

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics



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Habits of Unexpectedness.
Expressiveness in Musical Improvisation (and Beyond)

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ABSTRACT. The expressive nature of musical improvisation is dissected, navigating between two predominant theses: The Transparency Thesis (1) which proposes that expressiveness in improvisation transparently reflects the musician's subjective affectivity, and the Objective-Generic Expressiveness Thesis (2) asserting that it hinges only on the music practice's objective components. This article challenges both theses, arguing against (1) by emphasizing that musical expressivity transcends a mere natural outburst, and counteracting (2) by highlighting that it is not merely an enactment of objective expressive *topoi*. Introducing a novel perspective through the conceptual pair of (social) *Habitus* and (individual) *habit*, a third stance is defended: the specific expressiveness in improvised music is significantly impacted by its improvisational quality, whereby the expressiveness emerges from the manipulation and transformation of an expressive *Habitus* within the musical performance's contingent situation.

1. Introduction

In this article, I aim to investigate whether musical improvisation possesses a unique expressiveness distinct from the expressiveness observed in the interpretation of composed music. Specifically, does the improvisational nature of the music lead to particular expressive features? As we venture into this discourse, suggesting the significance of expressive habits in the historical construct of emotions, this exploration can also be viewed as a contribution to the wider reevaluation of the topic of musical expressiveness. However, this broader task will not

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be delved into in this context; it will merely be introduced as a potential outcome of the chosen argumentative path to understand the expressiveness of improvisation, which is the central focus of this article.

Before we delve into the intricacies of the expressivity of musical improvisation, it's paramount to first grasp what musical improvisation is and to have a succinct overview of its varied kinds. I understand artistic improvisation, especially of the musical kind, as a practice where the act of inventing and realizing converge, to a certain extent. This means that music is crafted while it is being played.⁶⁰

In this sense, musical improvisation is practiced in a vast variety of musical traditions, genres and practices: in jazz, in different ways according to its declinations (swing, be-bop, modal jazz, Free jazz) — in particular, but not only, in solos; in Indian classical music (the 'raga') and in musical practices like flamenco guitar, blues; and also rock (for example in bands like Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Cream, and Grateful Dead). But improvisation is also practiced within the so-called 'art music': not only were Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt great improvisers, but classical music in general is not without improvisation (for example, the cadenza of concerts was often improvised); moreover, in liturgical music, improvisation — particularly organ improvisation — has had and still has great relevance for its functionality concerning the times of worship. In the field of contemporary avant-garde art music, not only have some composers (for example, Cage, Scelsi, Penderecki) variously explored elements of improvisation in their compositions, but there are also famous improvisation groups (such as Musica Elettronica Viva, The Scratch Orchestra, The Art Ensemble of Chicago, Eddie Prévost's AMM, and Gruppo di improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza) whose music is sometimes located at the crossroads between music of classical tradition and Free jazz. Today, improvisation is also practiced in the field of electronic music and computer music, and in general in experimental or underground music.

Improvisation bears diverse aesthetic value and impact contingent upon the specific practices engaged. In Jazz Improvisation, it constitutes an intrinsic component of the musical performance. Jazz practitioners frequently generate spontaneous solos and improvisational passages amidst performances, facilitating a display of their individuality, creativity, and

⁶⁰ On the ontology and aesthetics of artistic improvisation see Bertinetto 2016, Bertinetto 2022 and Bertinetto, Ruta 2022.

technical mastery. This method simultaneously encourages an interactive and dynamic exchange among ensemble member. Within the realm of Indian Classical Music, musicians navigate through intricate melodic patterns (*ragas*) and rhythmic cycles (*talas*) during protracted performances. Improvisation herein serves as a conduit for musicians to exhibit their virtuosity and profound understanding of their cultural tradition. In rock music, improvisation might initially seem understated due to the genre's tendency towards meticulously composed tracks. However, it has carved a distinct space for itself, especially in live settings. Many rock bands incorporate extended solos, jam sessions, and spontaneous interludes into their performances, giving musicians the freedom to delve deeper into musical exploration and experimentation that can transform the songs on the spot - Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead are exemplary in this regard. This element of improvisation infuses rock concerts with an exhilarating and unpredictable energy. Pertaining to contemporary electronic and computer music, improvisation is prevalent especially within live performance contexts. Musicians and DJs employ various technologies to manipulate soundscapes, generate loops, and experiment with different textures in real-time, providing dynamic and interactive experiences for both performers and audiences.

These varied examples underscore the broad range of musical improvisation across different styles and traditions. Since each of them adds its specific touch to the realm of spontaneous musical expression, improvisation has different spaces, modes, and functions in the various musical practices. Yet, it can still be argued that the very fact that music is — even if only partially — improvised bestows a distinctive expressive quality upon the music performed.

2. A First Theoretical Attempt: The ‘Improvised Feel’

Initially, one might think that the specific expressive quality of improvisation is perceived as a unique emotional/affective effect, what Andy Hamilton termed the ‘improvised feel’: a sensation of imperfection that distinguishes improvised art from non-improvised forms. This sensation would be contingent upon properties such as freshness, dexterity, coolness, variety, vitality, openness, urgency, tension, fragility, and even disorganization, lack of coherence, confusion, inconsistency, monotony, or limited novelty. However, this theory, which Hamilton specifically articulates in reference to jazz improvisation, hinges on the belief that the aesthetics

of improvisation is an aesthetics of imperfection. If one does not accept this premise, the theory collapses. As I have argued elsewhere (Bertinetto, 2022), there are compelling reasons to reject this premise, notably the observation that many genres of musical improvisation, such as Baroque or classical improvisation, do not inherently present an appearance of imperfection. Furthermore, as L.B. Brown (2011) posited, Hamilton's 'improvised feel' is exactly what the term implies: a sensation, or more precisely, just a sensation. In essence, this sensation might be a misleading perceptual impression that does not correspond with reality. Senses can be deceived: hence, one can perceive a performance as improvised when it is not. This suggests that there may be no perceptual difference between an improvisation and a non-improvised performance, and artists might intentionally mislead the audience's perception: they can feign or mimic an improvised expression, presenting a fully prepared performance as improvisation, or inversely, improvise in such a manner that the performance appears as a rehearsed composition.⁶¹

The sensation of improvisation might actually hinge on the traits of a particular artistic style, irrespective of how the performances and the pieces are in fact created. Consequently, listeners might perceive the performance as *expressive of improvisation* and mistakenly assess it as an *expressive improvisation*; however, the performance might only be a *putative* improvisation instead of an actual one (I borrow this conceptual distinction from legal terminology): it merely *represents* (a semblance of) improvisation rather than directly *offering* the genuine article. Thus, their assessment might be misguided by erroneous information (a scenario which, evidently, is not exclusive to improvisation). In short, the impression of *improvisational expressiveness* (the 'improvised feel') may stem from a bias that mistakenly views improvisation as inherently aesthetically imperfect, whatever that may entail. Consequently, this doesn't assist in understanding the uniqueness of *improvisation's expressiveness*. Let's explore other avenues.

