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The Participant Belongs to the Play: The Ethical Dimensions of Improvised Music

Abstract

In this chapter, I explore the ethical dimension of improvised music via an engagement with Gadamer's conception of the artwork as *event*. In particular, I suggest that the practice of improvised music offers a direction back to a collective experience that previously was the domain of ritual. This experience, which I will convey via parallels between Gadamer's work and the anthropology of Victor Turner, coloured with descriptions by practicing improvisers, suggests extensions of subjectivity and agency beyond the human individual – both with other listeners, and with the other-than-human elements of the performance.

I argue that the improvised musical or artistic event is a *fractal* phenomenon in which we play out the ethical relationships of our broader forms-of-life on a microcosmic scale. In important ways, then, participation in improvised art can contribute to a re-interpretation of how we relate to others, and offers paths to how we might live out what Heidegger called an 'original' ethics, sharing in the world's unfolding by actively letting others be. Such a re-understanding can, I conclude, help us clarify our enmeshment with the other-than-human, as well as the value of artistic practice as a form of philosophy.

* * *

***Violinist*:** Listening is a huge part of improvising,
I think it's even more important than playing.[1]

Music goes to the heart of human being. There are no human cultures without a place for music and song, and from the most ancient times – back past the Greek epic poets, past the Vedic hymns of India, perhaps even past the chanted tales of the Australian Aboriginal songlines – music has been entwined with knowledge and the sacred. We are self-interpreting animals, and across time and place, since time immemorial, music has served as a vehicle of that interpretation.

In this chapter, I discuss music's hermeneutic role by exploring Hans-Georg Gadamer's conception of the artwork as *event*. In particular, I suggest that – as art has replaced the role of ritual in our society, in a movement that also brought a narrowing of subjectivity from the collective to the individual – the practice of improvised music offers a direction back to a collective experience that previously was the domain of ritual. This experience, which I will convey via parallels between Gadamer's work and the anthropology of Victor Turner, coloured with descriptions by practicing improvisers, suggests extensions of subjectivity and agency beyond the human individual – both with other listeners, and with the other-than-human elements of the performance – yet without recourse to the supernatural.

Taking a cue from François Laruelle, I will argue that the improvised musical or artistic event is a *fractal* phenomenon that can be understood not just as an analogy for social interaction, but as an enclosed and microcosmic event that encapsulates our broader ethical dealings. But more importantly, art provides a space in which such dealings can be experienced, developed, and reflected across timescales. Thus, the modern artistic event and the pre-modern ritual event can be seen as species of the same collective hermeneutic experience, a temporary attunement with something greater than oneself, and grounding one's broader experience of being in the world.

1 All musicians quoted in this chapter are experienced professional improvisors who participated in workshops and phenomenological interviews as part of the *(Musical) Improvisation & Ethics* artistic research project.

Finally, I explicate these points by expanding on Gadamer's (1986a, 45) brief discussion of rhythm, where he argues that the phenomenon exemplifies the way in which we temporally relate to what is *in-between*. I will suggest that what is true of the musical event is a refraction of our relationships in life more broadly. In important ways, then, participation in improvised art can contribute to a re-interpretation of how we interact with others, and offers paths to reconnect with experiences and understandings that have been suppressed in the Modern era, but without trying to go 'back' to an imagined past. Such a re-understanding suggests how we might live out what Heidegger called an 'original' ethics, sharing in the world's unfolding by actively letting others be, and, I conclude, help us understand who we are in our enmeshment with the other-than-human, and the value of artistic practice as a form of philosophy.

1. Music and Ethics

What does it mean today to think of music as *hermeneutical*? Hermeneutics speaks of the ethical, of the full context and meaning of human life. How exactly is music *ethical*? For all its apparent universality, it could be that music is perhaps merely *adjacent* to ethics – a useful mnemonic tool, perhaps, for knowledge that could be expressed some other way. We can imagine forms-of-life without music, and certain ethical systems – like Plato's *Republic* (2012, 172), but also real-life systems like those of the Puritans or the Taliban – have indeed tried to minimise or suppress the role of music in everyday life. But these exceptions and their always-only-partial successes point us back toward the thought that there is something in music that is inextricable from human life and practice.

So to assume music does *not* have an ethical dimension raises perhaps as many questions as assuming that it does. It could be that music's very ubiquity – like that of art more generally – tempts us to separate it out from the ethical, and to place it into a distinct sphere of 'aesthetics.' But this tendency to separate and distil – to abstract and universalise – belongs itself to a distinctly Modern ethic, to an understanding of the world that seeks to transcend its own situatedness, and to categorise thought, practice, and phenomena independently of all temporal and topological locations.

In such a schema, ethics and aesthetics *do* occupy distinctly different spheres. Kant (1987, 261 §28; cf. §§51-54), for example, subordinated artistic beauty and feeling to nature and reason, and was famously disinterested in music. And indeed, from a traditional Kantian standpoint, the diversity of situated artistic practices – traditional and modern – offer few clues towards a place-less or universal categorical imperative. By contrast, Jeff Malpas (*forthcoming*, 13) points us to Heidegger's (1977a, 235) call for an 'original' or *originary* ethics. An originary ethics, argues Malpas, asks about the *situated*; not just about phenomena and forms-of-life, but about those phenomena- and lives-in-*place*. That music is found across times, spaces, and cultures does not therefore mean that there is something *universal* in any particular form of music itself. By contrast, music always happens *somewhere*. It is the music of a *place* – which for Malpas means not simply a spatial location, but the entire historical and cultural location that enables a form-of-life. Music's forms and practices have everywhere rich histories that are inextricable from the milieux in which they are found, and their continual practice drives an evolution to which they themselves evolve in response.

