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Improvising Transcendence for Health and Healing: A Literature Review and Pilot Study

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF MUSIC

IMPROVISING TRANSCENDENCE FOR HEALTH AND HEALING:

A LITERATURE REVIEW AND PILOT STUDY

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the healing capabilities of musical improvisation using a two-fold approach. First, it proposes a theoretical framework to understand improvisation as a preventive or curative event. Second, it employs the proposed framework to discuss data collected through fieldwork and a pilot study. Broadly, the thesis links improvisational behavior to the experience of transcendence and personal transformation. More specifically, the study focuses on a group of improvisers living in North Florida and the intricacies of three improvisatory sessions held at Florida State University. The research follows a medical ethnomusicological approach to understand the way these musicians articulate and describe the embodiment of “non-ordinary states” while performing. Throughout the discussion, the notion of non-ordinary states is frequently recapitulated and reframed. Roughly, it refers to the thoughts and emotions that distance the musician from common, everyday activity. In a sense, transcendence is viewed as a spectrum in which those unusual inner-phenomena unfold. The main argument of the thesis is that improvisation leads to the experience of transcendence, and that the experience of transcendence *is* in itself a vehicle to promote health and healing.

PREFACE

In the summer of 2010, I carried out a series of interviews and research sessions centered on the study of musical improvisation. My purpose was to learn more about the way musicians articulate the unusual experiences they often go through when improvising—that sense of joy, fulfillment, and transcendence that make improvisation so necessary and rewarding. Importantly, I wished to explore and write about the therapeutic power of improvised music impelled by a desire to let others know about my own story as a musician and improviser. I wanted to tell the story about how I was positively transformed by the influence of musical spontaneity. During a critical moment in my life, improvising helped me to cope with my own fears, doubts, and lack of direction. By engaging me in a meaningful and fulfilling activity, the practice of unplanned creativity instilled in me a sense of empowerment that allowed me to persevere and reaffirm my life. In a sense, this study attempts to fathom my own experiences. As a human being who traversed an intense emotional crisis and who was able to heal by making music spontaneously, I conceptualize here the intricacies of a practice that not only contains the potential to improve the life of many, but that I believe is necessary to complement and nourish the various dimensions of the human self.

The interviews and research sessions I carried out comprised the applied portion of a pilot study I designed, aiming to develop a framework to understand holistically the subjective nature of the improvisers' experiences. The outcome of the study, indeed, was the conception of an Improvising Transcendence Model, a framework I propose here wishing to contextualize improvisation as a conglomerate of processes that potentially transforms and heals rather than as an aesthetically-oriented musical practice. The manifold considerations at play in this pilot study—ethnographic stance, theoretical foundation, understanding of the phenomenon from various angles—required a thorough review of the extant literature. Therefore, a great portion of this thesis is dedicated to the discussion and evaluation of several interdisciplinary sources. Only through this path was a multifaceted analysis of improvisational processes possible; that is, an analysis that takes into consideration the shifting nature of human beings as well as the possibility of an unbound agency enacted through the embodiment of bodily and cognitive spontaneity.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY CONCEPTS

This thesis explores the healing possibilities of music improvisation using a two-fold approach. First, it proposes a theoretical framework to understand improvisation as a preventive or curative event. Second, it employs the proposed framework to discuss data collected through fieldwork and a pilot study. In this introductory chapter, I survey an array of sources, aiming to create a set of parameters and concepts to frame the improviser's inner-experience. In the second chapter I will establish a theoretical framework and apply it to two case studies. The third chapter consists of an ethnography of improvising musicians and the analysis of three improvisatory sessions held at Florida State University. A brief conclusion summarizes the findings and adds some final thoughts. Broadly, the thesis links improvisational behavior to transcendence and personal transformation. More specifically, the study investigates a group of improvisers and the way they articulate and describe the experience of "non-ordinary states" while performing. Throughout the thesis, the notion of non-ordinary is frequently recapitulated and reframed. Roughly, it refers to the thoughts and emotions that distance the musician from common, everyday activity. In a sense, I view transcendence as a spectrum in which those unusual inner-phenomena unfold. Main argument is that improvisation leads to the experience of transcendence, and that the experience of transcendence *is* in itself a vehicle to promote health and healing.

Improvisation

Improvisation can be defined in multiple ways. The sole act of defining it, however, may narrow the broad scope of possibilities it conveys. To some extent, this thesis does not ascribe to a particular definition of the term; different notions of improvisation will be rehearsed, tested, and explored. Depending on the disciplinary or philosophical approach adopted, unplanned creativity calls for dissimilar interpretations. In that sense, cultural contexts play a central role in determining the very nature of improvisation, conferring specific value and meaning to it. For this reason, the task of finding a clear-cut and all-encompassing definition is arguably antithetical to this project. Largely, I perceive improvisation as a performative event. That is, improvisation fundamentally involves the realization of bodily and cognitive action. Following this line of thinking, improvisation can be understood as a form of human behavior shaped by certain

structures and intentionality. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, in many cases extemporization does not involve particular goals, rather, it is fulfilled through the performance itself.

It seems that the performative event *per se* encloses the essential meaning of the term “improvisation.” When placed in a particular cultural context, the performative event is unavoidably laden with social and historical implications. At the interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, extemporization becomes structured by idiomatic codes, symbols, and the particular uses of a given society. Due to such performative essence, it follows that improvisation cannot be understood as an abstract concept. It is always a behavior grounded in culture. As a performative event, it projects and expresses culturally determined selves that evolve through time and place. Therefore, improvisation’s behavioral aspects, along with its relative conceptualization and framing, are rooted in shifting and unscripted social realms.

1. Cultural Approach

Within musicological literature, improvisation was treated for many years as the counterpart of composition. Because of the predominant role of written music and scores in twentieth-century scholarship, improvisation studies began to develop mainly by focusing on its final “product:” the esthetic substratum of unrehearsed performances. “For lexicographical purposes,” Bruno Nettl points out, “the concept and status of improvisation among the denizens of the art music world and among musicologists importantly involves its relationship to and contrasts with composition or precomposition. *The New Grove Dictionary* looks at improvisation from the viewpoint of its end product, using the concept of the musical work as its point of departure” (1998: 10). That is, the concept of “finished work” (ibid.) has shaped the discussion, bringing as a corollary the view of extemporaneous music as a process symbiotically connected to an end. Thus, a reductive notion of improvisation as means to achieve an idealized sound object rather than a performative event and a practice itself—meritorious of specialized research—has informed scholarship. In many societies—such as the Kaluli from Papua Guinea (Feld 1982) or the Q’eros from the Andes (Wissler 2009)—people utilize music improvisation as a means of achieving catharsis. That is, they incorporate improvisation as a technique of the body and self. They adopt the particular dynamics of spontaneous behavior and make them an

intrinsic element in the context of meaningful music-making. Only through extemporization¹ can those groups enact certain modes of being. Therefore, the argument I defend is that extemporaneous behavior may be studied and discussed independently from its sonic product.

As will be seen in Chapter II, other traditions purposely systematize and professionalize improvisational procedures. In that manner, these societies stimulate their musicians to “compose” complex and polished sound products in real-time. That is the case of Indian classical music² and Persian radif (see Noshin 2003; Tala‘i 2000). In addition to a rigorous sense of craft, these two ancient systems relate extemporaneous creation to the induction of certain emotional profiles in both audience and musician. Among Indian and Persian classical musicians, then, the crafted composition is not the ultimate goal of the performance. That is, musicians coming from those traditions believe that extemporaneous behavior does not subscribe to the mere elaboration of an idealized, finished work.

To some extent, the view of unrehearsed performance as an unfinished work in progress started to take shape with the early and seminal work of Ernst Ferand (1887-1972). Ferand, who proposed for the first time the validity of music improvisation within scholarly endeavor, cemented his research on the hypothetical opposition between composition and improvisation. His writings centered in the axiom that extemporaneity is essentially a compositional process made in the “absence of notation” (Nettl 1974: 2). He perceives the improviser as “the inventor and executor of a composition” (Nettl 1974: 4), suggesting with this that extemporaneous behavior finds its *raison d'être* in a practical functionality. Under this lens, extemporaneity becomes a medium that fulfills the role of the absent score. It functions as the link between the composer/improviser and the imagined work of art. Ferand’s ideas depart from the consideration of two basic tasks that supposedly enclose the entire purview of music: creation and reproduction. By establishing this duality, he suggested first that the composer undertakes the

¹ Throughout the analysis, I will use the terms “improvisation” and “extemporization” interchangeably. These refer to central notions of bodily and cognitive spontaneity discussed in this study. Succinctly, my use of “improvisation”—along with other words that indicate what is usually understood as “real-time composition” or composition “in the course of performance” (Nettl et. al. 1988)—embraces a spectrum of processes linked to the performance of unplanned and transformative behaviors.

² Nalini Vinayak (personal communication, October, 2010).

crafting and finalizing of the work (fixing it into a written document); and second, that the performer reproduces such work by interpreting the written document. In the absence of notation, therefore, the improviser appears as the figure who masters both activities:

The division - taken for granted in Western musical life of today - that splits the original unity and simultaneity of creation and reproduction was and is foreign to the musical usage of the primitive and many other non-European cultures; the inventor and executor of a composition, the producing and reproducing musician, were originally in most cases one and the same person (quoted in Nettl 1974: 2).

Here, Ferand observes improvisation as the conflation of two well-delineated practices. For instance, due to their lack of notation, —primitive” peoples are in the need of improvisers to accomplish both creation and reproduction of the finished work. Extemporaneous music, then, is just one phase in the chain of decisions that lead the composer to the finalized sound object. Its functionality as medium determines its importance and aesthetic value. These ideas represent one established view within the extant scholarship about improvisation. Particularly, Ferand’s approach summarizes a theoretical stance I do not conform with.

In 1974, Bruno Nettl departed from Ferand’s conceptualization and proposed a new framework to investigate improvisation as a —single process” (ibid.). In his article —Thoughts on Improvisation: A Comparative Approach,” Nettl emphasizes the culture-dependent aspects of extemporaneous music-making. Importantly, he examines different musical traditions from around the world looking to find commonalities in the development of improvisatory techniques. That is, he aims to establish a shared understanding of extemporaneity as a universal practice. This —universality” was, according to Nettl, relative to particular social schemes and historical development. In his endeavor, Nettl strives to identify hidden relationships between distant traditions that make use of improvisation so that a scholarly template could be designed and applied to amplify further studies. In this manner, Nettl helps to open a broader perspective within improvisation studies.

Out of his desire to recognize relationships and links between different improvisatory traditions—such as jazz, Indian raga, and Persian radif—Nettl develops two concepts that will be important throughout this thesis: —building block,” and —point of reference” (1974: 15). To some extent, both terms refer to a similar idea. Building block alludes to the culture-dependent aspect of extemporaneity. Broadly, it invokes the notion of preexistent motifs, designs, contours, tonal progressions, or gestures that musicians incorporate into the unplanned performance. These

motifs—e.g., a major triad, a raga scale, a jazz “lick”— are important in so far as they allow the intertwining of spontaneous discourse. In his paper, Nettl argues that every improvisatory tradition is a repository of myriad building blocks. These have been composed, varied, and linked with each other incessantly throughout history. Musicians and audiences build up the particular sonic shape and semiotic content of the music by performing and listening to these building blocks within specific social settings.³ Musical environments (e.g., streets, concert halls, farms, night clubs, classrooms) mediate relationships and interpersonal transactions that acquire certain sonic topographies. Subsequently, these codified forms of social behavior are fixed and subsumed within the collective aural memory—i.e., the performance of lived experience is made by signs and is shared through sounding structures. The sound of such structures becomes customarily reproduced and accepted as part of the mutual social background. For this reason, building blocks are fundamental when invoking the cultural rootedness of extemporaneity or spontaneous behavior in general. They act as letters or syllables within a word, or as words within a sentence.⁴ The collective consensus that shapes musical building blocks is a precondition necessary for a fruitful expression and de-codification of experience through improvisation. Following Nettl, to a certain extent it is hardly possible to speak about music or culture without the mediation of preexistent building blocks. As units or cells that enclose information and coded experience, they serve to articulate dialogue.

The creation of new building blocks or motifs in music (e.g., a melody that becomes popular and is often quoted by improvisers) allows the interplay between tradition and innovation. When musicians learn a repertoire of existing melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic idioms, they are then able to reproduce or re-arrange those idioms according to individual needs of expression. In that manner, extemporizers enjoy the option to ascribe to a) an orthodox

³ As Benjamin D. Koen points out— in his review and discussion of semiotic models applied to music: —in Peirce’s model, and semiology in general, *meaning* and *mediation* are central concerns. That is, all signs have *meaning*; and *mediation* is the characteristic of the Sign ‘ [...] Mediation is the process by which signs, or objects and interpretants, interact. Nattiez states that an object has *meaning* when it becomes part of an individual’s *lived experience*” (Koen 2003: 66, unpublished). Thus, within the vocabulary of semiology, meaning is phenomenologically defined by its performativity. This thesis builds from that central idea.

⁴ Interestingly, in improvisation the semiotic substance of these “letters” and “words” emerges from the act of *pronouncing* them, and not from a preset manual.

vocabulary (e.g., a reliance on traditional motives), b) a heterodox vocabulary (e.g., new combination of pitches are introduced), or c) a balance between tradition and modernity. In this respect, Roy Wagner stresses that the power of convention—that is, the consuetudinary acceptance of certain symbols or constructions as social mediation—serves as a backdrop to the distinctively innovative character of creation: —Convention, which integrates an act into the collectivity, serves the purpose of drawing collective distinctions between the innate and the realm of human action. Invention, which has the effect of continually differentiating acts and events from the conventional, continually puts together (‘metaphorizes’) and integrates disparate contexts” (1975: 53). Therefore, building blocks not only set the norm, but purport the breaking of the establishment.

The motifs or cells Nettl takes account of are in a sense the basic vocabulary that defines improvisational systems. They constitute the spine of the tradition and speak about a deep sense of rootedness underlining extemporaneous renditions. Improviser and researcher Jeff Pressing has also formulated ideas that reframe and expand the notion of the building block. For instance, Pressing recognizes the aid of preexistent material in any improvisatory modality. To the extent to which every extemporizer relies on a set of learned idioms, his or her unplanned discourse will always include a great number of variational procedures:

There is a continuum of possibilities between the extreme hypothetical limits of ‘pure’ improvisation and ‘pure’ composition. These limits are never obtained in live performance because no improviser (even in ‘free’ improvisation) can avoid the use of previously learned material, and no re-creative performer can avoid small variations specific to each occasion (1984: 2).

Further, Pressing accounts for a spectrum of micro-processes at the core of extemporaneity. Such spectrum involves sequential steps that co-lead to the achievement of an “aesthetic stance” defined by “a balance between adherence to structure and self-expression, where the most common goal is to make appropriate music/movement/words that support the sense of occasion” (1984: 7). Departing from a submersion within the idiosyncratic set of formulas determined by a particular cultural context (which Pressing calls “aferents”), the player initiates an exploration of the variational possibilities of the material at hand:

Central to improvisation is the notion of the ‘referent.’ The referent is an underlying formal scheme or guiding image specific to a given piece, used by the improviser to facilitate the generation and editing of improvised behavior on an intermediate time scale. The generation of

behavior on a fast time scale is determined by previously training and is not very piece-specific. If no reference is present, or if it is devised in real-time, we speak of free or absolute improvisation (1984: 2).

Subsequently, the player engages in the creative invention of unscripted formulas. Those original formulas exemplify the influx of the musician's self-expression and promote an individualization of the impromptu. Pressing conceptualizes these fresh musical ideas as seeds (1984:7). Further, he confers them an ability to open new realms of knowledge and spiritual expression. According to his model, seeds are engendered out of the dynamic interaction between structure and self-expression:

The generation of seeds is an associative process. That is, each new seed generated will almost always be the result of combining previously learned gestures, movement patterns or concepts in a novel relationship or context. The conservatism of this process derives largely from the limited resources of cognitive procession available for real-time composition. But all or nearly all improvisation traditions also proclaim the notion that completely new and unprecedented seed ideas sometimes spontaneously occur. The origin of such material is often ascribed to God, mysterious higher forces, or undefined transpersonal powers (1984: 7).