3. The Two Main Positions in the Contemporary Debate

In this section, I will introduce the two main conceptions regarding the character of the expressivity of musical improvisation under discussion in the contemporary debate (1) the

⁶¹ On this "aesthetic paradox of improvisation," see Bertinetto, 2021a.

Naïve Transparency Thesis and (2) the *Objective-Generic Expressiveness Thesis*.

(1) According to the Naïve Transparency Thesis, the answer to the question about the expressive specificity of musical improvisation is undoubtedly affirmative, without this necessarily implying the ‘improvised feel’ discussed in the previous section. Improvisation possesses a specific expressiveness characterized by a close and direct link with the emotions of the improvising musician. This intimate connection can be judged positively or negatively, leading to the celebration or rejection of improvisational practices. However, the general point is that improvisation has specific expressive characteristics because the improviser is not musically interpreting someone else’s emotions but expressing their own emotions through music. The musician’s personality becomes transparent in the music. Particularly, musical improvisation would have specific expressive qualities because it is *transparent* with respect to the emotions of the performers.

(2) According to the Objective-Generic Expressiveness Thesis, the expressiveness of improvised music depends exclusively on the objective or public components of the particular musical practice or genre (e.g., in jazz: rhythm, swing, specific ‘wrong’ notes, typical harmonic solutions, pentatonic scales, etc.).

Both positions are too unilateral and reductionist. Let’s see why.

3.1 The Naïve Transparency Thesis

According to the Naïve Transparency Thesis, improvised music directly reveals the emotional life of the improviser. Improvised music is, so to speak, a mirror of the soul, the natural self of the performer. The specific expressiveness of a musical improvisation performance depends on how the music transparently reveals the subjective emotions of the musicians during the musical performance (Gioia, 1988). It is the musician while playing who is responsible for the expressive characteristics of the music. Musical expressiveness is explained as a kind of natural outpouring. The music reveals the musicians’ emotions, especially when the music played relies less on predefined cultural structures and constructs (such as in jazz standards) and there is ample room for uninhibited creativity, unconstrained by the interpretation of a pre-existing piece, as observed in free jazz and free improvisation in avant-garde music.

This transparency of music regarding the performer’s emotions can lead to either appreciation or rejection of improvisation. Derek Bailey, for instance, sees this as a merit of

improvisation: As he argues, improvisation “guarantees the total involvement of the performer. Better than any other medium, it provides the performer with the opportunity to identify completely with the music.” (Bailey, 2010, p. 42). Others hold different opinions. Musician Gavin Bryars, for instance, writes:

one of the main reasons why I am against improvisation now is that in any improvising position the person creating the music is identified with the music. The two things are seen to be synonymous. The creator is there making the music and is identified with the music and the music with the person. It is like standing a painter next to his pictures so that every time you see the painting you see the painter and you cannot see the it without him. And that’s why music in improvisation does not stand alone. It is corporeal. My position, elaborated through the study of Zen and Cage, is to distance yourself from your creation. Get away from what you are doing. Now that becomes impossible in improvisation” (Gavin Bryars, quoted in Bailey, 1992, p. 115).

According to this perspective, “improvisation is unsatisfying because the enunciation, the producing, the physical action of the performer is so strongly foregrounded. Someone else, however, may be content with and even aim for this situation” (Tarasti, 2002, p. 184).

In point of fact, this consideration is shared both by foes and friends of improvisation. French composer Pierre Boulez regards improvisation as “a purely affective phenomenon [..., as] a personal psychodrama [...]” (quoted in Zen, 2014, p. 182), which, like Bryars, led him not to appreciate improvisation much. Conversely, for the very same reasons Ted Gioia admires jazz improvisation:

Jazz music lives and dies in the moment of performance, and in that moment the musician is his music. His improvisation is the purest expression possible of the artist’s emotions and feelings, and it is a purity which is only heightened by the absence of the spoken word. (Gioia, 1988, p. 93).

However, the premise underlying the Naïve Transparency Thesis implies an erroneous understanding of the expressiveness inherent in musical improvisation. Indeed, it is certainly plausible to advocate for the eminently self-expressive nature of improvisation (see Hamilton, 1990, pp. 331-334), or the proposition that the development of the emotional expressiveness in musical improvisation parallels that of ordinary emotional expression. In improvisation, performers tend not to sonically depict previously artistically constructed manifestations of

emotional expressions, which are often prepared by others and packaged in compositions. Instead, they artistically present their emotional selves, showcasing the musical articulation of emotional expression, to varying degrees of success. Put differently, emotions are presented as they unfold in real-time musical expressions of emotions. Their significant differences notwithstanding, both in everyday life and in the realm of musical improvisation, emotions are not simply displayed in pre-formed expressions; instead, they are shaped through the act of expression as it unfolds.

However, this does not imply that improvisation is inherently expressively authentic because it reveals the performers' natural self. It is crucial to refrain from misconstruing the argument suggesting that in improvisation emotions are articulated as they become musical expressions as an endorsement of improvisation as a mere conduit for the direct external outburst of performers' feelings. Such a view, epitomized by the so-called "Theorie des unmittelbaren musikalischen Selbstaussdrucks or Exhibitionstheorie" ("Theory of the immediate musical self-expression or exhibition theory," Mohr, 2021), demonstrates a naïve expressivist perspective that overlooks the intricate artistic qualities of musical improvisation. Moreover, this standpoint presupposes a simplistic view of the relationship between subjectivity and music, wherein musical expressiveness is relegated to the mere consequence of pre-existing, precrafted subjects. Such an expressivist thesis, in its present characterization, must be abandoned, because while the biography of the performers may be interesting in various respects, from the standpoint of the artistic value of the music, it is irrelevant.⁶²

To this end, Georg Mohr (2021) rightfully critiques this position. However, he attributes it to the author of the present article (Bertinetto, 2019). But this is a blatant misunderstanding: I never espoused the notion that the artistic value of musical expressiveness lies solely in the overt manifestation of the musicians' emotional lives. Rather, my contention resides in a more nuanced examination of musical improvisation as a captivating realm of artistic exploration and expression. Indeed, the rejection of the Naïve Transparency Thesis does not warrant dismissing the notion that the expressiveness of improvisation possesses its own specificity and holds particular relevance in elucidating the contribution of musical performance to the

⁶² Furthermore, given that a single piece of music can be interpreted by different listeners as conveying different emotions, attributing a specific, commonly recognized emotion, such as anger, to the musician producing the music is unreliable. In the context of jazz, and specifically regarding John Coltrane, cf. Gridley, 2010.

expressive characteristics of music.