The placed-ness of musical practice therefore offers us a route towards understanding its ethical dimension. As Nancy (1999, 15) argues, originary ethics is not a search for fundamental rules (on which we might base a moral system) but an activity – the activity of *making sense* of our lives, of

our place in the world. We make sense by *thinking*. But thinking here takes on an inclusive sense that is not contraposed to the 'practical' but rather encompasses all that actively "brings into play" the sense of Being (*ibid*, 15-6). Music, I therefore hold, – as active, collective sense-making – is therefore a particularly salient exemplar of ethics in action.

In order to understand the ethical dimension of music (and perhaps the musical dimension of ethics), our task is not therefore to uncover some 'essence' of music that can be mapped onto or fused with an abstract ethical schema. Rather, our answers are to be found within the unfolding practice itself. And while the account I develop may be applicable to all forms of music, I focus in this chapter on *improvised* music, since the key ethical features I identify – listening, responsiveness, and recognition – become particularly visible in the context of improvisation.[2] By looking at what such situated musical practices respond to – and how they shape us – we will begin to understand how they contribute to our *form-of-life* – to the who, how, and why we are what we become.

2. Gadamer, Art, and Fractal Thinking

In order to understand music as active, ethical sense-making, it will be helpful to turn first to Gadamer, so as to more clearly understand the centrality of the artistic event in placing us within the particular form-of-life that shapes and is shaped by our ethics. Although Gadamer had long held that musical performance shared its interpretive structure with other forms of art and dialogue, he never, as Benson (2003, xiv) notes, applied his thinking to a hermeneutics of music itself. Even where many scholars of improvisation (e.g., Monson 1997, Sawyer 2005) have posited a 'conversational' model of musical co-creativity, it is only recently that McAuliffe (2021) has framed such conversations in explicitly hermeneutic terms – that is, not as two individuals communicating information in some mutually-intelligible 'code,' but as an ongoing refinement of shared understanding, guided around a common focus of concern.

In such hermeneutic accounts, a central role is given to the artwork itself, which in important senses is party to the dialogue. In his well-known essay *The Relevance of the Beautiful: Art as Play, Symbol and Festival*, Gadamer (1986a) argues that the work of art is not merely an object for admiration or diversion, but an *event* that gathers to itself materials and interpreters, bringing them into a shared, dialogic experience. But to fully appreciate the ethical (and fractal) significance of the improvised event, it is important to consider the ways in which *all* of its participants – not just the performers, but the audience as well as the particular place in which they are gathered into dialogue with the Work (Gadamer 2013, 120).

This collective dialogue brings with it a distinct form of temporality that Gadamer (1986a, 42) contrasts with the everyday and that he names festive or "autonomous" time (*Eigenzeit* – literally, its 'own time'). Gadamer's invocation of the sacred here is of course deliberate, and is expanded in a related lecture (1986b, 58), where he traces the origin of art to its ritual character (cf. Gadamer 2013, 126-7; 1986a, 12, 39). The modern practice of separating art into its own particular sphere – to be experienced in galleries, theatres, or concert halls – is a relatively recent and primarily western development. Pre-Modern painting and sculpture, for example, were used above all to adorn places of worship or as political or domestic invocations of the divine. Greek theatre developed out of

2 Of course, improvisation is a broad term, and there are countless improvisatory practices across the world's musical cultures. This chapter was written in the context of working with contemporary European free and free jazz improvisors, but I expect that its core arguments are applicable to other forms of music. Indeed, Benson (2003, 82) has argued that *all* music is improvised to some degree, since even the most precise scores require active interpretation and responsive awareness to each performed moment.

religious processions, and the folk and mystery plays of the Middle Ages brought communities together to mark moments of the liturgical season (Brockett & Hildy 2002, 80-6).

In all cases, artworks were woven into broader interpretive structures, central to the social transmission of lore and values. The gothic cathedral – the "*Biblia Pauperum*" as Gadamer (1986a, 2) calls it – formed a key node in an ongoing cultural dialogue, an interpretation of Judaeo-Christian myths and legends into colloquial West European understanding. In a similar but livelier way, the Indian *Ramlila* plays bring together professional and amateur actors into a participatory performance of the *Ramayana*, transmitting their society's idealised virtues through the tales of the heroes that bore them.

There was no 'art-for-art's-sake' in such pre-secular events; even *objets d'art* were not mere 'objects,' but infused with the talismanic or totemic power of spirits, saints, or ancestors. The encounter with such objects subtly offers a constant and a pre-articulated reminder of one's place in the world, and by coming to know such an object and interacting with its significance, one comes to understand and embody the values of a society. As Taylor (2016, 44) observes, it is through the process of learning to bow that we come to understand more abstract concepts like 'respect,' not the other way around. In the same way, by kissing an icon, lighting a stick of incense, or tying a ribbon to a rowan branch, we learn to attend to the broader networks of life and history in which we are embedded, and to embody attitudes of gratitude, hope, or respect.

Yet such everyday encounters with the divine-through-art are themselves small echoes of a fuller encounter, traditionally mediated through the shared rituals of the *festival*. A festival is, for Gadamer (1986a, 40), a *gathering*, not just of people but of *intention*. It marks a departure from the "normal, pragmatic experience of time" (*ibid*, 41), raising "the participants out of their everyday existence and elevat[ing] them into a kind of universal communion" (Gadamer 1986b, 60). Gadamer therefore – significantly, as we shall see – likens the festival to a ritual experience, to an entry into a form-of-life that is both temporary and yet which reaches beyond itself; self-sufficient, yet resonating with and through the everyday.

