cunning, observant, responsive, alert or creative”—and then a list of productive terms associated with the ability to “compose, design, experiment, initiate, select, adapt, improvise, undertake, contrive, explore, parry, or speculate.” To include the term *improvise* in the second list, as only a passing mention, was a little odd given that “improvisation” was meant to be the overall concept of his enquiry. But perhaps it was his way of alerting his readers to the possibility that, in addition to the broader concept, there is a narrower concept: when, in my terms, we improvise *impromptu*. Ryle did not make explicit the distinction between the narrower and broader concept, but went on instead to address improvisation mostly as a mode of innovation and ingenuity so that he could capture the difference he believed it makes in human life if we cross a river, climb a ladder, or pursue a philosophical train of thought only carefully, step-by-step, or by means also of one or more larger, inspired leaps—*impromptu*. Of what value, he wanted to know, is the ability to think and to act with a certain blindness, without having thought everything out in advance? In part he showed the value by writing his essay *about* improvisation as though he had improvised it “off the cuff”—yet he wrote it not out of “mere sociability,” as Schlegel put it, but with a typically British “cuttingness” of wit drawn on the basis of his considerable experience of doing philosophy in his “ordinary language” sort of way. Though he maintained a cheerfulness of description, behind the scenes was a harsh criticism of those to whom these cheerful terms did not apply.

Having made two lists, of characteristics and abilities, Ryle now listed the sort of exemplary persons who are admired for being able to move beyond habits without reaching the extremes of eccentricity or craziness. He named the “geniuses,” “pathfinders,” “jaywalkers,” those of high wit and swift repartee, and those whose intelligence enables them “to seize new opportunities and to face new hazards.” To illustrate these types, he alluded to a verse, often quoted in discussions of freedom and determinism, and sometimes attributed to Maurice E. Hare: that these exemplary persons are not trams, whose lifelines are carved out on the street in advance; they are rather busses for whom their life passages are (more) open. Here is one version of the verse:

There was a young man who said “Damn!
I perceive with regret that I am
But a creature that moves
In predestinate grooves
I’m not even a bus, I’m a tram.”

Having started out on the conceptual path of “innovation,” Ryle ended up in the company of persons whom, as he wrote, “every hour of the waking day,” or “every day of the week” engage perhaps “familiar and unafraid sorts of improvisation.” Following Nietzsche, it sounds like an exhausting way to live life! Yet Ryle’s point was only to remind us that in doing, thinking, and writing, we “essay” (from *essai*) solely because we are (or are meant to be) thinking beings. Those who think by following the “groove,” in contrast to those who “groove” while thinking, are those who believe that we act, think and write solely from a pre-packaged mechanism or pattern. Explicitly recalling Wittgenstein and Chomsky, Ryle offered an analogy to the mechanism or technology of music. We shouldn’t think of ourselves, he argued, as outputting or reproducing an internal and constantly-spinning gramophone record. For what the assumption of such a mental “mechanicalness” prohibits is a “freshness,” “Ad-Hockery,” or willingness to turn or move *in the moment* in unexpected ways. To allow ourselves to improvise is to open ourselves up to the “cleverness” of “the caricaturist or conversationalist” or the “adroitness,” as he put it, of a “dialectical” thinker or “fencer.”

Ryle noted that when persons act or think on their feet, we tend to ask them not what they have done but “how on earth” they got from A to B. And typically their answer is that they don’t know, that the movement or thought just came to them, that it was unrehearsed, “on-the-spur-of-the-moment.” But how, he then asked, do we assess or judge their actions? Should we hold them responsible given that what they did was not “intended” in the sense of premeditated, but nor again was it merely accidental? Their acts, rather, were the outcome of a wit, a style, a certain “presence of mind.” But how does one lay down the criteria for judging all this? Ryle did not pursue this intriguing question of judgment; he jumped instead to what it means to move by unpredictable leaps and bounds. Here, he might have well drawn on Aesop’s fable of the competing tortoise and hare, but he didn’t do this either because he was finally most concerned with the *impromptu* characteristic of a sort of “detective” work, where, with all the evidence