The crux of the matter is that the expressiveness of improvised music is deeply tied to the performer's affective state during the music production, their emotional response to the music they produce, and other contextual and situational factors that shape the musical output. However, this should by no means preclude the possibility that improvisation serves as more than a mere immediate outlet for natural-psychological self-expression. Instead, it can manifest the construction of self-images and intersubjective relations across diverse cultural contexts, illustrating the potential for staging the development of the self – encompassing both innovative and routine actions, interactions with others, and engagement with the natural and cultural environment. In this manner, improvisation offers illustrative and informative presentations of how individuals form themselves through their actions, gestures, and expressions, and how they navigate interactions with fellow beings and their surrounding context.

As I shall expound later, this is contingent upon the salience of the relationship between the expressive *Habitus* (with a cultural origin) and the aesthetic expressive habits of the performer.

3.2 Musical Expressiveness as Objective Grammar

In any case, the theory of emotional outburst or display – which I refer to as the Naïve Theory of Transparency – posits that music immediately and directly expresses the inner self of the performer. In contrast, Mohr (2021) counters this notion by proposing that the expressiveness of improvised music does not hinge on the performance alone but rather on the ‘objective grammar’ of the specific musical practice or genre (such as mainstream jazz, free improvisation, baroque improvisation, etc.).

The concept of ‘objective grammar’ refers to the idea that within specific artistic practices or genres, there are shared and culturally ingrained expressive patterns and conventions that influence the way emotional expressions are culturally formed and grasped. In the context of musical improvisation, the notion of ‘objective grammar’ implies that there are certain established and recognized patterns, techniques, and stylistic elements that are characteristic of a particular style or genre of musical improvisation.

For instance, in jazz improvisation, its ‘objective grammar’ may include elements such as specific scales, chord progressions, rhythmic patterns, and melodic motifs that are

commonly used by jazz musicians. These elements become part of the shared language and expressive palette of the genre, providing a foundation for improvisation within the jazz tradition. Similarly, in other forms of improvisation, such as contemporary classical or rock music, the ‘objective grammar’ would consist of specific rules, techniques, and idiomatic expressions that define the style and inform how improvisation is approached within those genres.

The notion of ‘objective grammar’ recognizes that improvisation is not an absolutely free and unbounded form of expression and that, instead, it operates within certain constraints and conventions that have been established and developed over time within specific musical traditions. These constraints are not rigid rules; they rather provide a framework within which musicians are able to communicate effectively with each other and with the audience. In summary, the concept of ‘objective grammar’ in improvisation recognizes the existence of shared expressive patterns and conventions inherent to specific musical practices, genres, and styles, thereby establishing a context for meaningful improvisation.

It is hard to deny the fundamental contribution of the grammar of a musical practice — and indeed, of artistic practices in general — to the expressiveness of a performance (or an artwork), and I have never refuted this fact (cf. Bertinetto, 2016; Bertinetto, 2019; Bertinetto, 2021b). The idea is that, as advocated by the theory of objective-generic expressiveness, musical expressiveness is shaped by ‘objective’ expressive characteristics inherent in genres, styles, and fields of musical practice. This encompasses culturally shared expressive *topoi* pertaining to the specific musical practice at hand: e.g., in jazz, elements such as: blue notes, chord substitutions and expansions, offbeat, swing, idiosyncratic timbre, ‘linguistic’ phrasing, ‘conversational’ interaction, the integration of audiotactile dimensions through ‘neauratic coding’ (cf. Caporaletti, 2005) etc.

However, can the musical expressiveness of improvisation be understood as a mere *application* of objective expressive *topoi*? Or, even worse, as a mere theatrical performance serving solely social conventions? (Auslander, 2021, pp. 148-163). The response I intend to develop is that an affirmative answer to these questions oversimplifies the expressiveness of improvisation. It overlooks the crucial aspect that the attribution of emotional content to an expresser, which the listener emotionally responds to, is what renders the music as expressive (cf. Levinson, 2006), rather than merely conforming to an expressive grammar (or code).

Similarly, in everyday life, we can (or at least, can be able to) discern between a mere pretense of emotionality (dependent on the application of an expressive pattern in gestures or speech) and genuine emotional expressiveness through which the subject shape their unique personality through words and actions, while embracing established expressive forms. When referring to ordinary expressiveness, it is imperative to recognize the crucial contribution of agency in shaping personal expressiveness. Likewise, adopting this perspective for the musical realm does not entail viewing music as a mere emotional release; rather, it acknowledges the pivotal role of performance in shaping musical expressiveness.

In conclusion, opposing Mohr's view does not entail accepting the naïve theory of transparency. Instead, it entails advocating a more sophisticated version of expressivism. This version, partly drawing on the 'person theory' of musical expression,⁶³ encompasses the following aspects:

(a) It willingly acknowledges that music, as an artistic practice, is not limited to expressing emotions, feelings, and affections. Instead, it encompasses a wide array of elements, such as ideals and concepts, including freedom, tolerance, contrast, resistance, and others.

(b) It embraces the idea that expressive grammars, culturally shaped and transmitted through musical genres and practices, significantly influence the expressiveness of performances, including improvised ones.

(c) It argues that music shapes emotional expressiveness and goes beyond merely forging the external form of pre-existing emotional states. Hence, various musical styles and practices shape emotions and moods in distinct ways, thus giving rise to diverse modes of artistic articulation of emotional life (cf. Bertinetto, 2019).