In a sense, Pressing's analysis departs from Nettl's building-block assumption, but it also introduces new threads in the discussion. Specifically, he inserts the notion of seeds as sound modules without precedent in the world. That is, he finds feasible the production of *original* knowledge. To this assertion, Pressing adds a vague reference to transpersonal powers that might work as the ultimate source of spontaneous creativity. Improvisation, under this lens, acts as a linkage between the realms of the sacred and everyday reality.

In sum, building-block theory comprises a multiplicity of views that converge in the notion of pre-composed sonic structures governing improvisation. Such preexistent schemes confer form and cultural ground to extemporaneity. For example, in North Indian classical music, improvisers are expected to learn and explore the *thaats*. These are parent scales with a set group of pitches and symbolic substance.⁵ Performers have to become acquainted with the various indexical meanings attached to the melodic structure, such as reference to times of day or emotional landscapes. Not only that, their expertise is measured in relation to the knowledge of phrases or motives generated by previous generations of musicians. In a public performance, both the audience and the musician are confronted with the interplay between tradition and

⁵ Nalini Vinayak (personal communication, October, 2010).

innovation. To some degree, listeners expect to hear a convincing recapitulation of preexistent phrases. The mediating function of tradition is brought about through the performance of certain idioms, certain melodic gestures known by an average audience. Raga musicians are trained to easily “quote” from a vast stock of idiomatic units. This helps creating a shared arena of understanding for the flow of expression and de-codification of experience. In jazz music, for instance, experienced performers may seamlessly insert into their improvisations phrases recorded by other musicians that convey points of historical reference or even serve as a form of political commentary. The jazz player assumes, in this situation, that the listener will recognize the phrase and de-code the sub-text implicit in the quote. In a similar sense, Persian radif musicians may play a standardized set of pitches to signal the arrival of a peak passage in their improvisations. In this tradition, the audience would identify the motif or standard set of pitches and would acknowledge (and embody) the climactic moment.

When considering the preexistent quality of building blocks, the contextual influx of culture within improvisation becomes evident. Any unrehearsed performance builds from micro-elemental structures that are “already there.” A preferred set of pitches or “lick” that is used over and over by jazz improvisers, for example, may have been composed by those musicians themselves or borrowed from someone else. In either case, the sonic configuration is used for the same purpose: it works both as a musical and as a cognitive reference, purporting an organizational function. In this thesis, I assume that no improviser can construct an extemporaneous discourse without the aid of pre-composed or pre-performed musical units. The employment of a shared and consensual vocabulary—that is, a stock of melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic building blocks—is necessary to fulfill successful transactions between performers and between performers and listeners. This includes those situations in which the performer is the listener as well. Even at the intrapersonal level, individuals need to incorporate what they have learned in their daily interactions with other musicians so that what they attempt to express acquires a readable surface. Performers codify emotion and cognition into conventional constructs (e.g., a given melody) in order to bracket and transmit their lived experience. Wagner equates this process to the steps human beings take to turn into *words* the purely physical and gesticulatory sonorities produced by the vocal folds.

Consider what happens when we speak [...] [W]hat we produce in speech is a kind of blurred and mumbly music, and one has to learn how to resolve this orchestration into conventional forms and units if one is to make sense of it, much as a trained musician learns to resolve a roar of sensuous tonality into notes, chords, harmony, melodic line, and structural form (1984: 53).

The role of building blocks, then, is of the utmost importance. They confer meaning and structure upon the improvisation. As preexistent structures laden with emotional and cognitive substance, they connect the performer to a given social context. They are part of a shared system of symbols and inventions that support communal cohesiveness. Listeners and musicians are able to communicate only through the mediation of a consensual apparatus. The borrowing and manipulating of building blocks represents, under this view, the primal avenue to unfold unplanned discourse.

The second concept coined by Nettl, —point of reference,” alludes to a type of building block that helps to articulate the ongoing composition. For example, in his analysis of Persian classical music, Nettl notes that —certain signposts or points of reference must appear” so that the improvised rendition can come into fruition (1974: 12). He infers that —these [signposts] are certain central tones, opening and closing motifs, melodic indications signaling the coming of closing sections” (ibid.) and other melodic devices that are at hand for the musician. The main function of these devices is to link fully improvised statements. Within Persian classical music, for instance, there is a type of melodic cell called *gusheh* (translated into —corner”) which is utilized literally as a juncture between extemporaneous statements. There is a broad array of *gusheh*. They vary in length, tonality, contour, improvisatory —density,”⁶ and indexical meaning (e.g., mood or mystical symbolism). Nevertheless, as Laudan Nooshin emphasizes, the *gusheh*’s main role is conferring to musicians a general overview of the type of material they would be required to improvise upon (2003). For that purpose, the student is encouraged to learn the entire stock of seminal micro-compositions (again, the historical and cultural background serves as a basis for extemporaneous creativity). In a performance situation, Persian classical musicians would recall particular *gushehs*. This evocation of the seminal material, nevertheless, would be highly personalized and adapted to the performer’s expressive needs. In any case, the micro-composition is outlined, interspersed, de-constructed, or tangentially stated within the larger context of extemporaneous discourse. In sum, the *gusheh* is a point of reference that acts as a

⁶ About this concept, Nettl writes: —Diverse though [...] points of reference may be in nature, how close together or far apart they are may be measured, at least very roughly. We can refer to this measurement as *density* [...] It seems likely that a performer of improvisation using a dense model tends to vary less from performance to performance than one whose model lacks density, and that the kinds of improvisatory thinking that goes on in various musical cultures, different though they are in style and content, can therefore be compared” (1974: 13).

transitional device. It links together diverse spontaneously composed segments, allowing an articulation of the otherwise disjointed unplanned material (it literally functions as a “corner”).

Additionally, traditional *gushehs* can be viewed as preexistent micro-compositions, which also have poetic verses associated with them, yet they also embody melodies and aesthetics from the so-called folk genres of the Iran. They antecede and determine to a certain extent the topography of the unrehearsed performance. They are “fixed [that is, conventionally set into the body of the tradition], memorized by pupils, and then used as the basis for creative performance” (Nooshin 2003: 244). According to Nettl, point of reference is a variance of the building-block concept that appears in many other improvisatory systems—virtually in *all* improvisatory systems.⁷ For instance, it has a recognizable presence in the *taqasim* of Arabic music, Indian *alap*, or the figured bass of Baroque music (Nettl 1974: 12-13). Its main function within the aforementioned traditions is in many aspects similar to the one exerted by the Persian *gusheh*: it bolsters the articulation and flow of the extemporaneous discourse.

Nettl’s facilitates a thorough comprehension of the cultural basis of improvisation. His building-block theory confers a means to emplace unrehearsed creativity within the social realm. Rather than positioning the argument in a purely intuitive or “metaphysical” contextualization, he managed to introduce a structural approach that is laden with room for extensive speculation. Yet, the structural quality of his scholarship leaves aside the consideration of other equally important processes that are fundamental to fully understand the reaches of extemporaneous behavior. Throughout subsequent publications, Nettl came back to his concepts of building block and point of departure. Mainly, he reformulated his previous assumptions, fusing the two constructs into a more general and flexible hypothesis. In his edited volume, *In the Course of Performance* (1998), he repositions the discussion by introducing the notion of “point of departure.” In an illuminating quote, he finalizes the conjectural framework he rehearsed in “Thoughts on Improvisation.”

One approach that sets off improvisation from composition, and that helps the understanding of the improvisatory process of individual performances as well as established practices, involves the identification of a *point of departure* (my emphasis) [...] which the improviser uses as a basis

⁷ Referring to possible “universal” schemes governing brain and motor processes within spontaneous behavior, Pressing writes: “what is particularly striking is the similarity of general cognitive processes employed in many different areas of [extemporaneous] endeavors, when one penetrates beyond the specific language and traditions of each artistic discipline” (1984: 2).

for his or her art. Used in a number of studies of music in several cultures, this approach comes closest to providing a paradigmatic method for improvisation research. These points of departure or models exhibit enormous variety throughout the world (1998: 13).

In the second volume he edited, dedicated in its entirety to musical improvisation, Nettl notably expands on the cultural intricacies of building-block theory. Commenting on today's issues within improvisation scholarly literature, he recognizes that building blocks "reflect fundamental guiding principles of their cultures" (2009: xiii). Not only that, he summarizes the present state of affairs in scholarship by positing some central issues (only two are listed here), one being that "the relationship between some point of departure learned by an improviser and the product that is created in the course of performance," another stating that "the methods of combining, juxtaposing, and otherwise arranging building blocks to create music" (2009: xii). In sum, Nettl's perception centers on the cultural rootedness of improvised phenomena. The main argument is that improvisatory language necessitates the agency of building blocks to be fluent. Moreover, building blocks are micro-structures that enclose certain domains of culture and social lived phenomena⁸. In other words, these melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic designs are a product of socio-cultural convention, a factual and phenomenological evidence of shared experience.⁹ Both

⁸ The notion of "units of culture" playing a fundamental role in human evolution has been proposed by biologist Richard Dawkins in his discussion about *memes*. In a sense, building blocks behave as memes. That is, they can be defined as "units of cultural transmission or unit[s] of *imitation*." As Dawkins points out, "examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. [These units] propagate themselves [...] by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (1976: 192). The transmission of units of culture containing information substantiated through lived experience is central for understanding the power of building blocks. According to Dawkins, memes transmigrate from one human brain to another following an imitative mechanism. In order to be successful, transmigration must involve a degree of variational flexibility. Thus, the imitative restatement of the meme also calls for a re-evaluation, re-formulation, and individualization of the information being carried by the bearer of culture.

⁹ In her analysis of liminal musical experiences, June Boyce-Tillman comments: "Nicholas Cook develops the idea through the domain of Construction by seeing the formal structure of the music as a container in which the imagination of the listener can flow free, emphasizing the links with the cultural presuppositions of the listener. This links music closely with traditional rituals. A

musicians and listeners are able to dialogically relate through the mediation of a mutually owned system. Their common understanding of the world—their set of values, esthetics ideals, and social norms— is coded following a particular patterning which links them together. The back-and-forth relationship centered in a continuous transmission and reception of lived experience—the indexical outline of such inner-experience—is made possible through the relative conventionality of a preexistent material. Building blocks signify, in a certain way, a condensed commentary of the major historical and cultural stages of the society they come from. Their sonorities crystallize, in a form of aural memory and recounting, the historiography of the social system.

As noted earlier, Nettl's model circumscribes to an exact structural perspective. It identifies certain components and elemental matrices working at the core of extemporaneous behavior. His model focuses mainly in performance practices and it does clarify important aspects related. Nonetheless, much can be added to the discussion in terms of cognitive, anthropological, or religious studies. Improvisation is not only an avenue of expression, but—as I argue in this thesis—a means for healing and transformation.

2. Anthropological Approach

In an important article for the history of improvisation studies (~~Improvisation as an~~ "Acquired, Multilevel Process"), Edward T. Hall states:

Viewing improvisation in general, not just in music, from the perspective of an anthropologist who has studied and written about culture in a wide range of contexts [...], I see a highly creative, adaptive process in human evolution (1992: 224).

Hall's evolutionary perspective—in conjunction with other more recent approaches I will discuss later in the thesis—opens the doors for theorizing about extemporaneity as a key to human behavior. The idea of *play* was introduced by Hall and correlated to improvisation as a form of survival and adaptation. Centering on the biological configuration of mammalian brains and the evolutionary development of the limbic system, Halls explores the ~~ability to play~~ "ability to play" and finds it fundamental for ~~mastering the skills needed for survival~~ (1992: 227). According to

musical piece, especially one that is familiar to us, can become a place of reflection and meditation" (2009: 192-193). That is, music is seen by Boyce-Tillman as a *container* and a *place* for the mediation of ritual performativity.

Hall, this ability starts to take shape during childhood. Specifically, it emerges from the interaction between the child's innate (~~in~~herited" is the term used by Hall) predispositions and the material world that he encounters. This world, a physical and ideational reality that is ~~al~~ready there," represents a constraint for the child's unstructured self. Confronted with the unavoidable presence of nature's and society's ruling forces, children are in need of reconciling with the surrounding environment. It is by ~~pl~~aying with the material of that [surrounding] world that they are able to master the unwritten, unspoken rules controlling their world" (ibid.). Furthermore, in exploring and testing the limits of natural and social reality ~~they~~ go through a good deal of improvisation, a process which we seem to lose until [we] have really mastered other systems as adults" (1992: 226-227). Thus, playing with the surrounding world—improvising with its limits, rhythms, textures, and surfaces—is an avenue to achieve an *emplacement*¹⁰ in the world, a successful form of ~~being-in-the-world.~~"¹¹ Children are able to fit into the unknown environment by feeling and discovering it with their bodies and cognition. This capacity to mold body and self to the demands of natural and social dimensions is seen by Hall as an ~~ac~~quired" aptitude:

Unlike learning, acquisition is an endogenous process which is direct consequence of environmental influences; it is similar to the relationship of a seed to the soil which underlies and nourishes it. Acquisition, it would seem, is rooted in an older part of the brain (the limbic system), rather than in the world-and number-base learning which is primarily processed in the left hemisphere of the neocortex (1992: 225).

According to Hall, the limbic system is ~~the~~center of emotions, parenting, social organization, and play" (1992: 224). It is also the neurological center in charge of communication. Its function, therefore, involves the ability to communicate emotions to others. This last feature is intrinsically

¹⁰ ~~Em~~placement" and ~~em~~bodiment" are two key theoretical constructs that will be discussed below.

¹¹ Here, I build from Thomas J. Csordas' definition of this concept: ~~being-in-the-world~~ [is] a term from the phenomenological tradition that captures [...] a sense of existential immediacy [...] This is an immediacy in a double sense: not as a synchronic moment of the ethnographic present but as a temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement; and not unmediated in the sense of a precultural universalism but in the sense of [a] preobjective reservoir of meaning" (1994: 10).

important to understand not only improvisation—and its potential to transmit inner-experience through *play*— but music in general.

Thus, pointing out processes that concern human adaptability—such as emplacement, embodiment, and mimesis¹²—Hall lays down an approach that connects improvisatory behavior to purposes that surpass the artistic end. More precisely, he links the ability to play to a form of survival within natural and social realities. I emphasize that those mechanisms seen by Hall as “adaptation” can be reframed and inserted into the existent theory concerning “emplacement” and “embodiment.” The two last constructs have been analyzed by Devon Hinton and Benjamin Koen. Especially concerned with the performing of healing through sound, both authors point out that emplacement and embodiment are crucial stages in the preventive and curative practice. For instance, discussing the therapeutic uses of *maddâh* music, Koen affirms that embodiment is “not limited to *the body*, nor does it accept a mind-body dichotomy. Rather, embodiment refers to a process of transformation through which a human being, comprising intellect, body, and soul, internalizes and manifests virtues, positive ideas and energy” (2003: 7). Additionally, Koen goes on to say that “*the* emplacement refers to the role of place in the transformative process of embodiment” (2003: 188). That is, both embodiment and emplacement are processes that dynamically interact with each other. Departing from the idea of adaptation through play proposed by Hall, this thesis argues that extemporaneous behavior enacts the ability to achieve a “gentle” emplacement, a successful form of being-in-the-world.

In the context of performative mechanisms related to emplacement and embodiment, Hinton posits an insightful framework to understand the entanglements between ritual and healing (1999). His model subsumes phenomenological aspects concerning mimesis with the natural world, highly advanced cognitive processes, and the fundamental aid of music in enacting certain beneficial dispositions. In his exploration of the people of Isan and their therapeutic and preventive use of music, Hinton stresses the role of rituality and the mediation of iconic and metaphoric language to express lived experience. Not only that, he theorizes upon the ways ritual performance of certain musics lead to a gentle process of embodiment and emplacement. His argument explains that by enacting and performing through music metaphors

¹² In this regard, Theodore Levin writes: “Mimesis adds a representational dimension to imitation. It usually incorporates both mimicry and imitation to a higher ends, that of re-enacting and re-presenting an event or relationship, and thus it involves the invention of intentional representations” (2006: 75).

that reflect archetypal formations and rhythms of nature, Isan people achieve a flexible state characterized by a mind and body plasticity. The condition of “being-flexible” is, according to Hinton, conducive to healing and transformation.