Like Gadamer's other two descriptions of art – 'play' and 'symbol' – the festival has a *fractal* quality. 'Fractal' here refers to the "regularity of irregular and fragmented patterns," as borrowed from the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot by the philosopher of improvisation Randy Fertel (2022, 278), to describe how forms of (co-)agency at different levels of complexity may nevertheless be recognisable and understandable in each other's terms. Laruelle (2011, 30-1) has argued that the fractal offers a path to understanding identity in a way that is nevertheless not a logical relation (cf. Mullarkey 2012, 146). Fractal thinking forms a core motif of what Laruelle (2010) calls 'non-philosophy.' This is in no way an 'anti-philosophy,' but an approach that considers philosophy just one possibility among multiple modes of thinking, which also include art, technology, and science (Mullarkey & Smith 2012, 2), and thus shares much with Nancy's (199, 15-6) reading of Heidegger's 'thinking,' mentioned above. While Laruelle criticises Heidegger's emphasis on language – and would therefore be would be wary Gadamer's use of *hermeneutics* and *interpretation* – there remain important parallels between the thinkers for our purposes here, especially insofar as they link philosophy and art as mutually-supportive modes in our collective process of sense-making or 'working it all out.'

For Laruelle in particular, it is important to stress that no mode of thinking simply *reflects* the Real, as a mirror is supposed to perfectly represent reality. Rather, each *refracts* it through a particular lens (Mullarkey & Smith 2012, 9). Art's mode of truth therefore neither could nor should be expected to conform to the binary or sequential logics of philosophy. Art can demonstrate different

relationships of parts to wholes simultaneously, and even where it unfolds narratively, its meaning can be shaped and changed, and only made sense of as a whole.

Thinking fractally, we can see that Gadamer's conception of art-as-festival does not simply 'reflect' or 'represent' but *refracts* and enacts an entire form-of-life on a condensed and enclosed scale. Gadamer's (1986a, 13) holistic understanding of art is made clear from the beginning of his essay *On the Relevance of the Beautiful*, where he suggests that the work of art is that which has no higher purpose than its own being. This is not to say, however, that the artwork is a 'mere' aesthetic object, produced simply for enjoyment or entertainment. To the contrary, it suggests that art itself is a 'form-of-life' – in a certain (albeit controversial) sense, a Dasein[3] – a self-sufficient but open-ended source of meaning and values, which are generated in ongoing dialogue with its co-participants of creator and witness. Art as 'play' evokes a Heideggerian conception of *poiesis* – a self-moving 'bringing-forth' that unites both nature (*physis*) and craftwork (*techne*), the opening of a flower with the fashioning of a chalice (cf. Heidegger 1977b, 10). Yet where these are guided by a *telos* that places them within an extended world, art-as-play remains enclosed within a play-space (*Spielraum*). These limitations therefore bring *telos* to the foreground, giving the artwork a possibility of completion that is never entirely possible in the open space beyond the *Spielraum*.

Of course, 'enclosed' and 'self-sufficient' here do not mean closed-off from our wider human life. But in a fractal sense, the artwork is a *world*-unto-itself. While forming part of a wider network of works, practices and meanings, it is nevertheless encountered as a bearer of those meanings, open to interrogation – in the same way that an individual person is encountered as autonomous and self-interpreting, even while being inextricably embedded in the larger social being that generates those meanings which one embodies and interprets through thought, action, and (self-)interrogation.

To say that art is 'self-sufficient' also does not imply that the work can be taken in isolation from its co-participants. The artwork, like any form-of-life, is never *exhausted*, but always subject to ongoing (re-)interpretation; its completion always asks to be completed anew. For Gadamer (2013, 401ff), this interpretive process is always structured *dialogically*. As two people speak, their conversation takes on its own life. The conversation is an *event*, formed by but surpassing its participants. We do not simply 'make' conversation but we 'fall into' it. To truly *converse* is not just to talk but to *listen* – in German, *hören* zu (literally 'hearing *to*' or '*at*' something) implying a deeper sense of focus and direction than passively 'hearing' (*hören*). Such deep listening is central to the practice of improvised music, which is itself experienced as a conversational event.[4] For example, the experienced improvisors participating in the *(Musical) Improvisational & Ethics* artistic research project[5] consistently returned to these themes in interviews, as illustrated by the following typical responses:

> ***Saxophonist***: You can't be passively listening.
> **Interviewer**: So what is active listening?
> ***Saxophonist***: It means focusing and not drifting away in your thoughts.
> ***Vibraphonist***: It's feeling like you're a part of the music… Not on the outside contributing something to the music, but you feel like you're part of the music.
>
> ***Drummer*:** A good conversation is the same as a good improvisation... [Both require] taking the situation as it is now, bringing in what you have, being really open, trying to really be aware of the others in the group.

3 Or more precisely, *daseinsmaßig*, 'sharing the form of Dasein.' As Haugeland (1982) argues in his 'freewheeling' reading of *Being and Time*, *Dasein* describes a 'pattern' of meaning that is for-the-sake-of-itself, and this pattern – or at least fractal variations of it – might be found or extended into other-than-human beings or collectives.

4 See McAuliffe (2021) for a Gadamerian defence of the 'improvisation as conversation' model.

5 See www.improv-ethics.net . For more on phenomenological interviews, see Høffding & Martiny (2016).

Listening means attending and responding to the Other; it is to think *with* another, allowing one's thought to be guided by what arises, giving shape to the unforeseen. The *dia* in dialogue refers not strictly to the 'two' partners, but to the space *in-between* them, the place whence the conversation emerges.

Gadamer's key insight is that such a space also opens between an artwork and its witness, or a reader and a text. What the text *is* – or rather, what it *says* – is not a timeless inscription, but a living conversation. The dead words on the page do not *mean* anything until they are brought back to life by the reader, who interprets them within her own situated understanding. Likewise, the stories encoded in the "*biblia pauperum*"; likewise the work of art. It is the space *between* where meaning takes shape.