(d) It also acknowledges the role of performance in shaping expressiveness, and more specifically, it posits that the improvisational quality of a musical performance plays a crucial role in its specific expressiveness. In other words, the fact that music is improvised (i.e., that a musical construct is invented significantly and intentionally at the moment of its execution) influences its particular expressive traits (cf. Bertinetto, 2021b).

In this context, I wish to emphasize the compatibility between the thesis that the expressiveness of a performance is structured by the 'objective expressive grammar' of a

⁶³ On the theory of 'musical persona' cf. Bertinetto, 2021b, Hatten, 2010, Levinson, 2006, Monahan, 2013; Rinderle, 2010, Ridley, 1995, Robinson, 2005.

cultural practice and the thesis that the performance and its improvisational character are not only relevant for the specific expressiveness of the music but also feedback into the expressive grammar of the reference musical practice. By doing so, I will clarify why my position not only avoids the naivety of which Mohr accuses me but also accounts for fundamental aspects of musical expressiveness that Mohr overlooks.

I will refer to this position as the Theory of Permeability or the Theory of Improvisational Habits.

4. The Theory of Permeability or the Theory of Improvisational Habits

In essence, the theory is as follows: Improvised music is not merely an immediate manifestation of the musician's interiority, but it does have a connection with the musician(s)' affectivity and expressiveness. This connection exists not only in the trivial sense that it is caused by the musician(s) playing it, but, more interestingly, it articulates subjectivity in relation to both the typical characteristics (stylistic, conventional, technical, aesthetic, etc.) of the reference musical practice and the situation of the performance. In this sense, however, while it is false that musical expressiveness is directly determined by the subject's interiority, it is also false that it is determined exclusively and unidirectionally by the typical characteristics of the practice or genre in question (the 'objective expressive grammar'). The expressiveness of an improvised performance cannot solely hinge on the characteristics of its genre, as the performative context, encompassing specific environmental, cultural, physical, and technical attributes, impacts the trajectory and expressiveness of the performance, engaging the performers throughout the process.

4.1 Bertram's Type/Token Distinction

To develop this proposal, I suggest applying an idea recently proposed by Georg Bertram in an article devoted to musical expressiveness in general, significantly titled "Inwiefern ist Musik als subjektiver Ausdruck zu begreifen?" ("To what extent is music to be understood as a subjective expression?"; Bertram, 2022). Bertram's thesis is that musical expressiveness results from the combination of an objective/external dimension and a subjective/internal dimension. In particular, Bertram understands the specific expressive dimension of a musical performance

as the subjective *token* of an objectively distinguishable expressive *type*. Consequently, the individual expressive subjectivity of a musical performance applies the characteristics of an objectively distinguishable expressiveness in specific ways.

Bertram's approach is clear and plausible. However, it does not capture the *reciprocal* impact between exteriority and interiority. The type/token dichotomy presents a relationship that seems too rigid and unidirectionally deterministic, with the token merely instantiating a pre-existing type in particular ways but not contributing to its development. It is certainly plausible to suggest that there needs to be a reconciliation between 'externality' — that is, the 'objective grammar' of expressive resources inherent to musical practices – and 'interiority' — specifically, the affective subjectivity of interpreters who infuse their musical performances with creative expressiveness. This is especially relevant when considering improvisation, where performers manifest their unique expressive style in real-time musical creativity. Yet, it remains essential to recognize the reciprocal influence between these two dimensions.

Therefore, in this context, I wish to emphasize the compatibility between the proposition that the expressiveness of a performance is structured by an expressive grammar of a cultural practice and the idea that the musical performance, particularly when improvised, not only holds relevance for the specific expressiveness of the music but also, and importantly, retroactively influences the expressive grammar of the music practice in question. To address this concern, I suggest adopting Bertram's proposal, but with a reinterpretation: replacing the type/token dichotomy with the conceptual pairing of (social) *Habitus* and (individual) *habit*. This solution allows us to explain both

(a) that (subjective) musical expressiveness is rooted in, scaffolded by, and responsive to the context of a certain aesthetic mode of expression (an expressive *topos*) historically configured, socially shared, and instantiated in objectively distinguishable musical characteristics, and

(b) that, nonetheless, the specific expressiveness of the music in question contributes to shaping the objective expressive *topos*.

By understanding musical expressiveness in these terms and recognizing that individual habits of expressiveness interact in co-determination with the social expressive *Habitus*, we possess the concepts necessary to address the problem at hand.

4.2 *Habitus* and *Habits*

Let us focus first on the concepts of *Habitus* and *habits*. The concept of *Habitus* was introduced by Pierre Bourdieu as a way to understand the social and cultural conditioning of individuals' behaviors, tastes, and dispositions. *Habitus* refers to the set of embodied dispositions, habits, skills, tastes, and ways of acting that individuals acquire through their social activities and everyday practices and are taken for granted or 'go without saying.' It is the result of the internalization, and integration into a person's bodily memory, of the cultural norms, values, and practices of a particular social group or society. "The *habitus* — embodied history internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history — is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56). Hence, the *Habitus* operates at a pre-reflective and unconscious level, shaping how individuals perceive and interact with the world around them. While the *Habitus* is relatively stable, it is not static. It can change through exposure to new experiences and social environments, although these changes usually occur slowly and gradually.

On the other hand, *habits* can be understood not only, or not so much, as attitudes or predispositions to act, i.e., as routines generated and constituted by the (almost) automatic and unconscious repetition of behavioral patterns; rather, following John Dewey (1922), they can be understood as practical forms of (organization of) life that can be more or less rigid and repetitive or elastic/plastic and mutable. *Habits* are ways of organizing the interaction between the organism and the (natural and social) environment and are formed through responses to environmental affordances (Noë, 2009): they are fueled by the interactions they make possible.⁶⁴ They are normative with respect to the actions that are based on them: they connect, organize, and direct actions in ways that are compatible and functional to human projects and practices (Levine, 2012). Therefore, *habits* (or at least some *habits*) can be understood as embodied norms of actions (Peirce, 1931), as well as perceptions, affects, and expressions.

⁶⁴ The term 'affordance' was coined by psychologist James J. Gibson (1979) in the field of ecological psychology. He used it to describe what the environment allows or affords an organism to do. According to Chemero (2003: 181), affordances concern the relations between the capacities of organisms and the characteristics of the environment.