Hinton stresses that, according to Isan people, “bending and flexibility [...] [are] most valued in language idioms, body habitus, and dance. Moreover, uprightness and straightness are given an extremely negative valuation. Rather one wishes to be as soft and pliable as the bamboo in the wind, adjusting and not breaking, rather humbly bending” (1999: 78). Here, “bending and flexibility” refer to the embodiment of idealized values that pervade the social and natural environment. Thus, the mimetic performance of metaphors enacts a flexible quality leading thereafter to a successful emplacement in the world. In Hinton’s hypothesis, metaphors own a phenomenological and rather practical value. For instance, a banana tree’s leaf that undulates with the wind is not only an image of beauty, but an allegory and a natural form of behavior that can be reproduced through mimesis. For the Isan people, the rhythms of nature are the main source of cultural patterning. On a daily basis, their landscape stimulates their imagination and sensibility. A rich gamut of natural forces—water currents, winds, exuberant vegetation—is rapidly picked up and re-formulated as esthetic and moral archetypes. These mental images then are brought to mind over and over in order to trigger positive psychological and physical profiles. The image of a flowing or flexible natural element—e.g., a piece of wood that bends—is perceived as perfectly embedded within the Isan people’s view of the universe. Since the water current or the piece of wood manage to flow and bend accordingly to the environmental demands, they successfully fit into the shifting quality of reality. That is, those natural elements achieve a gentle emplacement by being flexible and bendable. For this reason, if the individual reproduces through mimesis the flexible quality found in the iconic images of nature, then the possibility to adapt and fit multiply. According to Hinton, this condition is essential to understand how preventive ethnomedicine works.

In his “Ethnography of a Musical Healing in Isan” (1999), Hinton proposes that iconic images of nature and musical improvisation are decisive elements during curing ceremonies. In his recounting of a séance led by Mother Star, a well-known healer of Northeastern Thailand, Hinton describes how rhythmic and melodic patterns of music are used to inoculate images of the flexible in the patient. Along with extemporaneous music-making, song and poetry are improvised to help evoke more clearly and sharply the condition of being flexible. For example, in one of her curing sessions, Mother Star treated a young woman who suffers from hysterical blindness. The woman’s condition, in part, is a consequence of the parents opposing her desire to

marry a boyfriend. Mother Star admonished the parents: “Do not be so stiff and inflexible with her [...] if one is too severe, it will break” (1999: 406). Aiming to interpret and contextualize such event, Hinton applies to it his model of emplacement and embodiment. By doing so, he exemplifies one way in which emplacement and embodiment can be understood as stages to achieve flexibility and health.

Hence, the image, “if one is too stiff, then he breaks,” can be interpreted in different ways. On one level, it speaks to the need to be flexible, like the piece of wood that bends or the algae or lotus that moves in the currents of the waters, or like the *OO* plant, bamboo, banana tree, and rice that supplely undulates with the wind. On another level, this expression means that one should not bend the other severely and rapidly: or, like the recalcitrant water buffalo, the person will buck and the tether break [referring to the psychosomatic blindness of the girl]. One needs flexibility and supplely bend with circumstance; and one needs to skillfully and slowly bend the other. A philosophy of soft bending is stressed. And this philosophy is expressed in the epigram: “if one is too stiff, then he breaks” (1999: 406).

In this manner, Hinton summarizes how lived metaphor and the iconic agency of nature’s plasticity are brought about within the healing séance. By promoting a mimesis of the bending and flexibility attributes found in the natural world, individuals may cure and transform. Music and patterned improvisation are used, within Isan society, to convey images of flexibility and suppleness. By listening and dancing upon those sonic representations, the patient acquires—that is, *embodies*—the condition of being flexible. Thereafter, the process of emplacement becomes gentle and the individual finds it easier to fit into the social and natural environment. Following Hinton, this condition is essential to forge an efficacious preventive treatment.

Expanding on the notion of emplacement as prerequisite for adaptation and ultimate for the individual’s healing and transcendence, Koen writes:

Emplacement and body ecology create context and frame sacred clinical reality and daily activities; give meaning to poetic symbols and metaphors; and encourage cognitive links and reminders between symbols in the natural world and built environment and their direct or metaphoric meaning. Hence the focusing of one’s attention, and the expanding of one’s awareness is encouraged through the relationship inherent in this particular locale of emplacement and body ecology (2009: 116)

In this paragraph, Koen’s views are in direct dialogue with Hinton’s conviction in the curing power of lived metaphors. Nevertheless, Koen adds a new layer of analysis when he introduces

the notion of emplacement as a dynamic process rather than a “state” or “condition.” When he refers to emplacement as a process that encourages “cognitive links and reminders,” he touches on a key construct that will guide this thesis hereafter: emplacement, a successful form of adaptation and being-in-the-world, can also be actively practiced, fostered, and mastered. Specifically, those cognitive links and reminders—similar to Hinton’s indexical sounds and images— can explicitly be enacted through bodily and cognitive performance. That is, emplacement can be reframed as the process of playing with and exploring the features of the surrounding world. By making an analogy with Hall’s view, I posit that emplacement and improvisation relate at the level of performativity. Both are behavioral tendencies that facilitate fitness and help individuals feel at ease within the world and between people.

So far, my argument has considered improvisation as a form of behavior. At the level of cultural performance, Nettl argues that the use of building blocks and points of reference allow the rapid weaving of extemporaneous discourse. At the anthropological level, extemporaneity is seen as a form of adaptation to the shifting aspects of reality. Hinton and Koen reframe and expand the notion of adaptability, using embodiment and emplacement theory. Their views take into consideration the use of iconic images and sounds, lived metaphors, cognitive reminders, and other culture-determined constructions. In a way, these structures can be equated to Nettl’s building-block idea. An “iconic sound” or a “sound picture” is, according to Hinton (1999: 316), a patterned design that healers capitalize to unfold extemporaneous statements. Restatement, variation, and contrast are applied to the iconic sound or melody in the same manner an improviser manipulates a building block. Therefore, both concepts may be synthesized using single and polyvalent term: they are both *patterns*. In subsequent sections of the thesis, I will employ the idea of pattern to denominate a melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic micro-structure; it is fundamental for understanding the notion of healing through improvisation.

Transcendence

Musical improvisation, I suggest, can be seen as a practice that enacts healing and transformation. The base for this assertion lies in the multiple accounts of improvising musicians that I will discuss in Chapter III. In general, improvisers who were part of the present research recalled strong—sometimes indescribable—experiences while performing. Many of the participants manifestly considered musical improvisation a sort of “religion” or ethical guidance for existence. Their experiences, in many cases, linked both the performative and aesthetic

aspects of extemporaneity and the emotional and cognitive phenomena associated with healing events. Those phenomena refer to sentiments of freedom, happiness, empowerment, renewal, relaxation, connectedness, detachment, attunement, and meditative emptiness, to name a few. As will be seen in Chapter III, research assistants indicated the experience of these feelings as an outcome of extempore behavior. In this study, I assert that those sentiments are evidence and expression of the healing event. Moreover, they are constituents of a larger series of incidents and processes. The spectrum of occurrences that affect the individual intrapersonally—bringing as a consequence the transformation of attitude and adaptation to the shifting movement of reality—can be seen as the realm of *transcendence*. This investigation, therefore, needs to delineate a workable approach to introduce such an idea within the reaches of improvisatory studies.

Transcendence, or the experience of transcendence, can be defined using multiple angles. In my research I understand it as a spectrum of processes and events that lead the individual to become whole and heal. The main argument is that extemporaneity facilitates the experience of transcendence, thereafter leading to the curing event. In order to set a “transcendence theory” so that the therapeutic event can be investigated it is helpful to begin with a structural view of the human self. For that purpose, I invoke the paradigm designed by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*. In her ethnography dedicated to the agonizing experience of physical pain, Scarry proposes an outline to discover the different phases and junctures that structure the self. Her theoretical sketch serves to visualize a feasible configuration of the inner-experience. Such visual configuration helps to position the role of transcendence and its phenomenological and psychosomatic implications within the context of improvisation and healing.

In her ethnography, Scarry defines the core substratum of the self as pure “human sentience.”

In the long run, we will see that the story of *physical pain* becomes as well a story about the expansive nature of human *sentience*, the felt-fact of aliveness that is often sheerly happy, just as the story of *expressing* physical pain eventually opens into the wider frame of *invention* (1985: 22).

Two ideas are important in this passage. First, using as a case study the phenomenological actuality of physical pain, Scarry traces its “—~~igin~~,” its “—~~ing~~-felt,” to the primeval realm of human sensation. Under extreme conditions of pain, human beings become pure sentience. No cognitive or emotional processes exist at this level. The second important idea refers to the *path*

human beings are able to open from the stage of being “pure sentience” to the invention of self and culture. In this thesis, I concur with Scarry’s main ideas. That is, individuals depart from certain extreme experiences—not only physical pain, but emotional distress, sadness, anxiety, ecstasies, joy—and transverse diverse avenues to express them. In a sense, this constitutes a healing event *per se*: the ability to crystallize into cultural objects (words, sounds, images) the source of pain.¹³ Nevertheless, the notion of pure sentience as nucleus of the self is somehow limited. It negates the agency of human beings and the possibility of transcendence. It also contradicts the main argument of this thesis: improvisation facilitates the *movement* throughout a spectrum of events and processes conducive to healing. The very notion of transformation and adaptability are ingrained in the expansive and liberating forces activated when the improvising musician transcends.

Perhaps, Scarry’s argument is more in tune with “transcendence theory” when she affirms that “the body in its most intense presence becomes the substantiation of the most disembodied reality” (1985: 194). Yet, that disembodied reality is understood here as an *area* of reality that is new to the individual. Interestingly, Regina Schwartz affirms that “transcendence is not beyond the world; rather, is a passage from one world to another” (2004: xi). When improvisers extemporize new musical material—which is determined by culture-dependent structures—they embody new realities and new worlds of sensation. They open a path from their unique inner-experience to the sonic expression of it. Thus, transcendence may be perceived as a movement from one area of reality to another. More specifically, following the notion of adaptability, transcendence is framed here as a progress from one form of embodiment and emplacement to another.

In his edited volume, *Embodiment and Experience* (1994), Thomas J. Csordas writes: —“The paradoxical truth, in fact, appears to be that if there is an essential characteristic of embodiment, it is indeterminacy” (1994: 5). A “theory of transcendence” then should take into consideration the shifting quality of inner-reality and its mechanisms of expression. Such endeavor may be pursued following various approaches. In my research, I ascribe to a notion of transcendence rooted in emplacement and embodiment. More specifically, I draw from Csordas’

¹³ In her ethnography of the Temiar healing ritual, Marina Roseman investigates the act of “naming” a disease in order to neutralize it: —“the controlled uttering of names of illness agents that are located within the context of *human* interaction (or are mediated by human carriers) is used in invocations to startle and shame the illness into departing” (1991: 28-29).

view of transcendence as a mainly performative occurrence. Not only that, my view integrates the production of meaning through action and the important role of adaptation in bolstering gentle modes of being-in-the-world. According to Csordas, action and adaptation are necessary to instill a sense of unbounded agency in the individual.

We could say that human action is transcendent in taking up situations and endowing them with meaning that is open-ended and inexhaustible without ever outrunning those situations; and situations cannot be outrun because they are structured according to an enduring system of dispositions that regulate practices by adjusting them to other practices, thereby creating the condition of possibility for the open-endedness of action (1994: 17).

The open-endedness meaning of action that individuals develop benefits them with a sense of freedom and realization. It is phenomenologically favorable because it purports fitness into the unscripted flow of the natural world. Therefore, transcendence activates a positive movement from one mode of emplacement and embodiment to another. Such movement, characterized by a conceptual indeterminacy,—that is, a rich polyvalent and multifaceted condition—constitutes in part the core machinery of the healing event.

In Chapter II, a model to frame such “indeterminacy” will lead to the discussion of how improvisers embody new realities through the use of spontaneous sound. More precisely, I will illustrate how these sounds are not randomly uttered but articulated through the use of culture-determined patterns. Building from Hinton’s discussion on “cognitive flexibility,” Chapter II will explain how improvisers of two different musical traditions access the transcendence spectrum to adapt and heal.

CHAPTER II

IMPROVISING TRANSCENDENCE MODEL AND TWO CASE-STUDIES

In this study, I posit that extemporaneous performance leads to the experience of transcendence. This idea originates in part from the review of experiences reported in Chapter III. So far, the central argument has emphasized the following points:

- 1) As a cultural practice, improvisation bears no abiding definition. Its system and theory are culturally dependent and therefore evolve together with the society that generates them.
- 2) The use of building blocks, or more precisely “patterns,” is recognizable in virtually all improvisatory systems. They are the fundamental cells and junctures available to the musician at the moment of real-time composition.
- 3) As will be seen, extemporizers manifest the embodiment of strong, transformative emotions and thoughts while improvising. These emotions and thoughts are processes and events that unfold within the spectrum of transcendence experience. Broadly, I see this spectrum to encompass an enactment of “non-ordinary states” that distance the improviser from everyday activity. Specifically, using the aid of embodiment and emplacement theories, I propose that improvisers’ deep engagement with sonic patterns fosters adaptation through somatization of inner-experience.

Following Csordas’ argument, I suggest that transcendence allows for a beneficial movement from one mode of being-in-the-world to another. This transition involves the creation of open-ended meaning through action. In the context of musical improvisation, the movement from one mode of being to another engenders feelings of freedom, awe, joy, empowerment, and serenity which are brought into play when musicians and sound flow in unison. Applying Hinton’s words: —Emotional states, through the tropic dimension, attain a sort of—at least latent and readily activated—physicality [...] Physical symptoms of anxiety and depression are a form of somatization. Emotional states *always* have physical correlates (my emphasis)” (1999: 276). The emotional states attained while improvising, then, are framed here as transcendence: transitional and non-ordinary activity that heals.

This chapter focuses on two main points. Firstly, I integrate the introductory discussion into a more structured approach to therapeutic extemporaneity. Secondly, I apply the resultant approach to two case studies: an improvisatory healing ritual of the Andean people of Q'eros and the achievement of remedial ecstatic moods in Persian classical music. Afterward, a note about the role of the research in the “Ethnography of Improvising Musicians”—included in Chapter III—is established to provide conceptual and methodological points of orientation that prefigured the pilot study.

Setting the Framework

1) *Non-Ordinary States*

In *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, Ann Taves writes:

Since there is no way to specify an inherently contested phenomenon precisely, I will propose that we situate what people variously refer to *emically* (on the ground) as religious, spiritual, mystical, magical, and so forth in the context of larger processes of meaning making and valuation, and specifically in relation to the process of *singularization* [...] by means of which people deem some things special and set them apart from others (2009: 10).

In reference to the theoretical problems inherent to scholarship that defines spirituality using abstract and unyielding terms, Taves introduces the notion of *specialness*: “[t]he idea of specialness is one broader, more generic net that captures most of what people have in mind when they refer to sacred, [or] magical. We can consider specialness both behaviorally and substantively, asking if there are behaviors that tend to mark things off as special and if there are [...] things that are more likely to be considered special than others” (2009: 26). In this line of thinking, I use the notion of non-ordinary states to denote emotional and cognitive occurrences that permeate the individual with a sense of transcendence. It is possible to establish explicit analogies by drawing on a more literal meaning of the word, that is transcendence as elevation or extension beyond ordinary limits; exaggeration, hyperbole, [something] *rare*.¹⁴ Improvisers feel extemporaneity as something that elevates them, as an activity that leads them to a rare dimension located beyond ordinary limits of reality—for example, after an improvisatory session, a research assistant expressed that he felt very detached and free from anything outside of the room and ensemble.¹⁵ In sum, extemporaneous music-making appears as a practice that

¹⁴ Oxford English Dictionary. Second edition, 1989; online version November 2010. (<http://www.oed.com:80/Entry/204607>).

¹⁵ Original underlining.

inserts a schism in the unfolding of quotidian events. It establishes a differentiation between ordinary and non-ordinary domains.