before one and with no new evidence forthcoming, one cannot at first see the solution and then, *suddenly*, one sees it—in *the moment*. But from this, he didn't then further articulate his idea of improvisation, as I have, as an *act* of improvising (*impromptu*); he saw it only as evidence of a *quality* or *characteristic* that persons exhibit when they have the wit, ingenuity, nerves, or luck enough to allow the unexpected to happen to enter into what they do or think—everyday.

CHALLENGING COMPLIANCE

When I first read Ryle's essay a few years ago, I was writing about Nelson Goodman's thesis of perfect compliance, the strict condition that preserves the identity of a musical work through its many performances. Perfect compliance along the tram tracks is required, Goodman had argued, to prevent an identification of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* with *Three Blind Mice*, an identification that follows, logically, if we allow one, two, three . . . non-compliant elements or errors to enter into a performance of a work.²⁴ Having once been very absorbed by why, in discussing the ontological status of musical works, Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* is most usually selected by philosophers as the paradigmatic example, I was now asking why Goodman had selected *Three Blind Mice* as where we might end up if we take the wrong bus. It turned out that there were many fascinating reasons, including one suggested by Ryle. When, in an academic "epidemic of initialization," as he put it, we abbreviate phrases—as when *Three Blind Mice* becomes *TBM*—we eventually become blinded to what the words once meant—all the ordinary words that Ryle had put into his lists. But had Goodman, I then asked, really been taken in by this epidemic? Not as much as he has been accused of by those who have rejected his perfect compliance. In specifying so exact or strict a condition, Goodman had insisted that he was concerned only to preserve the *identity* of the work: all that made the work aesthetic, innovative, qualitatively exciting in its performance was another matter, lying beyond questions of identity. Whereas, with the later Wittgenstein, Ryle tried to capture the qualitative content of improvisation by appealing to extraordinary examples of ordinary things, Goodman, with the early Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, put the aesthetic matter outside the scope of what strictly could be accounted for by logical means. But in both cases, the result was the same that singing it, as George does, just as the notes say need not exclude improvisation as a quality of performance.

BROKEN STRINGS

I conclude this essay with a single example that pulls all the threads that I have introduced together into an uneasy image of epidemic blindness or prejudice that is at once both musical and social. Through a son's act of improvising *impromptu*, a blindness is

revealed to a father who cannot see. The son's act is necessitated by a broken string; the father's blindness is signified by a broken arm. The father is so obedient to the classical work-concept that he cannot see a space for a way of making music differently, his music or anyone else's. He is especially blinded to the improvisational quality of swinging with one's notes. The story doesn't, however, ask us to take sides with one sort of music against another, but nor does it say that we should not take sides. It rather shows us the danger of taking sides for the wrong reasons. This is not a new point, but, as the example shows, it resurfaces as urgent whenever conceptual strings are pulled to the wrong extremes. Consistent with the aim of critique—and with the concept of improvisation *impromptu* placed at its core—the example aims to break the thickest string of all: unwarranted prejudice.

Broken Strings is the title of a Harlem Renaissance film, directed by Bernard B. Ray and starring Clarence Muse, an actor suitably named given the film's subject matter.²⁵ (There is "suitable" naming throughout the film.) It opens with the father, Arthur Williams, performing a piece of standard virtuoso violin music before an all-black audience in a concert hall. The audience is mostly enthralled, though the camera focuses twice on a person who sleeps. A hint is given that the classical work-music Williams is performing, or how he is performing, is not to the liking of all (black people). The concert ends with Williams telling the audience of the special "kinship" he feels with "my folks," although usually he plays for "the [white] people of the world." The tension is deepened when, later, his manager tells an enthusiastic fan from the local church that Williams does not play for free even for "his folk," and that his fee remains at a thousand dollars. Williams's son, Johnny, is standing nearby and asks to carry his father's violin home while his father goes off with his manager. While driving the father away in a car, the manager becomes distracted. There is a crash leaving the father with a broken arm and hand.