4.3 Emotions as Individual and Social Habits

This thesis finds support in the research of Monique Scheer (2012), according to whom emotions are a kind of practice, and thus they are historical and social, while at the same time being embodied and reconfigured by the individuals who experience them in their praxis. This implies that emotions are, on the one hand, culturally articulated and part of the social expressive Habitus that regulates and constrains individual expressiveness. However, on the other hand, while individual expressive habits are plastic and can be modified through practice, they can also impact the expressive Habitus of a cultural practice. This thesis reconciles the cultural dimension of emotions with their bodily dimension and accounts for how artistic expressiveness is not simply a reflection of subjective emotions but participates in shaping the typical emotions of a specific historical culture.

4.4 The Historicity and Situatedness of (Musical) Expressive Habits

Not only the expression of emotions but the emotions themselves should be understood in terms of *expressive habits*, encompassing both individual and social dimensions. Emotions are shaped and nurtured by the situated cultural and artistic practices, such as music, in which they are expressed. In turn, they constrain these expressive practices. However, emotions are not static. Since modalities and kinds of expression are among the constitutive elements of emotions, and since kinds and modalities of expressions change, at the historical and individual level, then emotions are transformed through the practices in which they are involved. In turn, emotions, as they are expressed in cultural and artistic expressive practices, impact these expressive practices.

This applies also to *musical expressiveness*. Considering musical expressiveness based on the relationship between Habitus and habits allows us to reconcile the external/objective and internal/subjective dimensions of musical expressiveness, while understanding that not only expressive grammars of musical genres constrains individual musical expressiveness, but specific musical performances retroactively influence the expressive grammar of the musical practice in question. If emotions have a historically and socially determined character as practices molded by an expressive Habitus (Scheer, 2012), then musical expressiveness arises from the way an expressive Habitus is (trans)formed through its application in the contingent

situations of musical performances.

Emotions develop historically, they have a history (or multiple histories); and when it comes to musical expressiveness, one must acknowledge that musical emotions too have a history (Spitzer, 2020): musical emotions are forged within the Habitus of historical practices.

Musicians embody expressive habits as aesthetic styles through exposure to practice (and training), thereby shaping the expressive Habitus of listeners. Therefore, a double influence is at play: a social/historical musical Habitus impacts the expressive habits of performers, while performers' practices realize expressive habits in ways that feedback onto the Habitus, (re)shaping it. This happens because habits are not merely automatic behavioral routines but also plastic organizations of the relationship between individuals and natural/cultural environments (cf. Dreon, 2022). In the case of musical performances, this means that the expressive habits embodied by performers are reshaped through the interaction (or correspondence: Ingold, 2022) between musicians and musical instruments, musical cultures, performance situations, etc.

In short, musical expressive habits are in tune with the emotional expressiveness of a specific historical-cultural context. For instance, an emotion that is historically and culturally situated, such as romantic love, shapes the expressive characteristics of the music from the Romantic Age. This is manifested in musical expressions characterized by longing and melancholy, contrasting with the emotions evoked by the typical expressiveness of 21st-century *Echtzeitmusik*. Analogously, the aspiration to freedom and the revolutionary rage embodied in the African American rights movement in the second half of the 20th century significantly influence the expressiveness of free jazz. This is distinct from the expressions of rage articulated, for instance, by British punk music of the seventies. Thus, musical expressive habits rooted and articulated in objective grammars of musical practices and genres are forged by the cultural expressive Habitus, which also shapes musical practices. In turn, the expressive Habitus is (trans)formed by specific subjective expressive and performative habits embodied in response to situational (including cultural) affordances. Thus, the musical social Habitus guides individual expressive style. However, since musical expressiveness is realized through specific performances, the individual style of each performer (their personal expressive habits) in the long run has the potential to influence the overall style embodied by the social Habitus.

4.5 Shaping Emotions Through Musical Expression

It is therefore easy to realize that musical expressiveness is not merely a direct outpouring of the self. Instead, it arises from the interaction between individuals and both the natural and social environment. This means it hinges on the individual's appreciative response to the cultural — and especially musical — environment at the time of performance. Yet, it is crucial to recognize that not only is expressiveness historical, but emotion itself is historically constructed. This stems from the idea that expression, in the broader gestural sense tied to emotion, is a historical-cultural habitus. As such, it plays a role in structuring the emotion itself, which is embodied. In essence, musical emotion is both historical and embodied.

As shaped by the interaction between individual habits and the cultural Habitus, expressiveness is embodied both through immersion in a cultural practice and the diligent efforts of the performers. Performers craft their style through consistent practice, which encompasses the integration of musical instruments, assimilation of technologies like writing, interaction with the performance situation, and alignment with aesthetic cultural traditions. Notably, this influence is bidirectional: The expressive Habitus shapes the performer's habit, while the expressive habit reciprocally molds the Habitus. Consequently, musical expressiveness is influenced by the emotions which musicians experience in the context of the performance situation. Yet, these emotions are intrinsically shaped by cultural and social determinants, with their musical manifestation being a pivotal aspect of this socio-cultural molding. The musical expressions in a performance, therefore, play a role in the ongoing evolution of both personal and social emotionality.

4.6 Performing and Interpreting Improvisational Expressive Habits

The expressive *topoi* that regulate specific musical practices (i.e., the cultural expressive Habitus organizing, e.g., be-bop improvisations) are rearticulated by the exercise of subjective expressive habits of performers and listeners in the context of specific musical performances (e.g. a specific New York Jam Session of the fifties). These individual habits are reshaped by how emotionally charged responses to sonic affordances (rooted in a cultural practice) are articulated in musical performances.

From the perspective of performative practice, the cultural Habitus of a specific musical

tradition or genre influences improvisational expressiveness. For example, the improvisational style of a traditional Indian classical musician is molded by the distinct melodic structures and rhythmic patterns characteristic of that tradition. However, through consistent practice and experimentation, improvisers cultivate specific individual performance habits over time. These habits include musical patterns, techniques, and stylistic elements that become deeply embedded in their playing. For instance, a jazz pianist might develop a tendency to use certain chord progressions or melodic motifs during improvisation. Every musician forms their unique set of expressive habits based on techniques they have internalized, their artistic inspirations, their individual personalities, and more.

These habits have both a social and personal dimension, guiding how improvisers convey their musicality during performances. While expressive gestures are informed by both social and individual factors, their ultimate musical significance in specific performances arises from the improvisational interaction with the situation at hand. This interaction includes listeners who interpret expressive gestures based on their own cultural and aesthetic habits. These habits, shaped by their exposure to various musical genres and practices, profoundly influence their listening experience.