2) *The Temenos*

Building from this premise, the physical space in which extemporaneous performance occurs acquires a ritual aura. It becomes a realm of the unexpected, the spontaneous, and the rare. Michael Bakan comments on this feature of rituality of space in his studies of the use of “music-play” to improve the “quality of life for children on the autism spectrum” (2008: 167). More precisely, in conjunction with Benjamin Koen, Bakan developed the concept of a “playground environment” as a place to “nurture and support musical/social interactions” through improvisational skills (2008: 176). Further, such an environment was intended to promote a type of music that is “always spontaneous, free of specific musical/social goals and demands, and essentially unstructured” (Bakan et al 2008: 172). In that manner, Bakan aimed to help children on the autism spectrum to open their avenues of expression in a playful and socially shared environment.

The view of the physical space as a domain that co-creates new sensorial and cognitive worlds is present in the work of other authors as well. For example, Stephen Nachmanovitch, in talking about his preparation for an improvisatory rendition, invokes the Greek notion of *temenos*. He writes, “[t]he specific preparations begin when I enter the *temenos*, the play space. In ancient Greek thought, the *temenos* is a magic circle, a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur” (1990: 75). This view correlates with Bakan’s notion of the improvisatory playground as a “ritual space where the predominantly unstructured activity of free play that occurs in-between [that is, apart from quotidian behavior] unfolds as experience played out in ritual time” (2008: 181). Thus, the “non-ordinary” quality of extemporaneous experiences is also imprinted in the physical space where it takes place.¹⁶

¹⁶ Psychologist Robert A. Johnson has discussed the transformative and healing potentialities of ritual following an approach that focuses in the performative level rather than in the physical circumscription. His digression about the therapeutic capabilities of “ecstasy” is, in that sense, related to Csordas’ idea of transcendence. Both Johnson and Csordas ascribe unbound agency to the creation of open-ended meaning through performance. Johnson writes: “[c]eremony is a conscious event. Even the smallest act can become a powerful ritual. An act performed with

3) *Patterns of Sound and Cognitive Flexibility*

Understanding transcendence as a *shattering of the quotidian* is in direct relation to the emotional and cognitive experiences affecting musicians. More precisely, extemporaneous behavior is a concrete, practical way to enter into non-ordinary realms. One mode to visualize the process that takes place in the “ritual time” of improvisation can be illustrated by building on Hinton’s exploration of “cognitive flexibility” (1999, 2008). His argument can be summarized as follows.

- Improvisation is based on a free and intuitive manipulation of patterns of sound.¹⁷
- While improvising, individuals somatically engage the pattern’s sonic and iconic content.
- Such engagement operates as a form of sharp focusing and meditation.
- Improvisation demands a swift recall and manipulation of sonic patterns as well as the ability to seamlessly connect them.
- By performing, listening, and embodying the patterns’ melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic structure the improviser accedes to a realm of “pre flow.”
- Engaging a rapid succession of patterns at deep psychosomatic levels helps musicians develop the capacity of “cognitive flexibility.”
- Cognitive flexibility is an avenue for adaptability; it allows positive emotions (relaxation, joy, empowerment, camaraderie) and a sense of fitness within reality.

Hinton proposes a model in which individuals *somatize* patterns of sound that are imagined and performed simultaneously on the spur of the moment. The somatization he refers to, nevertheless, conveys more than the corporeal assimilation of sound and rhythm into bodily activity and bodily hexis.¹⁸ It does involve processes of embodiment and emplacement that fine tune cognitive and physical skills, but also activates a type of fully-engaged creativity that open

symbolic intent sets up an exchange between the unconscious and the conscious that allows for progression toward unity. This exchange can move in two directions: A consciously performed act will effect deep psychological change. A ritual act that springs from a change in unconscious attitude will be expressed as a change in conscious attitude” (1987: 90).

¹⁷ Compare to Nettl’s “building-blocks.”

¹⁸ “*Bodily hexis* refers to the relationships of bodies or beings to each other, to the natural and constructed environment and the state of ease or unrest in one’s body” (Koen 2003: 118).

the horizons of experience. In a sense, somatization can be seen here as an *absolute* and *extreme* form of embodiment and emplacement, as the actual crystallization of human agency through performance. In this regard, Hinton asserts:

Within musicology, certain authors suggest that listening to music is a kind of practicing cognitive flexibility: when one shifts the attentional focus from one to another of several melodic lines, a kind of figure-ground reversal occurs [...]. Several patterns may be present simultaneously, and the person may attend to all the patterns dimensions at once; in a kind of gestalt. But then, inevitably, the mind attends to one and then another of these layers. As attention shifts from one pattern dimension to another, there is a great sense of transformation—of parallel universes of possible meaning. One learns a lesson: each situation has multiple meaning dimensions, each of which may be engaged. The present mind-set is not the only possible one. With a shift of attention, a new dimension may be discovered and engaged (2008: 132).

According to Hinton, inner-transformation occurs when the improvising individual engages with a multi-layered and polyvalent performance of patterns. This type of cognitive somatization can also be understood under the lens of the “somatic modes of attention” model proposed by Csordas. He explains that “[s]omatic modes of attention are culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (1993: 138). In his analysis, Csordas affirms that engaging the object of attention by wholly embracing it through perceptual and cognitive de-codification facilitates a therapeutic emplacement in the world and reality: “to attend to a bodily sensation is not to attend to the body as an isolated object, but to attend to the body’s situation in the world. The sensation engages something in the world because the body is ‘always already in the world’” (ibid.). Thus, the perceptual engagement and somatization of the sonic pattern—which could be expressed through phrases such as “feeling the music,” “flowing with the melody,” “being caught in the groove”—plays an important role in improvisation’s power to shift the experiential rhythms of the self. This “shaping aptitude” fosters, and is in itself, a mode of cognitive flexibility.

4) Attention Theory

To further understand the relation between improviser, patterns of sound, and cognitive flexibility, an attention theory must be addressed. In that regard, following a phenomenological stance, Maurice Merleau-Ponty states:

To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data; it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as *figures*. They are performed only as *horizons*, they

constitute in reality new regions in the total world [...] Thus attention is neither an association of images, nor the return to itself of thought already in control of its objects, but the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon (2002: 30).

In this case, the pattern of sound is perceived as a *figure*, an attentional object that establishes a horizon, an open possibility. Extemporizers create and recall motifs and building-blocks that are not only esthetically, but emotionally meaningful for them. Developing a fluent discourse *within* the moment, the individual becomes grounded and wholly present in the world. That is, the pattern turns into a means for expression. It unlocks the probability of transcendence, instilling a sense of freedom, an “out-of-body” sensation.¹⁹ Under a more heuristic perspective, attention can also be seen as a form of meditation that invokes spiritual resonances. For instance, in his ethnography of *maddâh* music and ritual, Koen theorizes about attention functioning as a vehicle for inner transformation:

Through the ritual performance of *maddâh*, participants attend to multiple layers of meaning found in the performance. Most informants described their attention as both *pointedly-focused*, for example on specific words or passages in the *maddâh*; and *broadly-focused*, allowing themselves to be immersed in the *total sound* of the ritual and influenced in a holistic way, being “carried by” or “immersed in” the sound. In both the *pointedly-focused* and *broadly-focused* attentions, there is a *process* of transformation that occurs. It is a process of focusing attention, allowing *meaning* to be internalized, and manifesting what has been internalized, or *attending—internalizing—manifesting* (2003: 119).

¹⁹ Interestingly, Sartre confers transcendent qualities to the act of viscerally attending to an object, that is, to acutely perceive the discernible stimuli such an object radiates using as a means the totality of being. Moreover, Sartre equates consciousness to the very acts of *perceiving* the world and *transcending* towards it via the attentional bridges that extend between individuals and sensed objects: “All consciousness is a positional consciousness in that it transcends itself in order to reach an object, and it exhausts itself in this same positing. All that there is of *intention* in my actual consciousness is directed toward the outside, toward the table; all my judgments or practical activities, all my present inclinations transcend themselves; they aim at the table and are absorbed in it” (1984: 11).

This form of meditation can be equated to practices used in Zen philosophy. For example, focusing their minds and perceptions in a single *koan*—a question or problem that is also a “cognitive pattern” that has to be explored and “resolved”—Zen practitioners achieve *satori*:

When, as the Zen followers say, the mind is so completely possessed or identify with its object of thought that even the consciousness of identity is lost as when one mirror reflects another, the subject feels as if living in a crystal palace, all transparent, refreshing, buoyant, and royal (Suzuki 1996: 102).

That feeling of being “transparent” and “buoyant” is concomitant to the experience of *satori* or illumination. Since it allows an embodiment of “freshness” and renewal, it is also a form of cognitive flexibility that supports well-being and realization.

At a neurological level, attention processes have also been investigated. Research suggests that a rapidly and sharply focused perception of attentional structures promotes brain plasticity. In their investigation of attentional processes, Mei-Ching Lien et al. found that perceptual focus does not weaken when the attentional object changes swiftly (2010). That is, cognition and perception are prepared to focus accurately whether the stimuli is fixed (e.g., the individual contemplates a picture) or changing (e.g., the individual watches a succession of pictures). Attentional capture, thus, interlaces the musician’s perceptual apparatus with the sonic content of the pattern. This, in turn, produces a series of neurological processes correlated to the chemical basis of perception. Neurons and synapses are triggered, bringing with this a restructuring of the brain. In the context of extemporaneous behavior, William L. Cahn affirms, “[a]pproaching everyday activities with an attitude of improvisation is one way of deepening involvement in life and discovering more about oneself” (2005: 24). That is, learning musical improvisation instills spontaneity in the musician’s daily activities. As a practice, it produces a radical change in the way he sees and approaches the world. As Bryan Kolb et al. assert, “synaptic organization is changed by experience” and “virtually any manipulation that produces an enduring change in behavior leaves an anatomical footprint in the brain” (2003: 3-4). Then, the type of cognitive flexibility the musician learns by engaging spontaneously with patterns of sound also has a neurological basis. Cognitive flexibility is an outcome and condition of brain plasticity.

5) *Flexibility of Mind, Flexibility of Body*

Gerald M. Edelman explains that the human mind originates from the interaction of biological, cultural, and physical elements within an ongoing process of morphological adaptation (1992). In his investigation, he proposes the idea of “global mapping,” referring to the existence of bundles containing dense webs of neurons and synaptic connections. Through neuronal wiring, the brain spreads sensory motor instructions that accomplish intricate muscular movements. In addition, each sensorial stimulus—for example, a sound—activates a web of neural connections that modifies the morphology of the brain. “Global mapping,” then, denominates the restructuring and assembling of new neural and synaptic diagrams that loop within a dynamic flow of data that have been previously stored through past experiences. The experience of transcendence may be seen as a phenomenon triggered by the interacting relationship between sound, memory, emotion, and cultural milieu during performance. Following Edelman, these four areas are embodied through a massive interlinking of neural wiring and synaptic reshaping of the brain; that is, sensorial phenomena awaken in the individual the emergence of “global mappings.” In turn, this causes an “over-saturation” of perception: multilayered sets of stimuli invade the brain. Transcendence may be a polyvalent process that encompasses the hearing and performing of sequenced patterns, involving a subjective corpus of memories and emotions that are activated while improvising. This corpus interacts throughout complex neuronal wiring and co-creates the transcendent experience—via an exacerbation of the sensorial processes.

Judith Becker has applied Edelman’s theory to her work, aiming to understand the origin of trance states from a cultural and biological stance: “If a particular sound or sight results in the excitation of a global mapping, the individual may be associating the sound with a complex set of memories, emotions, inspirations to actions, beliefs, and even the experience of another realm of being” (2004: 115). In short, both Edelman and Becker point out that trance and other similar transformative experiences cause a restructuring of the brain. The de-codifying of sensorial stimuli produces *both* physical and emotional outcomes. Thus, the materiality of cognitive processes is reaffirmed here. Cognitive flexibility, it follows, is strongly connected not only to emotion and spirituality, but to the body.²⁰

²⁰ Interestingly, physicist Moshe Feldenkrais has investigated the attainment of self-awareness and advantageous mindsets through the fine-tuning of bodily movement and posture. By developing various techniques centered on the activation of the body’s natural mobility,

6) *Improvising Transcendence*

Building on the concepts discussed so far and on the ethnographic data that will be commented upon in Chapter III, I propose the following model for framing improvisation as a healing practice:

- **First stage:** Improvisers enter into the *temenos*, the “ritual time” in which playfulness and intuition overcome the rules of logic and purpose-oriented tasks. This marks a differentiation between ordinary and non-ordinary environments.
- **Second stage:** Improvisers initiate the recalling and imagining of sonic patterns. By performing spontaneously, they physically and cognitively engage the particular sonic structure of the pattern. The fine motor skills necessary to target pitches and rhythms in the instrument demand a sharpening of attention. Feelings associated with the motifs being played create a close connection between inner-experience and sonic discourse.²¹

Feldenkrais aims to foster a dis-tension of skeleton and muscular systems. He believes that self-rehabilitation is viable by contesting harmful bodily behaviors associated with rigidity and muscle compulsion. His argument is that physical performance and psychological attitude are manifestations of the same existential axis. Therefore, by instilling a free flow of movement in the body it is feasible to liberate human mind from restricted modes of awareness. He writes: “The more an individual advances his development the greater will be his ease of action, the ease synonymous with harmonious organization of the senses and the muscles. When activity is freed of tension and superfluous effort the resulting ease makes for greater sensitivity and better discrimination, which make for still greater ease in action. He will now be able to identify unnecessary effort even in actions that formerly seemed easy to him. As the sensitivity in action is further refined, it continues to become increasingly delicate up to a certain level. In order to pass this limit there must be improved organization of the entire personality. But at this stage further advance will no longer be achieved slowly and gradually, but by a sudden step [i.e., through self-transformation]. Ease of action is developed to the point where it becomes a new quality with new horizons” (1990: 87-88).

²¹ In this respect, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states that “in flow [...] our concentration is focused on what we do. One-pointedness of mind is required by the close match between challenges and

- **Third stage:** The multi-layered, swift succession of patterns (which improvisers listen to and —apture” with their bodies) demands an extreme focusing, a form of sensorial exacerbation that breaks quotidian modes of attention. A sort of meditation is enacted.
- **Fourth stage:** A sense of —flowing” with the music awakens when improvisers find their *own* voices through combining the formulas at hand. At this stage, perceptual processes exacerbate synaptic connections and neural firing. —Global mapping” integrates subjective memory, emotion, desire, imagination, and intuition into a single, polyvalent phenomenological gestalt.
- **Fifth stage:** The experience of transcendence makes improvisers become *whole*. This moment is felt as a non-ordinary occurrence in which usual dichotomies are blurred. Thought and action, desire and fulfillment are sensed as a single, highly rewarding activity. There is an implicit acceptance of the moment being lived with all its complexities and open possibilities.
- **Sixth stage:** The acceptance of the moment and the feeling of becoming whole traduce into an *affirmation of life*. Improvisers learn cognitive flexibility, develop an ability to cope with the shifting aspects of reality. In turn, this ability becomes an —enduring change in behavior,” producing a structural modification in the brain. Now, improvisers know how to adapt to the complexities of social and material existence and how to react in the face of pain, loss, anxiety and other sources of distress. Improvisers perform a successful mode of —being-in-the-world.”

This model presents one view of a complex and multifaceted event. While there might be manifold other avenues to comprehend healing and transformation, the one I rehearse here may serve as a foundation for further studies. Additionally, even though the model is graphically structured through numbered and sequenced —stages,” it purports a *non-linear* system. Stages can be overlapped, fused together, skipped, or approached in any given order.

skills, and it is made possible by the clarity of goals and the constant availability of feedback” (1996: 112).

Two Case Studies

In what follows, I will approach two improvisatory traditions using the proposed model. The analysis will include a brief description of the tradition's main components and different paths to explore them in relation to the six stages included in the model.

1) *The People of Q'eros*²²

The Q'eros comprise a population of approximately 4,000 Quechua speakers. They are dispersed throughout eight closely connected settlements in the eastern side of the Vilcanota Mountains in the Peruvian Andes. Their main source of production is the raising of llamas and alpacas and the cultivation of diverse potatoes and tubers. Geographically emplaced in a harsh ecosystem, between altitudes that vary between 1,500 and 5,000 meters above sea level, the Q'eros have developed adaptative strategies that have permitted cultural and material development since ancient times. For this reason, they are popularly known in Peru as the ~~last~~ Inca community.”