Weeks later, the cast is removed, but the nerve damage remains. Williams is "reduced" to teaching. One pupil is talentless and is thrown out. The second, Dickey Morley, is disciplined but overly compliant. The third is his young son, Johnny, who is undisciplined but entirely talented. The father is frustrated: his "great soul" no longer has an outlet. So he puts his hope in his son. However, the outlet Johnny desires is one that demands neither "repose" nor "control," but demands that one "play" as a bird flies, "this way and that, up and down . . . ringing and swinging through the air." He wants to play "just music" (as though there were something that was "just music"), but illustrates his desire by "swinging" on an already given work: Dvořák's "Humoresque." His father thinks only of the work and not the swing, and accuses his son of "desecrating a classic," and more, of "committing a crime against music."

A parallel drama involves Williams's daughter, suitably named Gracie, who loves one man but not another, leading the unloved to enter into a contest with the beloved. The contest is lost by the unloved because he cheats. Being a sore loser, he acts badly, leaving his father, a Mr. Stilton, the owner (suitably) of a beauty products store, having to put things right.²⁶ With Gracie jobless and her father bitter, the family falls into poverty. Johnny takes matters into his own hands and goes busking with his accompanist Mary

in the swing clubs. He will use the money earned to feed his family and to pay for an operation that might save his father's musical hand. He receives enthusiastic applause in the "Mellow Café," where his "humoresque" keeps everyone on their toes (dancing), including a very tall, thin, and talented banjo player named Stringbean Johnson. The café is a high-class establishment with standards that Johnny meets, until his father arrives to haul him off the stage. His father punishes him, forcing him to play scales for "twenty hours if need be" until "the spirit of jazz" is "driven out of him." Gracie arrives home, Johnny collapses, and the father is scolded. Gracie declares: "Johnny did all this for you!"

The drama's moment of recognition but uneasy reconciliation comes when Mr. Stilton offers a cash prize for an amateur radio contest, for those who never before have had "the opportunity to express themselves." The contest is introduced with a demonstration at the piano, to urge that, whatever music is performed, it should be true to the expression of its mood. "There is beauty in all music," we are told: music "is the international language," after which the introducer demonstrates how different musics express joy. But apparently music is not a "universal" language for everyone to enjoy equally. Reiterating the idea of a special kinship or affinity, he notes that "We [of the black race] are considered one of the most musical people on earth, because we have suffered." His statements are for us, but immediately for Arthur Williams, who is nervously perched in the front row of the live radio audience wondering how his son will perform the classical "mazurka" he has promised his father he will play.

The contest begins with three little muses—the Stevens Sisters—singing and tapping popular fox trots, and then Stringbean Johnson performing on his banjo a piece that he says he first heard Arthur Williams play—only now it is "jazzed" up. Third to go is Dickey Morley, who plays (appropriately) a tarantella, for when, again backstage, he takes a knife and cuts the strings of Johnny's violin almost to a breaking point. When Johnny, going last, begins to play his mazurka, he begins on the G string. It snaps and he looks forlorn. The audience gasps then laughs, which inspires him to go on—until the D string snaps. With two strings left, he can no longer play the piece compliantly, and starts to swing. Soon enough the backup orchestra and everyone else join in, showing that he is the obvious winner. His father applauds with vigor enough to bring the nerves in his hand back to life. Still fearful of his father, the son apologizes: it was "the only honest way out." Dickey apologizes to Johnny for having cheated. And Williams declares that although his "heart still belongs to the Masters"—(which Masters?)—it is swing that has mended his strings. "Look," he says, taking back his violin from his son, "what swing has done for me!"