Consequently, based on the expressive habits of cultural practices and cultural *Habitus* — even in terms of perception and listening — expressive gestures can be interpreted in diverse ways. For instance, consider the moans, screams, cries, shrieks, and groans of Coltrane’s saxophone. These sounds can be perceived as a manifestation of religious cosmic spirituality, an expression of the African American people’s call for freedom, as outburst of rage, or a display of gendered physicality, epitomizing black machismo. Different listeners interpret the same sounds differently because, drawing from their own cultural *Habitus*, they perceptually enact the act of screaming in varied ways while listening (cf. Wallmark, 2016).

Building on this perspective, it is true that one cannot ascertain the emotion felt by a musician based solely on the music they play, as implied by the Naïve Transparency Thesis. Yet, my proposition diverges from the view that the expressivity of musical improvisation directly reflects the performer’s emotions. On one hand, as Gridley (2010, p. 165) puts it, “it is presumptuous to infer from a musician’s performance that they are in a specific emotional state.” On the other hand, grasping the psychological state of performers is aesthetically irrelevant: musical expressions of emotion are discerned by how listeners resonate with the

music, not with the emotional state of the performers. (However, in live performances, direct interaction and mutual emotional feedback loops can emerge between improvisers and the audience).

Nonetheless, my proposition counters the Objective Grammar Thesis as well, although it emphasizes that music is permeable or receptive to the cultural Habitus of a musical genre as well as to the aesthetic and expressive habits (or style) of performers. A performer's affective response to unfolding musical events shapes the interplay between the cultural Habitus and individual aesthetic habits, (potentially) leading to its gradual trans-formation. Just as ordinary emotions can be subjectively interpreted, musical emotional expressions can be perceived in myriad ways based on a listener's personal experiences, cultural Habitus, and individual expressive habits. For instance, Coltrane's "creative struggle" (Gridley, 2010, p. 178) and subsequent dissatisfaction with the realization of his aesthetic intentions can be interpreted as 'anger,' as suggested by journalist Don Gold's review (cited by Gridley, 2010, p. 164) of the concert featuring John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Thelonious Monk at the Newport Jazz Festival 1958.⁶⁵ Yet, to many other listeners, it might evoke feelings of friendliness, happiness, or enthusiasm (Gridley, 2010, p. 181). Crucially, listeners' frequent belief, even if often misguided or unreliable, that they can discern a musician's emotions in their music might be an indication that the expressivity of musical improvisation is influenced by the musician's affective state during the performance. This doesn't necessarily mean that the recognized emotion transparently mirrors the musician's feelings, nor does it assert complete independence from the performer's emotional response to their own music.

5. An Objection, and Two Replies

5.1 The Objection

In summary, even in the realm of music, expressiveness arises from the dynamic interplay between the social/historical expressive Habitus and individual expressive habits, which together shape the emotional expressiveness of musical performances in specific contexts. While the social/cultural expressive Habitus constrains individual expressive habits, these

⁶⁵ *down beat*, 7, August 1958, 16. Cf. the album *Miles and Monk at Newport*, Columbia PC 8978.

habits, enacted in specific performative situations, also influence the expressive *Habitus*. Thus, in an improvisational performance, musical expressiveness arises through the interplay between the cultural expressive *Habitus* governing the practice in question, the expressive habits of individual improvisers, and the manner in which they emotionally respond to the unfolding performative situation. While music is permeable to the emotions of the performers articulated in the performance, it isn't merely a direct outlet for the performer's feelings. Instead, it represents an artistic expression of culturally constructed emotions, honed by the musicians' performative experience, as they navigate a specific situation. This articulation is also contingent upon the performers' appreciation and perception of the development of the improvisation itself.

One could object, however, that this model, based on the thesis that emotion, and not just its expression, has a dual natural-bodily and cultural-historical component, is applicable, and in fact applied, to musical expressiveness in general, not only to the expressiveness of improvisation. Thus, the objective we had set ourselves: to explain the expressiveness of improvisation, would be missed.

Therefore, it is necessary to provide some elements to show how this theory is also particularly effective in explaining the specificity of the expressiveness of musical improvisation.

5.2 The Short Reply

A first, short and general answer is as follows. While the expressiveness of a performance of composed music, despite rooting its interpretative freedom (which contributes to distinguishing different interpretations of a composition) in individual and social expressive habits, depends on the constraints of the score, the expressiveness of improvised music is as such shaped more directly not by the subjective intentions of the performer, but by the meeting between the emotional/expressive *Habitus* of the practice and the individual expressive style — understood as a mark of the historically changing artistic identity of the performer — in response to environmental affordances.⁶⁶ In this context, this view not only accounts for the expressive

⁶⁶ When it comes to music, 'environmental affordances' could refer to various elements that might influence a performance. In the context of musical improvisation, this could include the acoustics of the performance space,

stability of improvised music (anchored in the grammar of a musical genre or practice) and its inherent dynamism (stemming from the historical, plastic transformation of emotional expressions) but also elucidates the paradigmatic manner in which musical improvisation displays the intricate workings of (musical) expressiveness. A cultural (musical) expressive Habitus, which informs the expressive habits of both performers and listeners, is simultaneously applied in and reshaped by the (appreciative response to) the performance situation.

5.3 A More Detailed Answer: The Expressive Specificity of Improvisation and Its Paradigmatic character

Still, a more detailed answer can be provided. When music is consciously and significantly invented during the course of its performance, the expressiveness of music becomes permeable (but not transparent) to the emotions experienced by the musicians during the performance. This does not imply a traditional mentalist perspective, where music is seen as an external manifestation of an internal intention preceding the musical realization.⁶⁷ Instead, it's viewed from an enactivist perspective (see Schiavio et al., 2017): the specific expressiveness of musical improvisation is not the manifestation of the performers' inner emotional life, but the configuration of musical emotion — already substantially shaped at the cultural level — through performative interaction.