This between-ness – the *dia* of the dialogue – cannot be emphasised enough. It puts the lie to those superficial readers of postmodern thought, who criticise (or occasionally celebrate) it as giving license to an 'anything-goes,' individualist post-truthism. But just as one cannot converse alone – nor if we don't truly *listen*, *understand*, and *respond* to our interlocutor – then neither can one truly interpret an artwork or a text without *attending responsively* to what it itself suggests – and then replying in its own language. And the skills of responsive listening – as we shall see – are exactly what improvisors train to master.

3. From Ritual to Festival

Thinking fractally, if the *dia* is the space-between where two conversants form something new, then the festival is the *dia* of the social body. The *Spielraum* or 'play-space' instituted by the artwork and artist, and into which are gathered the participants, is also, according to Gadamer, where they enter together into the festive *Eigenzeit*, 'autonomous time.' The temporality of the festival is "a heightened self-fulfilling moment," set apart from everyday, linear time (Gadamer 1986b, 59). This is not so much a step into 'eternity' as a condensing of the bounds of finitude, an equilibrium of the world's life with human existence (and thus, Gadamer (1986a, 45) suggests, perhaps as close to eternity as we finite beings can relate). In festive time, the life of the Work transpires before us; it is a fractal, a micro-cosmos, whose themes resonate as echos to-and-from the macrocosm, bringing into direct experience what could only be approached – at best – conceptually.

Gadamer's discussion of 'festive time' recalls what the anthropologist Victor Turner (1974, 80) calls the 'liminal' phase of ritual experience. Turner has described in great detail the structure and temporality of initiation rituals, and suggested its extension to religious rites and festivals more broadly. At the heart of Turner's account is a threefold structure – a departure, a liminal phase, and a return – that is both temporal and topological. The departure and return mark the boundaries of the liminal space – the 'betwixt and between' – with our everyday world and our ordinary social roles. Across this threshold, our individualities and identities break down.

Like Gadamer's artwork, the ritual is self-sufficient and infused with its own *telos*, the enactment of the mythic. Or more accurately – echoing Taylor again – just as ethical concepts (e.g., respect) do not precede their enactment (e.g., bowing), but are developed through a practical co-understanding, so the ritual is not the 're-enactment' of an (imagined) history or myth, but the myth is an extension, explanation, and co-understanding of the ritual itself.

Thus, to enter the liminal space is not to step 'out' of time, but rather to bring the mytho-divine into the present tense; as Sallust put it: "a myth never happened, but always *is*." During the rite, there are

no passive spectators, but only *active participants*. Gadamer (2013, 127) similarly recalls the Greek *Theoros* (the 'viewer' or 'witness'), an envoy sent from one city to another whose sole purpose was to witness the festive rites and thereby to participate. Such active witnessing implies a sense of involved focus – not just 'being there' (*Dasein*) but being *present* (*Dabeisein*) (*ibid*). This distinction recalls the difference between merely hearing (*hören*) and truly listening (*zuhören*), a point Gadamer (1986a, 26) emphasises by playing on the latter's invocation of 'belonging' (*zugehören*) when he asserts that in experiencing art, "the participant belongs to (*gehört zu*) the play."[6]

That is to say, for both Gadamer and Turner, even the act of witnessing suggests an active engagement, an entry into the shared ritual space and partaking of the significances and intentions of the whole. While some participants may take on specific roles that are more or less central, the shared focus and unfolding *telos* of the rite lead to a blurring of subjectivity that Turner (1974, 82) called *communitas*, in which participants experience a sense of one-ness – of collective consciousness and of shared purpose – in which social distinctions (temporarily) dissolve.

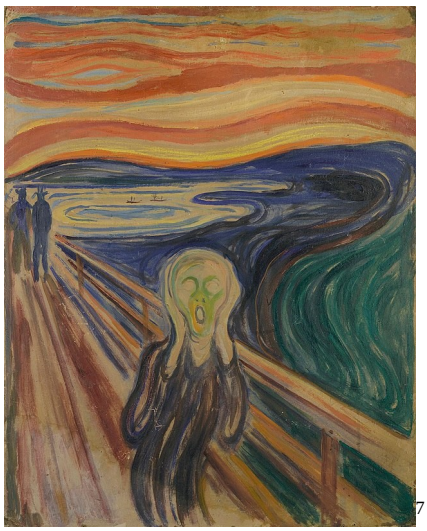
Communitas is most frequently described in 'ecstatic' terms (see, e.g., St John 2008), but it may also describe milder iterations of melded subjectivity that come into play in shared rites that might lack the intensity of a group initiation or *rite de passage* – in the celebration of a Christmas mass, for example. There is much that could be said about the tempering of *ecstasis* as societies grow more complex and their rituals become institutionalised, but this is not the space for that here. Nevertheless, a key point touched upon by both Turner and Gadamer is that as we became Modern individuals, our experience of liminality and participation in the meaning-defining and value-establishing rites has altered, especially as the social-prescriptiveness of such rites has weakened.

In later work (with his wife Edith), Turner therefore distinguishes the *liminal* experience of obligatory, prescribed initiatory rituals with what he terms the *liminoid* experience of more individualised and – to a much greater extent – more freely-chosen rites of passage in mass societies (Turner & Turner 1978, 231). Turner discusses this with particular respect to pilgrimages, but his followers have extended the concept to such diverse (post)modern 'rites of passage' as a gap-year backpacking, or attending a music festival (Matthews 2008; Gauthier 2004).

The perhaps strange claim of these practices or events to be 'rites' nevertheless aligns with Gadamer's account of the evolution of the concept of art *as* art. As described earlier, pre-Modern art belonged primarily to the sphere of the sacred, and served to situate its interpreters in a world that lay at the intersection of other-than-human powers. Such interpretations revealed the 'truth' of a divine or cosmic plan that dictated (to greater or lesser degrees) the roles of humans within it. Yet as these roles became untethered in the Modern age, the role of art likewise shifted to reveal 'truth' in terms of accurate representation. But by the nineteenth century – as industrialisation and urbanisation gave rise to multiple senses of alienation – art reacted by shifting to reflect, in Edvard Munch's words, "not what I see – but what I *saw*." Art becomes an expression of the inner life of the artist themselves, as demonstrated perhaps most famously in his 'Scream' paintings.