The strategies they have developed—which the Q'eros themselves call ~~adaptation-~~resistance”²³—involves continuous migratory movement across the mountains. They are a transhumant society. In other words, they constantly move with their cattle searching for fresh pastures. Guided by the seasons and natural cycles, the community travels across craggy steps and abrupt slopes shepherding the livestock. They are constantly looking for fresh pastures. Additionally, their transhumant system embraces a type of seasonal agriculture. That is, the Q'eros cultivate different products that fit the various ecosystems they encounter through their voyage across the Andes' altitude levels. In this manner, migratory displacement of the population allows for efficient agriculture and the health and fertility of the cattle.

Nevertheless, this ~~adaptation-~~resistance” strategy also has negative consequences. The Q'eros, as other similar Andean communities do, suffer from a permanent deterioration of the musculoskeletal structure. The continuous mobilization of these human groups cannot be halted. The subsistence of the livestock and the agrarian production—and therefore of the community itself—depends on it. The migratory displacement often involves long and exhaustive periods of climbing throughout the mountains without any mechanical aid. Thus, body deterioration and the emotional distress associated with the inclemency of the environment have led the Q'eros to

²² This section uses as a main source the dissertation written by Holly Wissler (2009).

²³ From <http://www.qeros.net/>, an official website developed by the community of Q'eros.

accept bodily pain and distress as a natural consequence of existence. In this regard, Kathryn Oths affirms: “So accustomed, the sierra people will bear a tremendous amount of musculoskeletal pain and illness, often derived directly from their work, yet [they] continue to labor. [For this reason], bodily pain is seen as a natural and expected condition of life. Reliant upon their own production of subsistence, there is simply no other option but to endure” (2003: 67). Further, the excessive amount of muscular tension and distress usually evolves into illnesses that are described in terms of physical sensations characterized by the lack of suppleness. For example, individuals request therapeutic treatment when they feel their bodies *engarrotado* [stiff], *endurecido* [hardened], or *nudoso* [knotty] (2003: 76-77). Therefore, the Q’eros’ notion of healing implies a type of intervention that helps recover the agility of the body so that daily activity can be resumed.

In order to balance the demands of transhumant life, the Q’eros’ strategies for survival and adaptation also contemplate the development of a local ethnomedicine. Their healing practices are shaped by an interconnectedness between the topography of the landscape and an extemporaneous theory of music. More precisely, as Holly Wissler points out, the people of Q’eros have created a highly stylized cultural synthesis of ritual, natural cycles, cosmological views, poetry, music, and a philosophy of life. This amalgamation of elements is reflected, for example, in the *Phallchay* ritual. Celebrated once per year, during a single day at the peak of the rain season, the ritual of *Phallchay* commemorates the “openness” of *Pacha Mama* (“Mother-Earth”) (Wissler 2009: 111). According to the local ontology, the rain season marks the period of time in which Mother-Earth is the most thirsty and vulnerable. For this reason, she has to be fed and rewarded. Otherwise, her vulnerability would turn into a source of disease. Additionally, Mother-Earth’s openness reflects in the moistness of the environment. The generative and fertile propensity of the ecosystem, therefore, may be capitalized to warrant the procreation of the herd and the healthy renovation of the community’s vital force.

The openness of *Pacha Mama* accompanies the “openness” of every member in the community. Rituality associated with catharsis and communal healing is channeled through the practice of “grief-singing” (Wissler 2009: 124). This observance involves the extemporaneous use of a specific melodic and poetic formula (e.g., a fixed melody and verse) to create “dense unison”²⁴ musical textures that allow a symbolic cleansing of the body and a riddance of harmful

²⁴ Thomas Turino defines the term as follows: “dense sound [...] refers to a consistent overlapping and blending of discrete sounds to produce a thick, unified texture [...] The dense

memories. In a sense, grief-singing also fosters a suppleness of body and mind (in Hinton's sense). The disease of the body, corporealized and conceptualized within the local ontology as a lack of suppleness, is reverted through a groundbreaking enactment and mimesis of the natural forces. That is, the community embodies the flowing course of the rain and the moisture of the environment so that they can also be renewed. Thus, during the *Phallchay* ritual, the Q'eros celebrate the arrival of the rain season, but also ensure the health of their members by promoting catharsis and cleansing through grief-singing.

The use of formulas in the grief-singing ritual can be approached using the Improvising Transcendence Model. As Wissler emphasizes, Q'eros people utilize a single melody and verse as an iconic marker throughout the celebrations of the day. The song "Pantilla t'ikay" ("my lovely pink flower") refers to the *phallcha* flower (a red gentian) that blossoms only during this seasonal festivity. The flower symbolizes fertility. It is gathered from the heights where llamas and alpacas graze every day and showered on the animals and community members while singing "Pantilla t'ikay." Since the song has a fixed melodic contour, it is inserted as an ostinato connection between improvised verses and melodies. That is, the pre-composed verse "my lovely pink flower," functions as a point of departure in Nettl's sense. It is sung continuously as a refrain during the festivities, functioning as a source of ritual cohesiveness. Using as main source of inspiration "my lovely pink flower," the participants engage in the spontaneous creation of new verses and melodic variations that somatize and express their individual experiences. The pre-composed verse, therefore, is a fundamental aid in the cathartic process.²⁵ In this regard, Wissler argues that "the regular and expected release of joy and grief through song contributes to individual and communal balance and healing" (2009: vii). The verse is an iconic juncture that allows freedom to exteriorize inner-experience in the form of improvised melodies and new

sound quality [...] involves a "fuzzy" aura around musical pitches in contrast to a "clear" or "sharp" sound" (1989: 12) Additionally, he emphasizes: "Although in dense unison or parallel harmony [...] there is no place for the soloist per se, there are certain ornamental and improvisatory techniques available for individual expression within ensemble performance" (1989: 13).

²⁵ Marina Roseman points out that "[t]he 'versing' of sung texts and poetic speech is opposed to ordinary language in the extent of its creative transformation [...] and forcefully contributes to the transformation of reality in ritual" (1993: 148). Thus, extemporaneous sung verses may also reinforce the sense of "ritual time" within improvisatory settings.

lyrics.²⁶ Often, the extemporaneous poetry expresses sorrow, memories of pain, and melancholy. Other times, it embraces the miracle of fertility and the renewal of the natural cycles. In every case, grief-singing frames a ritual performance based on a gushing articulation of spontaneous material. The Q'eros exorcizes their illnesses by shaping them into the form of spontaneous poetry and melody. The unplanned verses that conjoin the set-verse ~~my~~ "lovely pink flower" unfold freely throughout the day, as a sort of multi-pattern discourse. There is a moral duty correlated to the communal aspect of the celebration that invites improvisers to deeply engage the process of creation and re-creation of the self through musicking. Then, the bodily and cognitive sense of commitment with each of the sung verses (with each ~~pattern~~) also assures the pleasing of Mother-Earth.

The cosmological conflation of natural forces and individual agency crystallizes into a communal catharsis and renewal. Inhabitants find in grief-singing an avenue to transcend and enplace in the world successfully. In this regard, Jean-Paul Sartre equates the sense of *renewal* to transcendence: —Transcendental consciousness is an impersonal spontaneity [in Q'eros ontology, the supremacy of community values]. It determines its existence at each instant, without our being able to conceive anything *before it*. Thus each instant of our conscious life reveals to us a creation *ex-nihilo*. Not a new *arrangement*, but a new existence." The corporealization of malady and joy into spontaneous verses can also be seen under the lens of the ~~somatic~~ "poetry" proposed by anthropologist Michael Uzendoski. He suggests a poetics of existence, a form of metaphor enacted through body and ritual, which has the ability to transform and heal. Discussing his ethnographic experience in the Amazonia, he writes: —Amazonian healing experiences [can] be viewed as a kind of poetry, a ~~somatic~~ "poetry" that involves listening, feeling, smelling, seeing, and tasting of natural subjectivities [...] In my usage of poetry, 'I draw on the ancient Greek notion of *poesis*, which conveys ~~making~~" or ~~creating~~"

²⁶ Turino has investigated the use of ostinato and pre-set devices to allow communal engagement through musicking in the Peruvian Andes: ~~the~~ formulae and the motives repeated at the cadences of each section within a piece serve as handles by which newcomers to a tune can take hold of it. In learning a tune during performance, people pick up the cadence motives and formulae first and join in on these since they are already known or are repeated constantly. With each repetition of the tune, they begin to learn and add the new material presented by the piece until they can play the entire melody" (1989: 27).

something of beauty” (2008: 1). That is, incarnation of “natural subjectivities”—and extemporization of verses subsuming lived experience—leads to a ritual renewal and therapeutic catharsis.

In the context of the six stages suggested in the Improvising Transcendence Model, Q‘eros‘ case study may be outlined as follows.

- **First Stage:** In the case of the *Phallcha* ritual, the entering into the *temenos* is conceptually and phenomenologically well-demarcated. The Q‘eros choose a specific day of the year to celebrate the liturgy and leave aside work activities. Therefore, their sense of reality is radically transformed and is constructed in opposition to common-day activities (e.g., herding or harvesting). The participants feel “open” to catharsis and on the verge of breaking down.²⁷
- **Second Stage:** The iconic pattern of the ritual, “a lovely pink flower,” constitutes the seminal building-block from which improvisation will grow. The local ontology and ethics command inhabitants to deeply engage the cathartic performance, so that Mother-Earth is pleased. Therefore, somatization of spontaneous verses and melodic phrases is naturally achieved. Bodies resonate while uttering meaningful sound.
- **Third Stage:** The ritual time involving singing, improvising, and scattering of *phallcha* flowers along with inebriation and mimesis with the natural forces instills an intense attentional mode. The creation of somatic poetry (following Uzendoski’s sense) is reinforced through recitation and intonation of pre-composed and variational phrases. Grief-singing “absorbs” the singers.
- **Fourth Stage:** “Global mapping” occurs in the form of catharsis. Perception is exacerbated through potent musical, emotional, and bodily stimuli.
- **Fifth Stage:** As Wissler recounts, the Q‘eros manifest that peak moments of catharsis enclose feelings of joy and grief in unison. That is, sentiments that in common situations are seen as opposites, synthesize in a single, polyvalent expression during the “openness” of the inner voice.

²⁷ Importantly, Boyce-Tillman points out the role of emotional fragility and catharsis in predisposing individuals to beneficial change and intercommunication: “the complexity of the emotional world of music in the liminal space facilitates vulnerability and, in a group, collective vulnerability. This can bring about new qualities of empathy and understanding of our own complex inner emotional life and that of others” (2009: 14).

- **Sixth Stage:** The embracing of not only joy and grief, but anxiety, fear, hope, bliss, and manifold expressions through improvised song synthesizes in an embodiment of the opposites, in an *affirmation of life*.²⁸ Extemporaneous singing, along with ritual mimesis, inebriation, and communal attunement²⁹ enacts a sense of being *alive*. The Q'eros, thus, achieve a *renewal* of body and spirit. Their bodily pain and distress are now conceptualized as part of an over-arching cosmic process. They learn cognitive flexibility to face the inclemency of natural reality and to celebrate the landscape instead of blaming it.

2) *Persian Classical Music*

The radif is an organic body of pre-composed, non-metric melodies that comprises the foundation of Persian classical music. This set of melodies, called *gusheh*, are short and fixed compositions that improvisers use to draw motivic ideas, melodic contours, and tonal progressions. In radif tradition, masters require their students to memorize by heart the entire content of the system prior to public performances. A rendition of the radif consequently would encompass both the sensibility and creative imagination of the musician, and the mastery and memorization of the complete set of pre-composed melodies.

Gushehs' aesthetics are influenced by the syllabic structure of Sufi poetry. Aspects such as form, melodic ornament, and rhythmic organization resemble the chanting and recitation of Sufi texts. For this reason, improvisatory renditions present a mystical quality. In this sense, Darius Talai affirms that Persian scholars "believe in the power of music to affect physiology and emotion" (1998: 132). Music is seen then as a vehicle to promote well-being, especially throughout the organization of spiritual public concerts known as *sama*.

²⁸ In her analysis of Temiar healing practices, Roseman notes that "[l]ocalized song is the interactive self *in motion* (my emphasis)." The notion of flexibility is implicit in the physical and conceptual significance of singing.

²⁹ Mitchell S. Kossak defines "attunement" as a "sensorial felt embodied experience that can be individualistic as well as communal." It also "includes a psychological, emotional, and somatic state of consciousness often reported in spiritual, mystical, or transpersonal experience most closely referred to in the psychological literature as a unitive or peak experience" (2007: 11).

One important symbolic element in Sufi poetics is the *arch*.³⁰ Sufi philosophy understands human life as a separation from God at birth. Life involves a descent into the detrimental material world and a subsequent reunion with the divine when passing away. The arch represents the temporal ascent and reunion with God and is played out through mystical states. Radif performances depict such arch form. During *sama* concerts, for example, music takes performers and listeners on an ascent and ephemeral reunion with the divine. The symbolic return to the world, after the ecstatic passage, involves the notion of a ground-breaking transformation. When reaching the apex of the arch, attendees and musicians are virtually enraptured and transformed by the music.

The arch is depicted in radif music using a cyclic spiral progression that involves interwoven *gushehs* and improvised patterns. A common rendition of radif starts with a centrifugal melodic development and unfolds from the tonal center of the primary *gusheh*, modulating towards peripheral secondary *gushehs*. Once musicians have ascended and reached an emotional peak, they embark on a centripetal return to the original pitch center. The sequential steps in a traditional *radif* improvisation may be summarized as follows.

- The musician chooses a *dastgah* or *mode*.³¹
- Within this particular *dastgah*, the musician chooses a *gusheh*, which will function as a point of departure.
- The musician begins to improvise. The rendition would include variations, restatements, and modulations based on the choice of *gusheh*.
- The musician modulates from one *gusheh* to another, aiming to depict an arch form. Improvisation helps to undertake a smooth modulatory motion.
- The musician cues the apex of the arch with a dramatic modulation in the higher register of the instrument. This climactic moment expresses the reunion with God. It is at this stage, Margaret Caton suggests, where musicians and listeners experience *hal*³⁰, *an inspired mood* (Caton 1998: 140) that enacts a *transitory spiritual state of enlightenment or ecstasy*.³¹

³⁰ Morteza Varzi defines *hal* as *the state where one is taken away from oneself. When one is conscious of oneself, the environment, the furniture, other people, and so forth, that is not hal. [...] In a state of hal the musician does things that are not necessarily planned, but just come out* because he is not himself. [...] *hal* is not the goal, but the vehicle. The goal is a kind of understanding of reunion” (Racy 2003: 201).

³¹ *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. John L. Esposito, ed. Oxford University Press Inc. 2003.

- After reaching this summit, the musician begins a descending movement, following a similar modulatory process that lands onto the original pitch center of the piece.

In this manner, motivic transformation of the *gusheh* leads to a symbolic reenactment of the arch form. That is, at a symbolic and also performative level, improvisatory variation encodes, embodies, and plays out the rise and fall of the human condition as understood in Sufi philosophy.

As mentioned earlier, *gushehs* comprise the basic building-block in Persian improvisation. Their intervallic structure and contour serve as Nettl's point of reference. Improvised lines operate as branched extensions that unify and consolidate the chosen *gushehs*. It is worth mentioning here that *radif* and *gusheh* translate literally into "series" and "corner" (Wright 2009, 26-29). This lexical meaning opens the door to further speculations. For example, a *gusheh* would remain inactive and uninteresting if performed alone as a self-contained piece. The musician's imagination is needed to ramify melodies that link the pre-composed motives; performers, virtually, use the *gusheh* as a "corner" to articulate various phrases. Laudan Nooshin affirms in connection to this idea:

[While] patterns of various kinds do play an important role in [*radif* music], composition in performance depends on both memorization and the creation of new phrases. [...] [This] involves [...] the continuous negotiation of a network of choices in which formulas themselves have a flexibility not usually associated with the term (Nooshin 2003: 270).

Nooshin stresses the role of pre-composed melodies as point of reference, but also speaks about the necessity to merge them into a continuum. The inception of a discourse that tightly concatenates pre-set material ensures a "classical" (yet protean) rendition. Accordingly, such linking of melodic cells should also be agile and seamless. This constitutes core notions of elegance and beauty.