This expressiveness is a product of intertwining elements: the emotional Habitus of a society, the artistic expressive Habitus of a musical practice (rooted in that society), the performer's musical style, the expressivity of the mood presented by a piece of music performed through improvisation (like in the case of jazz standard improvisation), and the performers' emotional responses to situated performative interactions. In other words, musical emotion is not an internal state dressing up as music and behavioral manifestations, but an

the nature of the instrument being played, the reaction and interaction of the audience, or even the historical and cultural traditions that have shaped the performer's approach to their craft. The performer's interpretation and reaction to these environmental affordances can significantly shape the expressiveness of their music, and it's a key element of improvised performance. For instance, a musician might adapt their play to the acoustics of a room, or change their improvisational direction in response to audience reactions. In this way, environmental affordances serve as both constraints and opportunities, guiding the performer's choices and giving shape to the musical improvisation as it happens in real-time.

⁶⁷ Unfortunately, this is how McAuliffe, 2022 misunderstands my position.

already culturally elaborated emotion that realizes itself as music in the performative situation, whose specific concreteness is unpredictable.

More specifically, in the context of a performance regulated by the cultural expressive Habitus, improvisation exhibits expressive habits in (inter)action with the Habitus and the performative situation. Cultural subjectivity is showcased by expressive styles (habits), but also by the performers' sentiment regarding their own (and others') performance, their interaction with a musical instrument, and, more broadly, the 'here and now' performative situation (including the audience) and the historical/cultural context. The performers' feelings (conscious or unconscious) of appreciation towards the ongoing musical results depend on how the subjective aesthetic habits (and emotional expression as Habitus) are realized, and they impact the performance's expressiveness. Since in improvisation the expressive articulation of the situation guides the performance's course, and is in turn guided by it, this expressive impact is significantly potent in improvised music. The musician's self-affection towards the music they produce contributes performatively to the expressive (and aesthetic) form of the played music.

6. Enacting Expressiveness Through and By Improvising Music

Some may contend that this perspective risks overstating the influence of cultural and interactive elements in musical improvisation, thereby minimizing the individual performer's contribution. However, while the cultural Habitus sets a framework for the performer, it doesn't pre-determine their actions. The performer's individual agency and creative choices remain central to the improvisation, evident in the distinctiveness of each performance. The performer's emotional responses and musical decisions shape the performance as much as the cultural and situational context. The interaction between these elements is what brings the music to life in the moment of performance.

Yet, one may conversely end up thinking that this amounts to saying that then this view implies that musical expression is the manifestation of the musicians' private mental states. It is not so: In improvisation musical expression forms an integral part of the extended, embodied, situated, and enacted mentality that takes shape through the performance. To clarify: it's not about translating a mental state of a subject boxed in a body into sound, as the classic version of expressivism mirrored in the Transparency Thesis might suggest, nor is it the sum of many

already established individualities. Rather, it is about the enactment of an expression in which musicians participate (since they assimilate the expressive characteristics of a practice) and which, on the other hand, is reconfigured through musical practice. In essence, improvisation is not about intentionally conveying a pre-existing emotion of the performer or aligning the music with culturally-coded expressive patterns: it is about shaping musical emotions, already historically/culturally forged, through the performer's expressive correspondence with the concrete situation of the performance they are helping to realize.

Just as musical improvisation is not birthed from nothingness but relies on conventions, habits and skills, the expressiveness in improvised music is not purely spontaneous, but articulates the musical style, or the expressive personality of the musician who inherits past experiences. Thus, musical expression is not the immediate outlet of the person suffering the emotion they express, since its form complies with the codes of an expressive style (*Habitus*). In fact, it is the result of elaboration, articulation, and composition according to a specific cultural practice and the musician's practice in terms of their musical style, technique, and relationship with the instrument. Moreover, while the expressive essence of an improvisation might be preconceived — such as in rendering a jazz standard, which holds its overarching expressive tone — it can still take multiple interpretations without compromising its improvisational essence.

Furthermore, similar to what happens in the ordinary expression of emotions, in music (and more generally in art), the expression of emotion manifests itself through the (inter)action of the artist with the materials of their practice, articulating in response to the situation that activates it. The pre-reflective embodied intentions of musicians reciprocally shape each other, giving life, with lesser or greater aesthetic effectiveness, to an expressive 'joint intentionality' that develops on the spot (Keller, 2008; Salice, Høffding & Gallagher, 2019), in relation to the general context of the performance — which also includes the musical text, instrumental techniques and practices, and artistic competencies of the musicians — and influences this context. Expressivity is activated in the sound, which thus assumes a meaning (an intentionality) in the embodied and situated interaction (see Leman, 2016), forming in the performance and contributing to (re)elaborate and (trans)form the expressive patterns.

Of course, and to reiterate, during improvisation, musicians' emotional and affective engagement significantly shapes the music's expressive qualities. Thus, the emotions

expressed by the music can be both an effect and a trace of the musicians' emotional states, while those emotions are impacted by the developing musical expressivity. Consequently, the music that is being created can simultaneously become the subject and cause of the musician's emotional state, and the emotional response, which might arise from, for instance, the musician's appreciation of their own performance. In other words, the concrete situation of the performance can evoke emotions expressed by and within the music itself: there is a constitutive feedback loop between the modulation of the musician's affectivity and the expressive character that they, as well as the audience, perceive in the developing music (Cochrane, 2008, pp. 336-7). One may formulate this idea by stating that the expressive responses to the 'musical persona' being shaped in the improvised performance contributes to shaping the 'musical persona' through performative feedback loops. Furthermore, while both the performers' expressive responses and the 'musical persona' manifest and impact the interplay between the expressive social Habitus and the expressive individual habits.

Indeed, improvisation is characterized by the simultaneity of the musical flow and the underlying affective flow that drives the generation of music by the musicians (Canonne, 2013, p. 339). Unlike interpreting a pre-existing piece, the expressivity in improvisation does not just reflect a traditional expressive quality rooted in a cultural Habitus and its variations in the embodied habits of the performers. Instead, it ensues from an expressive articulation molded by the specific performance situation. Even a predetermined expressive intent, whether consciously acknowledged or not, adapts during the performance. The musicians' affective and bodily gestures, who manifest the flow of musical energy in line with their cultural embodied habits, also have a formative power. Their bodily exteriorization of affectivity — articulated through habitual patterns of expression — in response to the music's expressivity (or the music played by the other members of the group) also influences the generated music's expressive qualities. This self-stimulating process, exemplified by Keith Jarrett as noted by Clément Canonne (2013, p. 341), integrates into the 'distributed creativity' dynamics among musicians, instruments, audience, and setting (Clarke, Doffman, 2017).⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Distributed creativity* is a concept that originates from the field of cognitive science and emphasizes the collaborative and systemic nature of creative processes. Rather than considering creativity as a trait or ability confined to an individual, distributed creativity focuses on how creative processes are dispersed across individuals, tools, environments, and situations. In the context of music, the notion of distributed creativity can be particularly