But has Williams, or the film, accepted "swing" as a legitimate music? Yes, though not at the expense of the music "of the Masters." The point is not to decide between musics, but between persons who are stuck in their ways—trammed up—and persons who are open to "swinging" on whatever bus they take, for, as one song goes, nothing means "a thing if it ain't got that swing."

This rather obvious point assumes more subtlety only when we note that when confronted with broken strings, Johnny does two things at once: he improvises

impromptu and he begins to swing or improvise *extempore* on the melody of the mazurka. But for which is he rewarded or more rewarded? Would he have won had Dickey not cut his strings: would he have played his mazurka well? Or would he have performed without inspiration, preferring to play another sort of music? The film does not answer these questions. Instead, it shows us the awe of an audience who sees Johnny turning an obstacle into an advantage. To be sure, the audience moves to the swing, but, in the end, it is his act of improvisation *impromptu* that wins him the contest: that he could accommodate an obstacle or injury in a way that his father had not been able to do.

This conclusion has precedents, one of the first being in Pindar's twelfth *Pythian Ode* where words sung in the Dorian mode told of a contest in which, when the mouthpiece of Midas of Akragas's pipe broke off, he played on. And then it is said that his act "so surprised the audience," that "he was declared the winner." But what he played or how he played was not described. He seems to have been rewarded for his ability to improvise a solution *impromptu*, for this said something about him as a "musical"—muse-inspired person—beyond his being merely a performing musician. There are many more stories of this sort, perhaps the best known but also the most double-edged regarding the broken strings of Paganini's violin. Paganini cut his own strings to show his divine hand and for the latter, he was praised as being godlike. But staging the event repeatedly to impress his audience, he renders the apparent obstacle no real obstacle at all. For the deception, he was compared to the devil.

In the end, broken strings, arms, minds, and bodies have no value in themselves. They only provide opportunities to act or to keep on acting, or to stop acting. In the musical contests, new and old, it isn't only the music played that has counted but also, and sometimes more, what has been shown about the performers or actors as musicians, artists, and thinkers. Put like this, however, a conceptual critique of improvisation that looks at contests in art and life to reveal what is best about ourselves risks a sort of blind utopianism not much better than what Ryle described as an epidemic of academic initialism. If improvisation shows us at our best, it also shows us at our worst. If, therefore, I have urged a distinction between improvisation *impromptu* and improvisation *extempore* in order to open up a conceptual and musical space to let more music and more persons into the arena, I conclude on a different note: with a recommendation that we take from my argument less the distinction than the complex descriptions of how the terms, improvisation *impromptu* and improvisation *extempore*, have done their work, and continue to do their work, apart and together, in situations that only ever seem ordinary but never really are.

NOTES

1. Cf. Edward Ferrero, *The Art of Dancing* (New York: Ferrero, 1859), 27.
2. Richard Carlin, ed., *Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing: The Apollo Theater and American Entertainment* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2010).

3. I have treated the plight of musicians and the musical art in several recent companion essays, for example, in my manuscript, "All Art Constantly Aspires to the Condition of Music, Except the Art of Music." The present essay is written for George Lewis, whose own work on improvisation, thought and performed, I admire greatly. Thanks also to the many friends and colleagues who have commented on this essay: most especially to Bernard Gendron, Felix Koch, Marlies de Munck, Erum Naqvi, and Beau Shaw.
4. Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, tr. W.H.S. Jones (Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press, 1934): 10.30.8.
5. I have outlined the terms of this discourse in my *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1992] 2007), esp. chapter 8.
6. This notion of critique is drawn most explicitly from the work of Theodor W. Adorno, whose ideas of improvisation, risk, and experimentalism I have treated in "Explosive Experiments and the Fragility of the Experimental," in *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 108–135.
7. Cf. Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 168.
8. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1878): "Of no use are [those] who study to do exactly as was done before, who can never understand that today is a new day. . . . We want [persons] of original perception and original action, who can open their eyes wider than to a nationality . . . ; [persons] of elastic, [persons] of moral mind, who can live in the moment and take a step forward." *Fortune of the Republic* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood and Co., 1879), 35.
9. I am drawing in this section from sections 22, 303, and 295 of Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
10. Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 20–39.
11. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, ed. Daniel Javitch (New York: Norton, 2002), 32.
12. Cf. Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, tr. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), esp. 11, 24.
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
14. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, tr. Harold Edgeworth Butler (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 10.7.1. See also Chris Holcomb, "The Crown of All Our Study: Improvisation in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 53–72.
15. Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 2.11.4 and 2.12.9.
16. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 119–123.
17. Cf. Philip Alperson, "Musical Improvisation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 273–299.
18. In the present essay, I do not treat, for reasons of space, the enormous impact of recording technology on concepts of improvisation, other than indirectly later in the essay, when a distinction is drawn between an open and a mechanical mind.
19. See Jurgen E. Grandt, *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), chapter 4.