The meanings of *radif* and *gusheh*, "series" and "corner," serve to visualize the movable and segmented structure of the Persian musical system. The "corner" or *gusheh* articulates the improvised statements, suggesting new directions and perspectives. Statements are assembled in a way that demands the musician's attentive and responsive concentration. In the course of the performance, the individual becomes deeply engaged while creating a discourse that uses

patterns as “sequence[s] of thoughts” (Nettl 1974, 12). This extemporaneous discourse implies a chain of melodic phrases that promotes fast, intense shifts in the attentional focus. *Radif* musicians, therefore, usually experience numerous emotive and cognitive states related to such chaining of musical patterns. What Nooshin calls “extended repetition” (2003) for example, is a pervasive technique used to multiply the pattern’s variational possibilities. This suggests that by breaking down the seminal *gusheh* into multiple projections, the musician confers organicism and variety to the performance. Moreover, the improviser engages in a dynamic cognitive process, where change of mood and thought occurs in resonance with the music, in a constant reformulation. Thus, the role of Persian improvisers implicates a thorough knowledge of the stylistic conventions—that is, the complete collection of pre-set patterns—and the ability to pliantly connect and intersect them. To this purpose, extemporaneity must be able to conjoin preconceived ideas with new material. In doing so, the mystical ascent and reunion with God is achieved through music.

In the context of the six stages suggested in the Improvising Transcendence Model, Persian classical music may be outlined as follows.

- **First stage:** Persian improvisers enter into the *temenos* by properly setting their emotional and cognitive frame of mind to the mystical overtones inherent to *sama* concerts. Hence, the “ordinary states” that shape common-day behavior alter into a deeply spiritual predisposition.
- **Second stage:** Musicians begin the performance by clearly stating the type of *dastgah* and *gusheh* they will improvise upon. *Radif* system intuitively emphasizes the patternic underpinning of on-the-spot creation. Not only that, experienced musicians swiftly recall the particular cultural, historical, and philosophical inner-text relative to each *gusheh*. In that manner, targeting each pattern demands a crystalline technique, but also a lucid understanding of their implicit emotionality.
- **Third stage:** Throughout the unfolding and disseminating of the patterns (that is, the *gushehs*) into variational ramifications, the embodiment of the flexible condition begins to take form. By simultaneously performing and listening to motifs that fluctuate swiftly, the improviser reaches an “unusually” sharp mode of attention. The hypnotic, but at the same time lucid, connection with the music floods perceptual sensibility.
- **Fourth stage:** To reach the demands of tradition—e.g., “elegant” flow and cuing of preexistent phrases—the improviser harmonizes various levels of cognition. Memory, emotion, esthetic

thought, motor skills, philosophical understanding, and sensorial intoxication reveal through an amalgam of seamlessly merged patterns. Embracing such variety of cognitive tasks and perceptual processes instills a ~~g~~lobal mapping.”

- **Fifth stage:** Transcendence is associated to *hal*, the ~~r~~ansitory state of ecstasy” that improvisers accede through the arch sonic trajectory. Conceptually and phenomenologically, this ascension makes the person ~~w~~hile.” The long-awaited reunion with the Creator is depicted and enacted through music. Sufi philosophy interprets the completion of the arch as a ~~s~~tate of complete spiritual union between lover and beloved [where] no separation exists anymore, and everything created [...] participates in amazement in this scene” (Schimmel 1998: 68). Thought and action, self and other are thereafter subsumed in a fulfilling embrace with the Creator. Whatever path existence takes from now on will be accepted by the improviser as different sides of the same sacred reality.
- **Sixth stage:** Teaching the peak, the improviser discovers that all sides of reality conduce to the same realization: the ~~B~~eloved” embraces everything. Thus, no matter the accidents of existence, they always convey an *affirmation of life*. Distress, joy, anxiety, pain, ecstasy, and sadness are expressions of the same continuum. By this realization, improvisers learn cognitive flexibility. Their brains are re-structured and disposed for better adaptability. Through this avenue, Persian classical musicians perform a successful mode of ~~b~~eing-in-the-world.”

This chapter developed an operational framework to comprehend the role of improvisation in therapeutic settings. To that purpose, I discussed various approaches to transcendence, embodiment, and rituality. Additionally, two case studies exemplified the practicality of the Improvising Transcendence Model. In the following chapter, an ~~E~~thnography of Improvising Musicians” I will attempt to conflate, reframe, and expand the theory discussed so far. My main goal is to describe, from an intersubjective³² and phenomenological stance, the curative and transformative capabilities of musical improvisation as experienced by a selected group of improvisers.

³² My conception of intersubjectivity will be developed more fully in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III

PRELUDE

Ethnographic Approach

Throughout the analysis and interpretation of the case study that forms the foundation of this final main section of the thesis, I bring to bear a variety of interpretive positions and echoes with the intension of creating an ethnographic narrative that combines my personal and professional relationship with improvisers. That is, I aim to use as foundational sources, first the information obtained through subject-researcher transactions and second, my own background as participant *non-observer performer*. I emphasize the notion of non-observer performer by pointing out that, during group performance sessions, my role cannot be split into two different personas. The attention and engagement required to improvise meaningful material is dependent on a complete immersion into the performance's dynamics. The researcher, in this particular case, cannot successfully play the role of participant and ethnographic observer simultaneously.³³

³³ The importance of introducing a reflexive level of understanding in ethnographic endeavors has been lucidly discussed by ethnomusicologist Michael Bakan. In his book *Music of Death and New Creation* (1990), Bakan ascribes to an ethnographic stance that conflates “outsider” and “insider” positions into a much more comprehensive and holistic purview of the musical experience as a shared, transformative event. Importantly, Bakan notes that the methodological conundrum that springs from an imposed scholarly view ends up forcing the presence of the research “insider” into an “abstract,” ultimately idealized foreign cultural milieu: “If we continue to subscribe to the inherent limitations of epistemological perspectives that frame our fieldwork musical interactions as primarily dictated by the respective statuses of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ and continue to cling to the hierarchical and exclusionary position that ‘understanding the music from within’ ought to be the only proper goal of our musical efforts as researchers, we will continue to negate the ethnomusicological value of the reflexive study of musical experience as a significant form of intercultural dialogue in which all who participate, including the researcher, are relevant contributors to meaningful music-making” (1999: 332). In other words, Bakan posits that such dyadic placement—insider or observer versus the observed “other”—opposes a real construction of a socially shared knowledge. In the research sessions I carried out, my role was not different than the one expected from the research assistants: I was supposed to improvise, listen to others, and enjoy the experience. So I did.

Moreover, any attempt to insert the “observer” role into a group session, while participating also as a musician, will contradict at its most fundamental level the nature of the event this study strives to explore. Spontaneity and non-rehearsed creativity are the two goals participants—including myself—wish to achieve during research sessions. For this reason, media fieldwork techniques and field notes play an important role in the post-session analysis.

The Role of the Ethnographer

My personal experience as improviser greatly influences this study. Throughout my affiliation with improvisers and informants, I present myself as an ethnomusicologist but also as someone who has been deeply transformed at various levels by the power of music. I let participants know that improvisation does play an important role in my life. In adopting this position, I wish to relate closely with my informants, engaging with them at the common ground level of a shared meaningful activity. This, I believe, serves to accomplish a valuable exchange of ideas and experiences, rather than a mere actualization of hierarchical structures sometimes unavoidable within ethnographic work.

Limits and Issues

This research presents a variety of difficulties. Ethnographic methods may or may not help to make self-evident the veracity of findings related to the subjective phenomena. Even though research methods allow an exchange of information between informant and ethnographer, especially throughout interviews and questionnaires, the evaluation of individual narratives makes difficult the formulation of a single explicative structure. The use of subjective descriptors, personalized modes of language, culturally and psychologically grounded expressions, and complete sets of ideological constructions shaping the narrativization of experience are recognizable in each of the musicians I interviewed. Therefore, each improviser’s account takes place within a subjective area of meaning. A historiography of the self implies a contingent and unique mode of interpretation. Further, gathered testimonies address notions of transcendent or non-ordinary experiences that distance the improvisers from those common-day structures of meaning that pervade daily normal activity. Each word and figure of speech articulated by the informant implicates a specific signified, an individually shaped explanation of the self’s inner reality. In this regard, the study strives to subsume individual explicative structures within a larger interpretative framework. Contradictorily, my thesis focuses on the assumption that, departing from individuality, extemporaneity plays an important role in

fostering beneficial modes of being. How are we to reconcile, then, these two sides of the coin? Is it possible to conflate an array of dissimilar historicizations of the subjective into a single interpretative strand? Perhaps, one way to conciliate this incongruence is to approach ethnographic data not as samples of particular social conglomerates, but as segments of a phenomenological continuum. The “field” I chose cannot be circumscribed to specific cultural or geographic demarcations. Instead, the field is determined by a common practice, that of musical improvisation. In this context, individual performers constitute by themselves embodied praxes that express unique pre-objective experiences. The subjective, it follows, calls for personalized and discriminative interpretations.

Psychological Imagination

I argue that historiographic techniques may serve to find feasible ways to link the study of the past with the scrutiny of subjective events. While historical studies strive to create plausible reconstructions of bygone cultural and material worlds, the analytical process they incorporate involves dealing with the very nature of evidence and facts. For that reason, historians such as R. G. Collingwood have pointed out the “imaginary” character of any historical reconstruction (1946). Collingwood asserts that historians always face two fundamental problems at the moment of embarking upon the discovery of the past. Firstly, historians have to decide—informed by determinant ascriptions to certain ideological or political stances—how to approach and where to find their evidence. Secondly, they need to become acquainted with the various “histories” proposed by preceding specialists. The weighing and measuring of “what is there”—the bulk of theories and assumptions crystallized around a fact or the “idea” of a fact—leads scholars to face the issue of “authority.” Chroniclers of history adopt, since the very moment in which they redirect their discernment and intuition to former episodes, a particular position that reinforces or destabilizes mainstream scholarship. They have to decide whether or not what has been said about the past can be used to continue fostering the quality of the ongoing research. From taking the decision to trust or not to trust a given explanation of the historical fact, scholars travel on their own using (as Collingwood would say) the solely power of imagination and instinct.

Given that the history Collingwood proposes is one that accepts and deals with the haziness of facts and the likely one-sidedness of interpretation, it is possible to advance here an analogy between Collingwood’s historical imagination and “psychological imagination,” a term I coined to tackle the very same haziness of subjective facts. For example, in his critique against

the positivistic approach, Collingwood advocates a history that avoids fixed conceptualizations of events as evidence. Moreover, he suggests that history needs to be seen as a multifaceted continuum that morphs every time a scholar dives into its waters. Through this lens, the gathering of evidence and the measuring of data become always relative. Collingwood expresses this thought roundly: “I am now driven to confess that there are for historical thought no fixed points thus given: in other words, that in history, just as there are properly speaking no authorities, so there are properly speaking no data” (1946: 243). Now, to draw a parallel, it is possible to argue that, properly speaking, there are also “no authorities” and “no data” in the study of improvisers’ transcendent experiences. The sole aid I utilize comes from the use of recorded narratives and testimonies that, in every case, communicate remarkably different recollections of the same phenomenon. Then, how does one reconcile this absolute absence of reference? In relation to history, Collingwood argues that “imagination” is the most important gadget in a historian’s tool-box. Imagination helps to develop sound interpretative universes that narrow the distance between fact and knowledge. By applying an intuitive approach that is scholarly and historically contextualized, the investigator is able to discover more meaningful ways to support and construct unique translation of the past:

The web of imaginative construction is something far more solid and powerful than we have hitherto realized. So far from relying for its validity upon the support of given facts, it actually serves as the touchstone by which we decide whether alleged facts are genuine (Collingwood 1946: 244).

Thus, I argue that it is possible to understand the improviser’s testimonies using the same rationale. Musicians’ recollections of out-of-body experiences, for example, can be imaginatively contextualized within a broader discourse that incorporates cultural expectations or learned modes of spirituality, for example. Further, each of the written or spoken accounts offered by the informants may function as a window to those much broader “special” episodes that alter internal structures of the self. It follows then that by using imagination as a cohesive, explorative agent my research will intertwine parallel discourses that embrace not only ethnographic but also psychological “data,” which is instilled on me by the improvisers’ testimonies. In this manner, the study may benefit from a dialogical/interpretative interaction between informants and researcher. Using once more Collingwood’s words, I want to emphasize that ethnographers can develop interpretative frameworks by intuitively structuring the continuum that is part of their investigation:

Freed from its dependence on fixed points supplied from without, the historian's picture of the past is thus in every detail an imaginary picture, and its necessity is at every point the necessity of the *a priori* imagination. Whatever goes into it, goes into it not because his imagination passively accepts it, but because it actively demands it (1946: 245).

That is, by incorporating the notion of “psychological imagination” to this study, the musicians’ unique narratives will be acknowledged as facts; second, imagination will help to portray not arbitrary explanations but tentative, all-encompassing dimensions of the subjective knowledge.

Constructing Knowledge through Dialogue: An Intersubjective Approach

Scientific and scholarly methods usually favor accuracy and exactness of representation. “Signs” are circumscribed to rigorous and precise areas of meaning. That is, meaning is constructed through processes that aim for clarity and synthesis, while ambiguity is usually problematized. Scientific and scholarly explorations attempt to explain and make accessible arguments and research that support any theoretical assumption. One way to diverge from this norm can be found in the “intersubjective approach” proposed by anthropologist Michael Jackson (1998). For Jackson, knowledge is negotiated and created throughout the dialogical and polyvalent performance of relations between subject and researcher. For instance, methodological tools derived from the ethnographic re-conceptualization proposed by James Clifford et al. in *Writing Culture* (1986) include dialogical occurrences in which subject and researcher positions tend to fuse and blur into an overlapping enmesh of identities. Concepts such as “participant observation,” “reciprocal ethnography,” and the rethinking of “allegory” as a valid source for intellectual inquiry have been proposed as paths to construct viable visions of the “other,” visions that are nevertheless solidly grounded in culture. These techniques involve the notion of interacting selves and mutuality, which serves as a foundation for a dynamic generation of knowledge. The tradition that begins with Clifford’s incorporation of post-modern thought into ethnography has led anthropologists to reconsider fundamental sources of knowledge within the “field.” Jackson appropriates some of these ideas—the impossibility of universal truth, the relative nature of interpretation—to forge a type of research that trusts in single and thoroughly mediated relationships. Such is the case in the account of his own personal relationship with one of his informants, Noah. In *Minima Ethnographica*, Jackson manages to extrapolate valuable and perceptive insights from the back-and-forth fluctuation that informed his relation with Noah. Jackson is able to construct an interpretation of culture and self that is

rooted in the here and now of the particular world he and Noah inhabit. Jackson, however, acknowledges the potential bias guiding his analysis. His *I* and *Thou*³⁴ construction links both the foreign reality of the subject's experience and the methodological, cultural, and psychological formation of the anthropologist. Dialogue, in this sense, comprises a tense merging of the opposites. This happens not in a dialectical sense—a mere exchange of contested positions—but within an overarching process that allows epiphany and transcendence. Following Jackson, the ethnographer truly discovers and creates knowledge by becoming the other.

Ethnographic research, then, benefits from the incorporation of the intersubjective approach developed by Jackson. The merging of subjectivities he advocates, as a fundamental procedure to access new areas of understanding, enables the ethnographer to pursue methodologies that conciliate many of the issues pointed out—but not solved—in *Writing Culture*. That is, intersubjective mechanics can objectively serve as a foundation for scientific research. Paradoxically, objectiveness and exactness in the analysis of subjective phenomena can be reached, according to Jackson's model, by setting up methodological apparatuses informed by non-rigorous parameters in a positivistic sense. He invokes notions of self that unfold and unlock in supple ways, praising the capability to freely transform and experience the *I* as the *Thou* and the *here* as *there*. Conversation about these notions of self is extremely important in order to confer credibility to a study of the subjective experience. Jackson argues that:

Existentially one might say that it is only by seeing things from the point of view of the other that one can enter into a viable relationship with him or her. Others must somehow become us and be assimilated into ourselves if we are to know how to interact or get along with them (1998: 65).

In this form of ethnographic epiphany and transcendence, the researcher strives to create what Alfred Schutz has called “reciprocity of perspectives” and the “interchangeability of standpoints” (ibid.). Dialogue destabilizes rigid dichotomies between insider and outsider, and purports a broader framework to negotiate and construct categories to interpret the world. Dialogue, then, is understood as a methodological procedure that allows a multi-vocal orchestration of discourses. These discourses, enclosed within the relational and dialogical nature of the intersubjective approach, carry and assert plurality within a unique sense of cohesiveness. Subjectivity and interiority become, through this lens, a tangible piece within the larger clockwork that articulates embodied realities.