6 "*Der Mitspieler gehört zum Spiel*" (Gadamer 1993, 117). Cf. Gadamer 1986c, 121/2013, 120.




[7]

The two fractal moves in this series see, on the one hand, the world spiral in from the eternal to the human to the individual, while at the same time, the prominence of the individual expand. The sphere of the meaningful becomes smaller, but the human and their individual meaning come to take up more of this space. As Nietzsche (2001, 120) famously described, with the collapse of external certainties, it becomes the task of human beings *themselves* to define what is worth living, and hence the rise of what Turner called the 'liminoid,' or non-prescribed rites of passage, as sites of self-definition.

Art therefore – as many have observed – comes to take on roles that had previously been the domain of religion, and in such a way as to bring the human to the fore. But the most significant observation in Gadamer's account is not merely that the *subjects* of artworks have become secularised and individuated. It is that the Works themselves have now become the liminal – or rather, *liminoid* – spaces, the media of self-interpretation, in which we step out of secular time, out of our everyday selves, towards an experience of what, once, was felt as the sacred.

4. Musical Performance as Liminal Event

To return to music, we can discern a similar arc in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European music, where the classical structures which had superseded (at least for the upper classes) the traditional folk forms were themselves challenged by compositions that became, on the one hand, intensely personal modes of self-expression, and on the other, questioned the very limits of what music and art could *be*. For example, the movements that grew up around Arnold Schönberg and the 'Second Viennese School,' and that would coalesce more radically around the *Darmstädter Ferienkurse*, developed a tradition of breaking in ever more distinctive ways with the predominant European traditions of tonality, instrumentation, and eventually scoring and other structures that had implicitly defined what music *was* in the collective consciousness.

At the same time, after western classical traditions of improvisation had been forgotten in favour of a canonisation of the composer and his Work (Gooley 2018, 2-3), European music-makers began to incorporate new improvisational elements via interactions with (and, frequently, appropriations of) African-American and non-Western traditions. Yet where those latter traditions were traditions in a strong sense – with norms and structures of greater or lesser strictness that shaped the paths that

7 Unknown Master (Flemish), c. 1500, *Virgin and Child*, public domain.
(Attributed to) Rembrandt van Rijn, c.1660, *Portrait of a young man, possibly an artist*, public domain.
Edvard Munch, 1893, *The Scream*, public domain.

improvisations could take – twentieth-century music (at least in what musician and scholar George E. Lewis (1996) calls its 'Eurological' forms) mirrored its contemporary visual art's concerns with novelty and individual self-expression.

Born (1995, 351) has noticed in this emphasis on individual creativity a "reluctance of the postmodern sphere of legitimate music to admit its indebtedness to the other." Lewis (1996, 102) observes that Eurological composers have tended to use "coded qualifiers" like 'experimental,' 'avant-garde,' or 'contemporary' to distance their 'artistic' music from pop- or jazz-influenced forms, and to stake a claim to being somehow more 'serious' or 'high art' than the at-least-equally sophisticated 'Afrological' musical languages that were being developed in parallel by creators who often lacked 'formal' (i.e., institutional) musical training.

This distinction can also be seen in audiences' participation in the musical event. There are many ways an audience can interact with music, including by dancing, singing or tapping along, calling out to performers, and so on. Yet as a rule, the more 'serious' a musical style is considered, the more an audience is expected to restrict their participation to quiet and immobile listening. While artists like John Cage explicitly drew attention to the other-than-human elements involved in making and hearing music, the heavily *conceptual* nature of his works inevitably draws attention back to the individual creative genius, arguably at the expense of participation in the music itself.

For this reason, Cavell (2002, 186) has heavily criticised the Eurological avant-garde for being overly self-involved through its "concentration on the composer and his problems," and its resulting apparent indifference to the experience of spectators. Cavell argued that this school of music addresses itself more to other composers than to the public-at-large, who in turn are denied any reference points for evaluating why one piece and not another might be considered worthwhile. Since none of the traditional criteria for art – technical competence, compositional principles, even the artist's intention – are obvious even to connoisseurs of emerging styles, "the possibility... and the experience of fraudulence is endemic" (*ibid*, 188). Thus, complains Cavell, those who would be part of the 'scene' "cannot afford not to" take new presentations seriously, and we "often do not know which is on trial, the object or the viewer" (*ibid*, 190).

It is right here, however, that Gadamer's conception of art becomes illuminating. When we begin to understand the work not as an 'object' but an *event*, and thus come to see the performance-space as a ritual *Spielraum* – self-sufficient in its own bounded 'festive-time' – then we understand the audience not merely as passive *spectators* but as *Theoroi* – as active *listeners* and *participants*, who *belong to* the *play*.

As we saw Gadamer declare above (1993, 117), to *listen* (*hören* zu) is to actively participate in the shared, ritual playspace. "*Der Mitspieler gehört zum Spiel*" – "the participant belongs to the play" – might, in this musical context, be more poetically rendered "the player and Play unite in listening." But because, as Gadamer continues (*ibid*; cf. 2013, 26) "every work leaves the [responders] a certain *Spielraum.…* to be filled in by" themselves, the listener is also the responding co-creator. We might therefore dare to say "*player and played, each the other listening plays*." And – as I will come to in the next section – nowhere is this more vivid than in the act of improvisation, where the listening player's responses give rise to the unfolding music itself.