Expressivity is not solely a manifestation of personal intent. Instead, shaped by both inherited and learned habits, it emerges from interactions within the musical environment. For the performer, the music's expressivity triggers affective reactions evident in their bodily movements, which then stimulate specific musical expressions. The musician participates in the expressive character of the music they play, emotionally reacts to the affordances it offers, and these reactions feedback into the expressive character of the music (Seibert, 2016, pp. 248-259). The expressive impact of the musicians' affections in relation to what they are doing can be conscious or not (it can become conscious precisely thanks to the music, to the musical and non-musical reactions of the other performers, the audience, etc.). In turn, the performer's 'expressive system' interacts with the expressive systems of the other performers and with those of the listeners: this interaction takes place on the ground of the expressive *Habitus* and impacts it.

In this regard, musical subjectivity is shaped through the display of expressive style (habit), which is influenced by the performative/appreciative impact of the performers' affections towards their own and others' performances, the interaction with the instrument and generally with the here-and-now performative situation (which includes the audience) and the historical-cultural situation dominated by the expressive *Habitus*.

Expressive musical habits of both performers and listeners are scaffolded by the *Habitus*. They correspond to the emotional expressiveness of a certain historical-cultural situation. Acquired through the incorporation of the responses to environmental/cultural affordances, that is, through an exercise of social coordination through and thanks to music they are determined by the *Habitus* that shapes artistic practices. Once incorporated, expressive habits scaffold the musical '*nachvollziehen*' (Vogel, 2022), that is the cognitive and emotional process of understanding, empathizing with, and appreciating a musical performance through listening: a

relevant. For example, during a musical improvisation session, creativity is not limited to a single musician. Instead, it emerges from the interaction between all musicians involved, their instruments, the environment in which they perform (including the audience), and the historical, cultural, and stylistic frameworks they are part of. Each of these elements contributes to the overall creative process, influencing and shaping the music that is being created. Furthermore, distributed creativity does not only involve the 'distribution' of creative processes across different elements but also involves a continuous feedback loop between these elements. For instance, a musician's creative output can be influenced by the reactions and inputs from the other musicians, the audience's feedback, the characteristics of the instrument they are playing, and the specific atmosphere of the performance setting. At the same time, the musician's performance can, in turn, influence all these elements, leading to an ongoing, dynamic process of mutual influence and adjustment.

process that implies an active engagement with the music and that importantly includes grasping its expressiveness.

7. Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasized that the expressiveness of improvised music hinges on the dynamic interplay between the cultural expressive *Habitus* and the individual expressive habits of performers and listeners alike. This interplay not only acts as an organizational guide for the expressive articulation of the performance but is also shaped by the performers' emotional reactions to the evolving 'musical persona,' — the expressive character of the music being generated in real-time. To put it succinctly, in the absence of a predetermined composition, the improviser manifests their deeply rooted and socially-influenced habits, underpinning their performative expressivity. As this expressivity unravels within the improvisational context, it modulates in alignment with the expressive attributes emerging within the performance situation. Even if these modulations, or adjustments, are subtle, nuanced or latent, they possess the potential to redefine and reconfigure both the performative habits and the overarching expressive *Habitus*. Concurrently, these expressive habits frame the listeners' expectations, appreciations, and interpretations of the musical gestures occurring within the improvisations and, in turn, these habits are reciprocally influenced by the musical experience itself.

And yet, although I have previously addressed how to counter certain objections to my proposition — a proposition that is admittedly more programmatic in nature than formulated as an irrefutable argument — one could still have another worry and raise a general objection. It could be further contended that explaining the expressiveness of improvisation, especially in relation to expressive habits, might appear counterintuitive. Some might believe that improvisation, by its very nature, transcends the realm of the habitual.

But this assertion is misguided. Habits, in a broader sense and not merely as technical competencies, allow performers to ease control over various facets of their performance. This relaxation facilitates a creative response to the ongoing situation, enabling the emergence of unexpected elements that might even surprise both performers and listeners. Habits are operating even in contexts like 'free improvisation,' where there is a deliberate pursuit of novelty or unpredictability. In fact, the quest for the new and the emphasis on creativity itself stem from a historically-contextualized *Habitus*, within which the element of surprise is

aesthetically valued.

A plausible theory posits that habits don't just form aesthetically by virtue of the emotional rewards that follow the organism's response to environmental affordances — they evolve and refine themselves through continuous interaction and engagement. But to prevent stagnation, they demand an affinity for the unusual, for novelty — a meta-habit of keen attentiveness to the situation's unique nuances and demands. This can be conceptualized as a distinct *aesthetic (meta)-habit*, which rejuvenates other habits. It is improvisation that accentuates this very trait (cf. Bertinetto, 2023). Furthermore, this responsive attention to the specificity of the situation, which is pivotal for successful improvisation, can be perceived as a key contributor to the aesthetic value of any musical rendition. Emotion, especially when viewed through the lens of embodied habits (Hufendiek, 2021), is always expressed in an improvisational manner. It is a core element of the organism's interactive dynamics with an environment discerned through felt *affordances* (Gibson, 1979). To put it briefly, the emotional essence of musical expression arises from the spontaneous improvisation inherent in the act of the musical performance. This dynamism also engages listeners expressively, as they navigate through shifts in the expressive schema (Habitus) guiding their listening of the performance. Listeners partake in the performance by 'processing' its style, through their internalization and adaptation of the expressive Habitus, actively contributing to its evolution and transformation.

Consequently, a compelling case can be made that musical improvisation serves as a paradigm for the expressivity inherent in musical performances at large.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Workshop *Improvvisazione e soggettività* (Cremona, May 26, 2023) and at the ESA Conference 2023 in Budapest. I am grateful to the participants, especially Alessandro Arbo, Michela Garda, Gianmario Borio, Vincenzo Caporaletti, Nemesio Garcia Carrill, Jacopo Frascaroli and Vitor Moura, for their invaluable comments and suggestions. This paper was made possible thanks to the Research Project of National Interest of the Italian Ministry for University and Education, 'Improvvisazione - composizione: la doppia identità della musica europea,' and the research project 'Normative Aspects of Aesthetic Appreciation' (PID2019-106351GB-I00) of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.

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