20. In his *Philosophy of the Performing Arts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), chapter 8, David Davies draws the concept of improvisation into contact with that of a rehearsal. The discussion is focused on the work of preparation or bringing constraints to a performance of any type of music. To this discussion, one may add the thought that all the revision and decision making that goes on behind the scenes is precisely that which is not shown as such in the public performance, but which is turned into a demonstration of "perfect" fit and wit.
21. Deborah Brown, "What Part of 'Know' Don't You Understand?" *The Monist* 88, no. 1 (January 2005): 11–35.
22. Cf. my related account of ekphrasis in "How to Do More with Words: Two Views of (Musical) Ekphrasis," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50, no. 4 (October 2010): 389–410.
23. Gilbert Ryle, "Improvisation," *Mind* 85, no. 337 (January 1976): 69–83.
24. Lydia Goehr, "Three Blind Mice: Goodman, McLuhan, and Adorno on the Art of Music and Listening in the Age of Global Transmission," *New German Critique* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 1–31.
25. Krin Gabbard persuasively connects this work to the 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer*. See Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 108–109. But one might also connect it to Krenek's opera *Jonny spielt auf*, also of 1927.
26. In this double drama, over music and love, the film interestingly mirrors the complex agonisms of Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, agonisms that I have explored in "—wie ihn uns Meister Dürer gemalt!": Contest, Myth, and Prophecy in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 60, no. 1 (2011): 51–118.

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CHAPTER 27

ENSEMBLE IMPROVISATION,
COLLECTIVE INTENTION,
AND GROUP ATTENTION

GARRY L. HAGBERG

EVERY performer knows, I think, that there is a difference of a fundamental kind between performing solo and performing in an ensemble. Similarly, performers in ensembles who have performed both non-improvisational and improvisational music know there is a fundamental difference in kind there as well. On the level of embodied action, these differences are fairly evident. But the articulation of them—that is, articulation with the kind of detail sufficient to both the nuances and the depth of the actual phenomenology in question—is a more difficult matter, and interestingly so.

One of the first models for ensemble performance that presents itself is that of the social contract: the collective is no more than a convergence of individuals who, *as individuals first*, choose one at a time to join a group that offers benefits (in our case musical) that expand what the individual could create alone, in exchange for a corresponding reduction in individual or autonomous freedom. The violist in a string quartet agrees to play under—in terms of both pitch and authority—the first violinist, and that violist (like the other players) has by virtue of the musical-social contract an obligation to play with (in tempo, articulation, phrasing, timbre, line shaping, and overall interpretation) the collective will of the other players.

What is of central interest here for present considerations is that, in the ensemble variant of the social contract model, the individual, *as individual* (in political and ontological terms), is present and intact from start to finish. If the collective authority, or Hobbes's Leviathan, turns and starts working against the individual's interests, the individual—always present as one atom in a collective organization—counters that turn by resisting, rebelling, or removing. And on this model, the entire content of the collective is simply the sum of the individuals combined. And there—exactly there—lies the rub.