While such poetic license might risk obscuring in the search for clarity, it nevertheless serves to bring out the interconnection between hearing and belonging which Gadamer repeatedly highlights.

> If we are trying to define the idea of belonging (*zugehörigkeit*) as accurately as possible, we must take account of the particular dialectic implied in *hearing* (hören). It is not just that he who hears is also addressed, but also that he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not.
>
> (Gadamer 2013, 478)

Cavell's spectators – addressed by the musical event – are forced to make sense of the cultural situation to which they belong, and which is refracted in the artwork. Being so addressed, the witnesses are called upon to answer. This does not, however, imply that *all* contemporary or experimental art succeeds in establishing a dialogue, since every conversation is (at least) bi-directional. The third element in Gadamer's threefold conception of art is the *symbol – symbolon* – which Gadamer (1986a, 31) traces to the *tessera hospitalis*, the broken medallion whose rejoined halves symbolise a *completion* of two parts of a dialogue. The dialogical element of the symbolic connection of the audience with the artist/artwork is important, since dialogue implies a need for a shared (or at least mutually-intelligible) language. This imposes a certain responsibility on both parties; the artist must speak to the audience, but the audience too must also make the effort to listen and understand. And as with any encounter with a new language, the experience of making sense is neither guaranteed nor necessarily easy.

In a later essay, Gadamer (2000, 51) argues that the active listening at the heart of dialogue is one of the 'fundamental experiences' (*Grunderfahrungen*) of our shared life or co-existence (*Zusammenleben*), and goes on to explicitly invoke music as an exemplar of how active, participatory listening unites human beings in community (*ibid*, 53). The deep links between belonging, listening and community also bring us closer to the phenomenology of music-making itself, and was another recurring theme throughout the *(Musical) Improvisation & Ethics* project.

> ***Saxophonist*:** It's about playing together, making something together. And also being heard... It's just like this feeling of, 'hey, you're listening to me, and I'm listening to you, and we're doing this together'.
>
> ***Electronic sound-artist*:** It's more of a mind/body experience… an awareness... feeling something that brings you into connection with something bigger than normally you are.

Such experiences take us back towards the liminal space of the initiation. As we will see below, 'initiation' also signifies the entry into a form-of-life, the establishment of an embodied understanding of what is 'right' in specific situations. We should not expect that this process will immediately 'make sense' to the initiate, nor that it comes with any obligation to be 'fun' or 'entertaining.'[8] Yet this 'initiation' analogy is itself somewhat limited because, as mentioned above, in complex Modern societies ritual experience is better understood as *liminoid* rather than strictly liminal. The forms-of-life – the social and personal histories, values, (sub)cultures – of the participants are too varied for any single experience to speak to all of them in the same way or to the same degree. Nevertheless, the 'between-ness' of the liminoid still offers a place apart, where established structures are brought into question, affording a possibility of re-interpretation of the world and one's place in it.

We arrive, therefore, at the curious (post)Modern place of art. With the decentring and withdrawal of religious ritual from the common life, art steps forward from its supporting roles into the vacated space. The *event* – for example, the concert – develops its own rites of departure, its own shared suspension of the everyday, along with certain structures and norms (such as whether to remain silent while the music sounds, for example). And – at its best – the artistic event instils a sense of *communitas* – an intersubjectivity generated by the shared attention and emotion that temporarily unites the diversity of witnesses.

8 Although there is, possibly, just as little necessity for it to be harsh or overly 'serious.'

However, the problem remains whether this treatment is simply analogical. How exactly should we understand musical practice and experience as fulfilling the distinctly *ethical* role once held by myth and ritual? In the final section, I will expand Gadamer's argument that the artwork has its own sense of autonomy or *telos* and – building on his example of the phenomenon of rhythm – can help us understand how our own unfolding and subjectivity is intertwined not just with our fellow humans, but with the other-than-human and emergent 'in-between' that we share.

5. Rhythm and Dialogue with the Other-than-Human

In *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, Gadamer includes some brief but insightful observations on the phenomenon of rhythm. In this final section, I want to expand on this as an exemplar of how music more broadly takes on a form of intersubjective autonomy, such that its performance becomes a dialogue not just with one's fellow players, but with the other-than-human musical Work as well. This in turn suggests that the practice of improvisation – and the attunement and recognition it requires – offers a clue towards how we might think about a situated, originary ethics.

Citing a psychological study,[9] Gadamer (1986a, 45) notes that listeners "cannot help introducing rhythm" into a perceived series of sounds or notes, whether or not such sounds are produced with a rhythmic intention. His simple example perfectly encapsulates the sense in which our experience emerges through a process of interpretation that is temporally-stretched, linking the past with the present, both of which are understood in the light of future expectation. Indeed, a fundamental factor in our being (self-)interpreting animals is precisely this capacity to project forward, to let the past guide our anticipation of the future, even as present experience structures our understanding of the past.

We encounter this capacity on multiple timescales, again in a fractal sense. On the largest scale – of our lifetimes – we interpret our very selves *narratively* (Schechtman 2011). That is, our self-understanding is structured not only by where we have come from (our past experience, and especially the stories we tell about it) but where we are going – that is, who we see ourselves becoming. In turn, we evaluate the events that befall us in terms of whether they bring us closer to that projection. For that reason, a major crisis – the loss of a secure job, the failure of a final exam, or a separation from a spouse – can be experienced as world-shattering, because it throws into question our future image of ourselves and therefore our very concept of *who we are*. In a very real sense, we experience the end of a 'world.'