³⁴ See Buber 1937.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF IMPROVISING MUSICIANS

During the summer of 2010, I began a series of interviews and research sessions centered on the study of musical improvisation. My goal was to learn more about the way improvisers feel and articulate the unusual experiences they often make account of. Being an improviser myself, the investigation was inescapably influenced by my own philosophical and aesthetic preferences. Not only that, the main subject of the project—the therapeutic power of improvised music—has been a fundamental element in my formation as a musician and human being. As a teenager, I studied the classical guitar. My ambition as a student was to acquire perfect technique and memorize the classical repertoire. Although I felt music to be deeply connected with my own emotional world, I never consciously searched the expression of my thoughts and feelings through playing. After some years of dedicated studying and practicing, my patience was gone and I stopped playing the guitar. I could not achieve the level of perfection I was looking for and I just gave up. More years passed and I fell into a vortex of conflicting emotions. I dropped music, college, and found myself completely lost. I neither had a job nor any idea about what to do with my life. The world simply lost meaning for me.

One random day during this chaotic period of my life, I was hanging out with my friend Jaime, an inspired musician and painter. We were at Jaime's studio in Lima, where he used to sit at the piano and play and sing entirely improvised songs for hours. I remember I enjoyed listening to him playing that wonderfully unstructured music for long periods of time. This particular evening during the winter, Jaime was making up something on the keyboard and, without stopping his agile interweaving of chords and melodic lines, he shouted to me that there was a guitar in the studio. Jaime knew about my aborted career as a classical guitarist. —~~Play~~ something with me,” he said, giving me a glance. I suddenly felt terrified. My fingers were stiff, I had forgotten everything about ~~technique~~.” Jaime, tenaciously, invited me again: —~~Play~~ whatever you wanna play!” Then, driven more by self-esteem and pride than by anything else, I grabbed the old guitar Jaime had in the studio and began playing a simple riff with him. In that decisive moment, I clearly felt that something broke and change inside me. I experienced a sense of happiness, of pride, of freedom. After years of being lost in life, I did not care about playing music ~~right~~” anymore. I just wanted to *play*, to ~~flow~~” with the music Jaime and I were creating so freshly. Suddenly, I realized that music was not about technique, but about the emotions I was experiencing while playing without direction. Music was about life and about the enjoyment of something greater than me and the instrument. That realization, and all the consequences it

brought forth through the subsequent years, has amply determined my life. From that moment thereafter, I have not stopped improvising.

Setting the Groove

As part of my research, I designed a series of improvisatory sessions. I contacted various students from Florida State University's School of Music and invited them to make music with me. Mostly, I looked for people with little or no experience improvising. The idea was to put them in a "different" situation, out of the ordinary context in which they often play music as students or classical performers. The participants were enthusiastic. Even the jazz majors, who improvise on a daily basis, manifested a sense of excitement about the unusual setting of the session. The space we used for our three performances is informally called the "World Music Room" (WMR). It is a middle-sized classroom designed to hold approximately 45 students and it stores an extended collection of indigenous instruments from all around the world. For this reason, the WMR is an attractive environment for any musician. Its decoration, based on culturally diverse iconographies and designs, instilled an "exotic" aura in the eyes of the participants and helped to make them feel more at ease.

The sessions started with a few pointers. A particular motive (Pattern A) was set as the seminal building-block for improvisation. I borrowed this melody from Hildegard von Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*:



Fig. 1: Pattern A

The decision to use this phrase was inspired by various considerations. The phrase is sonically interesting. Although it mostly unfolds smoothly, featuring diatonic intervals, it also presents two successive leaps in the second half of its content—a P5 interval from D to A and a P4 interval from A to D. Additionally, Pattern A hints a modulation to the relative major key (F-major, if the home key is approached as C-major). These two characteristics—the phrase's interesting

intervallic structure and unclear tonal center—confer ample room for elaboration. Further, participants were informed about the origin of the melody. I made sure to explain to them that the phrase also has lyrics that are sung during the emotional peak of Hildegard's play. The successive P5 and P4 intervals are indexical cues of the author's religious beliefs. This brief contextualization of the pattern's historical and cultural background helped to establish a predisposition to *openness*.³⁵ With this, the entering into "ritual time" was encouraged.

Participants were invited to improvise using Pattern A as a building-block or to remain silent. This "rule" aimed to connect the research sessions with the formal structure of the Improvising Transcendence Model. Further, this and other directions (included below) were read aloud and presented in paper form to the participants.³⁶

- **Rule 1:** Performers may play (or not play) anything they wish—there are no mistakes.

³⁵ Hildegard's play is an interesting work that can be inserted into the ongoing discussion on healing throughout spontaneous behavior. In a non-published paper, this researcher argued that *Ordo Virtutum*, and more precisely, its central motivic figure—the successive P5 and P4 intervals, which has been called Hildegard's *thumbprint* by Bruce Holsinger (1993)—functions as an iconic sound pattern that primes the idea of spontaneity and connect it to rupture and spiritual growing. The paper's argument relates the disjunct linearity of the thumbprint to the philosophical and performative avenues in which Hildegard broke with medieval chant tradition, defined by the pervasiveness of conjunct melodies. That is, by emphasizing a radical intervallic disjunction (using successive wide intervals) Hildegard contested the constraining esthetical and theological frames imposed by Catholic Church at the time. She invoked a sort of spontaneity and spiritual renovation through sonically depicting an opening of the mind and body, actualizing by this means a metaphorical creation of a virginal *space* within her nun singers. In that regard, Holsinger writes that "this gesture [the thumbprint] relies on melodic openness, an unfolding of music's body for the entrance of the divinity" (1993: 107). Further, *Ordo Virtutum* (which translates into "the Rite of the Virtues") was intended to be sung and represented at Hildegard's convent during ceremonies of initiation. That is, the "Ritual of the Virtues" aimed to bolster a renovation and cleansing of the nuns' souls before taking the ecclesiastic vows.

³⁶ These rules are inspired in William L. Cahn's *Creative Music Making*.

- **Rule 2:** Performers should listen as deeply as possible to themselves and to the other performers. Nevertheless, it is important to know that there is no penalty for breaking this rule too.
- **Rule 3:** Performers who feel prompted to play may use Pattern A as a source of inspiration.

Groups varied from 3 to 4 participants and myself as a facilitator. I decided that my role within the session was to support and encourage other musicians to freely improvise. Having in mind that many participants had no previous experience improvising, I customarily began the performance by playing a few notes. Moreover, I informally told the musicians that the experiment was supposed to “be fun.” The role of “facilitator” was informed by Bakan et al. (2008), which they applied in the Music-Play Project. Referring to the facilitator’s task within therapeutic extemporaneous settings, Bakan and his colleagues write that “the key is to find the right degree, type, and balance of engagement versus laying out, and to approach better understandings of what actions might encourage rather than inhibit happiness and the co-creation of culture” (2008: 179). Consistent with such philosophy, I improvised consciously and freely using Pattern A, but to some extent I also subordinated my own playing to the task of encouraging others to free their imaginations. In that respect, I considered William L. Cahn’s take on the topic: “The [...] facilitator has an important role in providing as much support as possible in helping new participants to work through any self-imposed impediments. This can be best accomplished simply by maintaining a nonjudgmental environment, allowing space for new participants to absorb their new experiences in improvisation and to reflect upon them later in discussion” (2005: 29). Inspired by this last point, we held an informal chat after each performance, addressing personal experiences and more general comments—e.g., the use of instruments and the length of the session. Afterwards, musicians answered a written questionnaire focused on specific areas of interest for the research.

Throughout the second half of 2010, I also interviewed seven professional improvisers. These informants shared with me their own experiences as musicians and their personal take on improvisation. The interviews were approached informally. Using a dialogical approach, a set of questions was formulated in order to allow a conversational exchange of opinions. The information gathered through this avenue was important at the moment of contextualizing and measuring the data collected during the pilot study.

Groovin'

The three sessions held at the WMR unraveled differently. They grouped different types of musicians, ranging from undergraduate and graduate performance majors, to jazz and ethnomusicology majors. Instrumentation also varied. It included instruments such as the flute, clarinet, guitar, violin, shakuhachi, upright bass, and saxophone. In order to accentuate the melodic content of Pattern A and the free-improvisatory quality of the experiment, percussive instruments were not employed. In addition, performance practices were dissimilar in terms of interaction among instrumentalists, dynamics, length of the rendition, structure, and esthetics. Nonetheless, the three sessions presented various elements in common. Before each performance, the general mood was defined by an incipient uneasiness. Musicians were distracted and, in many cases, anxious. The sense of being “dispersed” customarily anteceded the performances and was expressed in various ways. Participants felt “very excited,” “anxious,” and “eager to see what would happen.” Others were “alamed, somewhat timid,” “tired and tense,” or just “distracted” and preoccupied with the activities of the day. There was a bit of fear too. One participant wrote: “[I was] very nervous because I had no prior experience with improvisation and was not sure what to expect. [I] also [felt] nervous about playing in front/with people I didn’t know very well.” This attitude created an aura of expectation that was capitalized later through some “ritual” actions prior to the rendition itself. Dimmed lights, the recount of Hildegard’s music and its mystical quality, and a minute of silence aimed to set a “differentiation” between the ordinary and non-ordinary reality we were about to enter.

The existing tension was recognizable in the air. I was able to perceive stress and anxiety in some of the improviser’s bodily movements and countenance. Distraction and concentration were unusually intermingled within the WMR. Each participant had a lead sheet with the notated melody on a music stand. A few people rehearsed the melody or tuned their instruments while the rest were just looking silently at the excerpt. I perceived that moment prior to the improvisation as deeply important. Within the Improvising Transcendence Model, anxiety and uneasiness are seen as introductory moods to intense periods of concentration and display of energy. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out, regarding the achievement of “flow” states, “[i]t is never easy to break new ground, to venture into the unknown” (1997: 116). In the context of the WMR sessions, mind-body tension represented the “barrier” that divided common-day modes of engagement from non-ordinary behavior. Participants manifested promptness for action through a preparative strain of muscles and cognition. They were getting ready to “venture into the unknown;” that is, into the *temenos*, where playfulness and intuition overcome the rules

of logic and purpose-oriented tasks. This preparation, in a sense, asks for a “giving up” of the normal presentation of the self. Improvisers need to confront the dissolution of every-day persona and this, in turn, generates anxiety. In that regard, philosopher and writer George Bataille sees “giving up” of the self as a condition for rapture, which he defines as a form of abandon where “existence finds a sense again” (1998: 53). Bataille believes that “anguish—and the related complex of emotion this term conveys—is a pre-condition for openness: anguish assumes the desire to communicate—that is, to lose myself—but not complete resolve: anguish is evidence of my fear of communicating, to lose myself, [...] to become everything” (ibid.). Nachmaninovitch also refers to “surrender”³⁷ as a key conduit to promote change: “Ikkuin wrote, ‘If you forget yourself, you become the universe. That mysterious factor of surrender, the creative surprise that releases us and opens up, spontaneously allows something to arise’” (1990: 30). Thus, I see the embodiment of tension, anxiety, and fear prior to the performance as a preliminary (and perhaps necessary) stage leading to flow and transformation.

The triggering function of stress was also mentioned by interviewees. Matt Morin, an ethnomusicology graduate student and pianist, mentioned: “Stress makes me improvise. It is a way for me to get away of all that [i.e., stress related feelings]. When I feel rigidity, that I am constricted within a certain system, improvisation allows me to break free of that, get that stuff out of my emotional setting.” In Matt’s case, tension and anxiety arise from a sense of oppression and activate the desire to behave extemporaneously. He succinctly defined improvisation as “freedom” and gave examples of how he usually practices improvisation as a back-and-forth relation between oppression and freedom. For instance, his methodology involves the use of “concepts,” visual designs that correlate specific fingerings to sound. The sense of oppression Matt made account of reflects in the establishment of certain concepts as norms within his playing: “I see where I have limitations and then I try to push forward. I try to be able to be a more diverse speaker on the instrument. If I find myself falling into certain patterns, I figure it out ‘OK, this is this way, now I need to flip that’, it is all structural.” He also transmitted to me the frustration he often experiences due to the difficulty of getting rid of oppressive mental schemes that reflect in the music: “I have been trying to break those habits [i.e., the pervasiveness of his “concepts”]. My mind is so ingrained in these modes of playing that I can’t break free from them.” Matt’s frustration and mental strain born from a feeling of oppression that is reframed, funneled, and transformed through improvisation. His use of “concepts,” similarly,

³⁷ “Surrender to the Beloved,” as well, is a key construct in Sufi philosophy.

can be ascribed to the discussion about patterns of sound and the aid they offer in fostering emotional suppleness.

The role of anxiety as an activator of “anti-stress” mechanisms was hinted at by Jeff Brooks, a talented classical and jazz clarinetist. He said: “When I was eleven, I noticed that I felt better when I was playing music, specifically, when I improvised. If I felt really emotional or angry, or usually really sad, I would play music and that was a form of therapy. I really didn’t have any other outlets other than that at that point for expressing emotions. Now, it is kind of continuing on in my life.” Jeff used improvisation to assuage intermingled sentiments of nostalgia and distress. His capitalization of harmful energies to achieve contrary ends (anger and sadness for serenity and joy) equates Matt’s interplay between oppression and freedom.

Nalini Vinayak, an Indian sitar player, defined the hypothetical absence of improvisation in her life through these terms: “I would feel like a bird with clipped wings. I would feel that I can’t move, that I am stopped. I would feel caged. No freedom.” Nalini expressed, with different words, Matt’s same ideas. Not being able to improvise would make her transverse the burden of being “stopped” and “caged.” It would neutralize her power to “fly,” to be “free.” Thus, according to Nalini, a sense of oppression and anxiety is also implicit in a pre-extempore situation—that is, in a given everyday life circumstance when spontaneity is thwarted. Under this perspective, she emphasized, behaviors that revolve around a fixed axis of action result in potentially detrimental sentiments of immobility.

In comparison to Matt’s and Jeff’s accounts, Nalini established an important distinction regarding the theoretical “triggering function” of anxiety and tension. For her, relaxation and not stress should ideally elicit extemporaneous discourse: “When you start *alap* [i.e., a free improvisatory section within Indian raga music] you have to be very relaxed. Tension cannot help you. You have to be stress-free and tension-free. Your mind has to be very relaxed. You have to hit the right notes and the right bends. It is important to be very peaceful.” In her statement, Nalini reiterated the need to be relaxed as a condition for sharp focusing and concentration. Hers is a meditative approach that aims for precision in the instrumental intonation of the pitch. That aim requires from her a mental and bodily one-pointedness. As medical doctor and researcher Amarjit S. Sethi affirms, “meditative approaches involve systematic and continued focusing of attention on a single target (mantra or sound) and persistently holding a specific attention set toward all precept of mental contents as they spontaneously arise in the field of awareness” (1989: 8). Thus, Nalini avoids stress in order to be able to suitably link emotions and imagined sound with the actual pitches produced. In part, this attitude is associated with the technically demanding aspects of her instrument. The sitar is a

chordophone that generates micro-tones and subtle micro-dynamics. These need to be brought out by plucking and bending the strings with extreme precision. Therefore, Nalini's anxiety and uneasiness traduce into inaccurate intonation and subsequently into defective linkage between emotion/imagined sound and actual pitch. Another level of analysis might be found in the dissimilarities between Nalini's versus Matt's and Jeff's cultural backgrounds. Nalini shows a predilection for a meditative approach while Matt and Jeff emphasize physical promptness to action.