But a form of forward-projection is present not only in our life-scale narratives, but in our everyday interactions as well. Solli (2022, 446-7) has detailed how 'rhythmic perception' is present even in prenatal infants, and plays a critical role in the development of understanding between the infant and their caregivers as they interact and attune to one another's needs and actions. Solli (*ibid*, 447) connects this rhythmic basis of co-understanding – which finds its culmination in natural language – to what Benjamin (2004) calls "interactive thirds" – that is, the autonomous 'in-betweens' that are both created by and that structure our interactions with others. That is to say, understanding is not a simple matter of communicating information from one subject to another, but of an interactive refinement around a common concern that involves a growing sensitivity to how the other affects and is affected by both oneself *and* the shared in-between.

De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007, 493) call this process 'participatory sense-making,' and similarly articulate how the "coupling" between two agents gives rise to an "emergent autonomous

9 Hönigswald 1925, whose findings have been more recently and rigorously borne out by Levitin & Tirovolas 2009.

organisation" that in a certain sense can be thought of as having its own agency, shaping the other participants into unforeseen directions.

With Schiavo, De Jaegher applies this thought directly to music, arguing that dynamic, participatory sense-making reveals

> the 'musical object' not as a fixed and wholly pre-given structure, but rather as an emergent phenomenon that develops through shared active involvement in the musical event; the musical object is, by this light, an ongoing open structure that *shapes and is shaped by* the sensemakers *in a circular fashion*.
>
> (Schiavo & De Jaegher 2021, 34; my emphasis)

In more Gadamerian terms, this brings us back to the centrality of the *dia-logue.* Being-with another means a shared orientation around what is *between*. Gadamer's invocation of *rhythm* suggests an example of this projecting between-ness on an even smaller scale. The example of rhythm shows, even more clearly than the conversation, how we become (co-)attuned to an in-between phenomenon that is neither purely subjective, nor altogether objective in the world, while at the same time resembling both. It is subjective because when we 'tap into' a rhythm (as listeners, and even more as players) it is part of *our* experience. As Gadamer (1986a, 45) puts it, "we can only hear the rhythm that is immanent within a given form if we ourselves introduce the rhythm into it."

But at the same time, the rhythm is also objective, since if we stop playing (or listening), the rhythm continues. Even if everybody stops, there can remain a trace, a sense that the rhythm is still somehow 'there,' waiting for someone to pick it up again. It is only when the piece ends, the gathering disperses, or a new rhythm replaces it, that the rhythm no longer 'is.'

The 'independence' of rhythm – created by the players, and yet not under any individual's control – serves to give a sense of physical force or even agency.

> ***Drummer*****:** *It is sort of magnetic, the rhythm… It kind of wants you to come in*.
> ***Clarinetist:*** *Sometimes our band slips into a groove without noticing it…*
> ---
> ***Drummer:*** *Rhythms have a gravitational force.*

This curious 'gravity' (which we can extend beyond the example of rhythm to other musical phenomena) also suggests that its vessel – the Work itself – has a form of self-sufficiency apart from its particular performers and witnesses. It is not just that the rhythm does not exist 'in' any one particular performer, and that it can be 'passed' from player to player as they come in and out of the piece. More profoundly, the Work also has a sense of autonomy insofar as there is the 'right' way to play it – the 'right' tempo, the 'right' amount of swing, and so forth. Playing music – especially in improvisation with others – is not like pressing 'play' on a sound system. It is a process of *searching* and *finding*, of subtle *refinement*, invoking particular properties of the music together with the cultural and technical history of the performers and their listeners.

That music has its own 'rightness' evokes the Platonic concept of *anamnesis*, 'remembering,' or what Gadamer (2013, 118) called the "phenomenon of recognition." For Plato, recognising something as 'true' or 'right' implies the *psyche*'s memory of its Ideal form (*eidos*), obtained in some eternity beyond the direct experience of our situated being. While Gadamer avoids any form of Idealism, he nevertheless draws our attention to the significance of the feeling of recognition that accompanies an experience of the never-before-seen.

> The ‘known’ enters into its true being and manifests itself as what it is only when it is recognised.
>
> (Gadamer 2013, 118)

Gadamer (*ibid*, 119) also describes recognition as “genuine knowledge of the essence.” Yet the practice of improvisation emphasises that ‘essence’ here does not refer to some ‘ideal’ Work (fixed eternally in the mind or score of the composer, as the soul might be held to be fixed in the mind of God). Rather, improvisors, through an act of participatory sense-making, come to harmonise[10] around a shared conception of an unfolding work that itself speaks to them and shapes its own unfolding.

> ***Bassist*****:** *It’s a mixture I think, [between] something I’m looking for and something I’m creating... There’s always this balance between searching and doing.*

The movement involved in centring in on this ‘rightness’ resembles what Merleau-Ponty (1945, 308-9) calls the *meilleure prise* or ‘optimal grip’ with which we actively discover the right distance to stand from a painting, in order to properly take it in. Finding the right place to stand, like tuning into a rhythm, is a bodily technique. As much as playing music is always a physical act, musicians getting ‘into’ a rhythm often extend their motion throughout their body, bringing their physical movements together with their attention into synchronisation with the work and their co-performers. It is an act of adjusting one’s movements and actions in intimate *responsiveness* to the sounds and sensations of the group performance, in order to act not only with other participants, but guided above all by the work *in-between* itself.

However, where finding the *meilleure prise* on a painting involves a simple movement through the space between viewer and object, getting a ‘grip’ on a shared rhythm is a more dynamic process with much clearer dialogic structure. These phenomena become most explicit in the act of group improvisation, where the ‘recognition’ of how the music ‘wants’ to be is a group process, in which subjectivity melds as the magnetism of the music draws performers into a cohesion that phenomenologically resembles what Turner called the *communitas* of the liminal ritual.

> ***Violinist*****:** *When we’re playing, it feels like there is music happening, and I’m trying to understand that and make it go, like, not disturb it...*

As many improvisors have noted (Nachmanovitch 1990, 4; McAuliffe 2021, 43), even a solo improvisation contains these elements of searching, responsiveness, and recognition. If the artistic event is, as Heidegger argued, a *poieisis* or ‘bringing-forth,’ improvised music demonstrates just how much *poieisis* describes a *process* and not the manifestation of a fixed Idea. The autonomy of the unfolding work therefore blurs the line between *physis* and *techne* – the artwork is both the product of human skill, and yet appears to follow its own *telos*, of which human action is just one element.

The art and experience of creation – of participation in the unfolding *telos* – is, I argue, this process of recognition – of *anamnesis*. Recognising what is ‘right’ comes from the process of ‘initiation’ mentioned above – from a return to the liminal (or liminoid) space in which what unfolds was previously encountered. In a mundane sense, we can understand such initiation to be the formation and incorporation of musical understanding – a form analogous to the development of *phronesis*, the ‘practical wisdom’ or ethical improvisation that Gallagher (2007, 211) holds cannot be articulated but is embodied and habituated through practice, experience, and “hanging around with the right people.” But more poetically, we can see the *anamnesis* as an entry into a liminal,

10 Not necessarily in a traditional, tonic sense.

autonomous ‘festive time’: into an encounter with the eternal. But this is not the ‘no-place’ eternity of platonic Ideas, but a situated, fractal microcosm that relates the here-and-now to structures beyond our ken.

Conclusion

Thinking fractally, we have arrived at twin conceptions of the ethical significance of musical improvisation. First of all, the practice itself requires its participants to *listen to* one another and to the work – that is, to develop a responsive sensitivity to the unfolding situation. For improvised music to succeed, it needs to be approached by both performer and listener as a *dialogue* – anticipating what is ‘said’ and ‘heard’ while retaining an openness to the novel; and at the same time situating the novel into a shared structure. Such conversing will, of course, often require great effort and attention; as with natural language, understanding becomes easier and more transparent as fluency increases, yet even the most fluent communicator must make an effort when confronted with new or complex concepts.

Yet also, and on a more profound level, this hermeneutic understanding of improvisation asks us to rethink our very conception of human action and agency. A Gadamerian conception of the artwork as *event* – as a temporally- and topologically-enclosed microcosm of ‘play-space’ and ‘festive-time’ – suggests that creative agency is always bound up dialogically in an unfolding conversation with others and with the other-than-human *Work* itself.

Where improvisation is often characterised as ‘free,’ on this understanding we find that this free agency is guided by an emergent Work, one that has a ‘right’ way to be and that cannot be reduced to the decisions or desires of a single agent. Indeed, even a solo work of improvisation proceeds in this dialogic way, with each new voicing responding to the Work *as heard* in the moments before. Gadamer’s example of rhythm shows how this temporally-stretched, intersubjective dimension of the emerging Work gives it an identity that includes the players themselves, and not merely as a ‘product’ or object of their performance.

Such a radical conception of agency – merging the human with the other-than-human – is controversial and not-at-all obvious from the Modernist perspective of autonomous individuals. Yet reflection on the performance of musical improvisation shows that such a conception need not invoke anything supernatural. What-is-there is all there is, but what-is includes the *dia*, the in-between.

Crucially, I have suggested that all involved – the audience no less than the performers – *belong* as *participants* to the *play*. The artistic event gathers all into a ritual-esque, *liminoid* space, in which the Work manifests as both cause and effect of the shared experience. Through active *listening*, performers, witnesses, and the Work itself are drawn into a responsive exchange, a process of seeking and recognition, that brings about a merging of participants’ subjectivities into a sensation of *communitas*, of shared identity and purpose.

Thinking fractally, this experience therefore points us to two conclusions. Firstly, the practices of improvisation, in music and in art more broadly, offer spaces to experience ourselves and to act as more than our individual selves. In ways that do not conflict with the naturalistic background to our cultural way of seeing, we are afforded a chance to tap into something beyond the human – to an event that, for all its transience, suggests the eternal, or as Gadamer says, as close as we mortals can approach.

But secondly, and more profoundly, thinking this experience fractally also suggests a way of being that is not restricted to the artistic moment. By experiencing and understanding ourselves as somehow in dialogue with – even in communion with – what is more-than-human, we can come to experience and understand ourselves as *belonging* in the world. No longer objectifying Moderns, related to the world as if from outside, we find a way to understand ourselves as participants in its unfolding – finite, yet inextricable.

Through the practice and experience of improvised art – and the understanding of the Work as an *event* – we can develop and refine the skills of listening, attention, and recognition that enable a shared attunement to a collective event that 'wants' to be certain way. Such an attunement is resistant to universalisation. It must be played on its own terms, as the situation demands.

This attunement – and the skills or virtues[11] that enable it – exemplify, I suggest, the active, practical *thinking* of Being that for Heidegger marked an originary ethics. In later writings, Heidegger (1966) describes a comportment towards beings that he calls *Gelassenheit* or *Seinlassen*, 'releasement' or 'letting-be,' that is *ethical* just in the sense I have been developing. Crucially, this 'letting-be' is not a passive abstention from action, but an active engagement that is nevertheless not 'will-ful' but rather, as Davis (2010, 179) puts it, "a non-willing engagement that attentively lets beings be themselves."

Davis (*ibid*, 180) later suggests that "*Gelassenheit* also names our proper comportment to one another… attentively letting others be, rather than either passively neglecting or actively 'leaping in' and taking over" their concerns. Taken together, this attitude of actively 'letting be' – towards one's fellow players, to one's material instruments, and to the unfolding event itself – may find its clearest and most concentrated example in the act of musical improvisation. Yet thinking fractally, the virtues of *Gelassenheit* also underpin an *ethos* towards that greater improvised event of our unfolding form-of-life itself.

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11 I use 'virtues' here in the broad Aristotelian sense, as the capacities which enable ethical action.

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