At the WMR, a cloud of mixing feelings pervaded the ambience. We started playing a variation of Pattern A in the middle of a rare atmosphere. There was a combination of strain, expectation, enthusiasm, and some fear in the air. Lights were dim and each musician was attentively looking to the lead sheet. I thought: "Was it a mistake to notate the music and have everybody reading from it? Wasn't this experiment about spontaneity and non-rehearsed creativity?" In the three sessions held, almost invariably, participants had their sights acutely attached to the written excerpt. One way I tried to relieve myself from these doubts was by reflecting on the need of making it evident that we were working with *a pattern*. The notion of having such a pattern visually printed on paper—with a title stamped in bold font at the top of the white page reading **Pattern A**—was a good way to reinforce the idea of a given motive and a micro-scheme governing the improvisation. As Bruno Nettle points out, improvisation and composition are part of a single spectrum. Both are activities that to a certain extent involve the combined usage of preset and spontaneous musicking. In that regard, Jeff Brooks brought to the front the idea of "reading" music as a form of improvisation in which the spontaneity of interpreting written material leads to a reenactment, a *re-creation* of the composition: "When I am performing classically in a solo situation, even if the music is written down, I feel that the music is highly improvised within that moment. That helps me to keep the music fresh." In the same line, Matt Morin talked about a *spirit of improvisation*: "Written music can sometimes have more of the spirit of improvisation in it than any improvised music." These two testimonies, in a sense, appeased my doubts. "We are going to improvise *now* and the printed pattern will be our building block, both visually and musically," I said bluntly to myself. Subsequent to this thought, the first notes of the instruments started to resonate timidly in the WMR, as the first drops of a winter rain. A few moments later, the whole group was grooving and interacting, creating a complex composition out of Hildegard's elegant melody.

Improvisers were flowing and stopping, jumping and standing with the music. Some participants, I noticed, strived to understand what the group was saying or what the temporary leader was developing. “‘Flow’ and ‘flexibility’ are not easy to achieve,” I told myself. The collective nature of our endeavor involved not only that everybody had to listen carefully and play within the overall changing texture, but that each participant also had to achieve a level of feeling at ease doing so. The initial stress that dominates the pre-session ambience had to convert into fluent energy. In my mind, a desire to carry the complete ensemble with me began to take shape. “What should I play so that everybody may want to be absorbed in the music?” I asked myself, remembering improviser Robin Engelman’s words: “I have experienced the feeling of becoming the actual sound I have been playing. [...] the feeling of literally losing your identity” (quoted in Cahn 2005: 4). Following the mystical recommendations of Chinese poet Lao Tzu, I wanted the group to “be like water,” to play continuously and with no fear.³⁸ To persist in my desire, nevertheless, may have caused to block instead of to impel the free unfolding of the sound. Indeed, as I noticed while listening to the recordings, there was equilibrium within the music being played. The periods of inactivity, dubitation, and weakness interrelated with moments of resolution and fiery activity. There was a nutritious dialogue going on.

Some of the participants remained contemplative—playing just a few notes, trying to find the right notes—while listening to the group. Others took the lead and rose out of the texture with their instruments singing with a full voice. “Will it be possible to measure what it is happening *now*?” I asked myself while searching for notes on my guitar. The sessions were a back-and-forth process in which improvisers strived to continue, to remain within the texture, and sometimes to escape from it. The “ritual time” discussed by Michael Bakan was happening now, with all its contradictions and interactive forces. Music reflected the dynamics of change. By the same token, the WMR was nesting a unique process of creation. We, as improvisers, were opening a realm of dialogue and exchange, a window for individual expression. A few minutes before the session there was *nothing* in the room. Now, there was *a thing*. We were founding a realm of spontaneous sound, with its own changeable rules and fluid stratifications. We were building a social reality and a culture of improvisation. The novel quality of this embryonic world constituted an *illud tempus*, the essence of healing rituality:

³⁸ Lao Tzu writes: “The best way to live/ is to be like water/ For water benefits all things/ and goes against none of them” (Lao Tze 2008: 9).

Since the sacred and strong time is the *time of origins*, the stupendous instant in which reality was created, was for the first time fully manifested, man will seek periodically to return to that original time. This ritual reactualization of the *illud tempus* in which the first epiphany of a reality occurred is the basis for all sacred calendars; the festival is not merely the commemoration of a mythical (and hence religious) event; it *reactualizes* the event (1987: 80).

Not only that, historian of religion Mircea Eliade asserts that —the cosmogonic myth [i.e., the time of origins] serves as paradigmatic model for every creation or construction; it is even used as a ritual means of healing. By symbolically becoming contemporary with the Creation, one reintegrates the primordial plenitude. The sick man becomes well because he begins his life again with its sum of energy intact” (ibid.). The performance of extemporaneous sound, of emotion and cognition embodied and emplaced through music rituality, led to the creation of a unique universe within the walls of the WMR.

Throughout the three sessions, dialogue and intersubjective bridges stretched lithely and gracefully. Musical phrases and rhythms—engendered out of the interplay between Pattern A and each improviser’s intuition, desire, and knowledge—seemed to carry with them the essence of each individual. Successive patterns and variations intertwined a colorful and multilayered amalgam of sounds that was crystallized and reformulated continuously. Even though my first perception regarding the performance’s continuity and stability was skeptical, I realized afterward that “easiness” was not the only facet at work in group improvisation. Abrupt changes, dubitation, blank spaces, awkward modulations, cacophony, ostracism, and sometimes “rigid” ostinatos were an essential part of the process. The culture of improvisation that was opened at the WMR embraced everyone’s voices. My background as a musician was forcing me to think in terms of finalized products, I recognized. The esthetics of free-form improvisation, as Cahn wisely put it, are “about the process” (2005: 29) and not about the rendition of music that resembles any meticulously crafted classical composition. Before this realization, I was looking to hear sophisticated and polished forms and perfectly cut phrases. I did not take into consideration the real beauty of communication being conceived through sound. The deep esthetics governing the WMR’s sessions were determined by “the way in which [...] performers and listeners relate[d] to themselves and to others in the context of whatever music [was] happening” (Cahn 2005: 29). The “rules” of our composition were being generated *ex nihilo*, out of the inner-dynamics contained in the orchestration of free human voices and the seminal melodic structure. In this “first epiphany of reality,” the participants and I produced our *own*

version of the world. Sound, emotion, and cognition unfolded as a pristine stream opening a path into the sand. Music, indeed, was flowing ~~like~~ water.”

The cloud of mixed feelings that infused the walls at the WMR broke down into a release of forces and emotions. Improvisatory sessions opened a space for dialogue and co-creation. The *illud tempus*, our first epiphany of reality, was enacted in the context of a sacred space: ~~By~~ approaching the sacred space of the classroom as the primary venue for cultural transformation in all its forms, we further draw from the Latin definition of *religion* (*re*, again; *ligare*, to connect)” (Naylor 2008: 513). Certainly, the WMR was an arena for ~~re~~-connection.” At both the intra and interpersonal levels, unscripted performance helped to produce new versions of the self so that we could successfully exchange our emotions and thoughts with the *other*.

Such release of forces and emotions was evident in the participants’ responses to the question ~~What~~ “What was your emotional/physical state during the performance?” The variety of answers given by the improvisers calls for a summation and close analysis (see *Chart #1* below):

Chart #1

| Participant | Answer |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Improviser #1 | <i>I felt very <u>detached</u> and free from anything outside of the room and ensemble.</i> |
| Improviser #2 | <i>Relaxed, heightened senses, clear mind.</i> |
| Improviser #3 | <i>Very calm. Like a dove flying.</i> |
| Improviser #4 | <i>Broadly aware: meaning not focused and detailed but still tuned in to one thing (music, sounds) for long period of time.</i> |
| Improviser #5 | <i>Happy, excited, anxious, sometimes distracted listening other players.</i> |
| Improviser #6 | <i>Relaxed, spontaneous. At ease-not pressured, free.</i> |

| | |
|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Improviser #7 | <i>Calm, attentive, focused.</i> |
| Improviser #8 | <i>Open, happy, irritated, calm, meditative, tense, relaxed, amused, judgmental.</i> |
| Improviser #9 | <i>Attentive, aware, released.</i> |
| Improviser #10 | <i>Tense, relaxed, paradoxical, aware, awake, in-tune, engaged.</i> |

Chart #1 shows references to various sentiments and states that may be enclosed within a catalogue of broader complexes. I propose the following categories.

- **Relaxation complex**: *Very calm, relaxed, at-ease, not pressured, calm, meditative, released, open.*
- **Flexion complex**: *Like a dove flying, free, spontaneous.*
- **Meditation complex**: *Heightened senses, clear mind, broadly aware, not focused and detailed but still tuned in to one thing, attentive, focused, amused, judgmental, attentive, aware, awake, in-tune, engaged.*
- **Transitional complex**: *Detached and free from anything outside of the room and ensemble, not focused and detailed, happy, excited, anxious, distracted, irritated, tense, paradoxical.*

These four “complexes” pertain to wide (and not privative) categories that subsume areas of experience. The “relaxation complex” involves mind/body processes of distention and expansion; that is, movements that liberate inner-tension. The “flexion complex” denotes the enactment of supple states, as described by Hinton. Such a complex promotes a general feeling of easiness of action and “going with the flow.” The “meditation complex” stresses attentional schemes. It refers to the perceptual apparatus and the various degrees that the human mind and body concentrate into the reception and processing of stimuli. Further, the “meditation” complex closely relates to the attentional theory proposed by Edelman: attention “tends a *directional* component to behavior, and it modulates an animal’s responsiveness to the environment.” Importantly, according to Edelman, attention “reveals the ‘fragility’ of consciousness: it focuses our mind on its objects and obliterates or attenuates surrounding ‘irrelevancies’” (1992: 141-142). As such, “the ability to choose quickly *one action pattern* to be carried out to the exclusion of others confers considerable selective advantage (my emphasis)” (ibid.). Finally, the “transitional complex” encloses sentiments and states that carry with them an interim meaning.

For example, “~~d~~istracti~~o~~n,” “~~t~~ension,” or “~~i~~rritatio~~n~~” are modes of being that do not perdure but *conduce* to other modes. Distraction may lead to focus, tension to relaxation, and irritation to contentment. These four complexes altogether—and the infinite ways they may overlap and reconfigure— help identify some of the subtle events registered throughout the session.

Additionally, a discussion of the answers given in response to the question “What was your emotional/physical state after the performance?” serves to expand the experiential reaches inherent to the four complexes proposed (see *Chart #2* below).

Chart #2

| Participant | Answer |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Improviser #1 | <i>Extremely calm-almost speechless and was not thinking of anything but the music.</i> |
| Improviser #2 | <i>Relaxed, happy, surprised, calm, at ease.</i> |
| Improviser #3 | <i>Completely relaxed and happy.</i> |
| Improviser #4 | <i>Very relaxed, like waking from a long nap on Sunday/ Christmas morning, thoughts not clear.</i> |
| Improviser #5 | <i>Relaxed and happy.</i> |
| Improviser #6 | <i>I felt very relaxed and also empowered/inspired by the fact that we could all create something new and exciting just by improvising together. It was also great to hear someone else’s musical ideas and try to recreate them and vice-versa.</i> |
| Improviser #7 | <i>Happy, relaxed yet excited. It was an interesting sound and experience.</i> |
| Improviser #8 | <i>Contemplative, connected, satisfied, excited, proud.</i> |
| Improviser #9 | <i>Relaxed and emotionally satisfied on that we had achieved something beautiful.</i> |
| Improviser #10 | <i>Empty, in a good way. I felt as if time no longer mattered, all that was important was the present.</i> |

The sentiments and states referred to by improvisers in *Chart #2* present the overall condition of participants after the performance. In a sense, these ensuing sentiments and states provide a marker to perceive how “modes of being” were enacted and transformed throughout the session. More specifically, the change in the dominant state—for example, from “tense” and “focused” while playing, to “happy” and “satisfied” at the end of the session—denotes a factual alteration triggered through the performance and spontaneous play. These “new” modes of being may be sorted using the aid of the four complexes:

- **Relaxation complex**: *Extremely calm-almost speechless, relaxed, completely relaxed, very relaxed, satisfied, emotionally satisfied;*
- **Flexion complex**: *At ease, like waking from a long nap on Sunday/ Christmas morning;*
- **Meditation complex**: *Was not thinking of anything but the music, thoughts not clear; empowered/inspired, contemplative, connected, empty, proud, all that was important was the present;*
- **Transitional complex**: *Happy, surprised, relaxed yet excited.*

While the density in which the four complexes overlapped and reconfigured before and through the session varied a great deal—ranging from nervousness and tension, to excitement and concentration—the aftermath of the session, instead, centered on sentiments of calmness and satisfaction. That is, it seems that the four experiential areas contained in the complexes went from a more dispersed and isolated arrangement during the initial moments of the rendition, to a movement of synthesis towards the peak and end of the session. The players emphasized that while reaching the end of the rendition, dissimilar feelings (such as anxiousness or attentiveness) merged into a single, experiential trope. Such singular sentiment was generally defined by the improvisers as *being relaxed*. Thus, it follows that the conflation of various experiential areas into a single strand benefited each individual by inducing a sense of looseness and un-tightness. I define such amalgamation of the four complexes as transcendence, or the experience of transcendence: the passage from one *world* to the other, from one *mode* of being to another.

Throughout the sessions, participants fluidly traversed various experiential areas. In many cases, these areas overlapped and canceled each other out, leading to new forms of embodiment and emplacement that defy exact conceptualization. These newly created forms of being-in-the-

world were subsequently described in terms of being calm, relaxed, and satisfied. That is, participants felt at-ease, confident within their own bodies and selves. Embodiment and emplacement were engaged successfully, leading to a positive and re-energized perception of each one's own being.

George Parrot, a jazz-rock fusion guitarist and educator, framed the movement from one mode of being to another as an empowering “release” of forces and sentiments. Usually, during a public performance, George would improvise complete songs on the guitar. His approach involves an initial statement of a basic motif (a pattern) and the subsequent arrangement of contrasting sections inspired in the reformulation of the seminal pattern. He described his methodology as follows.

[In a concert,] I would pick up a melody by ear, or would start with a simple form, like *ababcb* form. Once I knew the form and the structure, I would just kind of play around the melody, over and under it. A lot of the music that I do now I kind of approach it with that mentality of improvising, as opposed to following a strict form.

George's philosophy of improvisation coincides with Matt Morin's usage of “freedom” as motivational force. When asked about his personal definition of improvisation, George responded: “It is all about freedom. That is what it is all about: being able to play free [...] Freedom to express yourself, to allow yourself the choice of following the form of the music or interpreting it differently each time.” George associates the enactment of freedom to a release of contained energies. His avenue to achieve transcendence comprehends a type of improvisation that allows him to *play*: “[improvisation] is almost infinite. You hear a melody in your head and then you try to incorporate it into what you are playing. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't.” Once George has “put together a phrase,” he initiates an extemporaneous discourse by “playing off [such] melody.” This process is felt by George as deeply engaging and fun. Moreover, “playing off the melody” puts him in a mood reminiscent of his beloved childhood, when he improvised music with his parents, both professional musicians.

C=What type of emotions do you experience while improvising?

G=It goes back to when I was a little kid. It was just *magic*. It feels like you transcend this world. You escape into some kind of... [long pause] I don't know what it is. The world of music! It is magical.

C=How do you feel after improvising?

G=It is a real release. When things don't go well, when you improvise and the song falls apart, it is frustrating. But you have to keep trying. When you break through it really feels good, as in a release [...] Sometimes you hold back too—which is frustrating because there is no reason to hold back. You just should go for it.

Release is acted out through play and persistence. By releasing the contained forces, George brings freedom to his life. In the same manner, the improvisers I played with during the WMR sessions achieved a gentle emplacement in the world, a sense of being calm and relaxed by “playing off” the melody I provided them.

The movement from one mode of being-in-the-world to another was also alluded to by Danny Bedrosian. Danny is a successful keyboard player and singer who has toured the world with funk bandleader and producer George Clinton. Danny started improvising music very early in his childhood. For that reason, he approaches extemporaneity as an already mastered technique; improvisation is a “mode of being” that is already ingrained in his persona. Further, Danny deliberately utilizes extemporaneous behavior to explore his own “sub-conscious” in the quest for finding sounds —“to make people feel special things.” Danny defines improvisation as “individuality.” For him, “there is an identity implicit in improvisational nature,” which relates to the idea of making extemporaneity a concrete means to objectify and articulate inner-reality. “A good improviser is fearless, has experience, and is open,” says Danny, paying importance to the musician’s ability to *openly* bring about his or her individuality through spontaneous creation.

The degree to which the ongoing composition is able to draw from “sub-conscious” material determines the esthetic success of the rendition. One has to be “fearless” so that a precise scrutiny of the mind’s obscurities—that is, hidden memories, desires, or dreams—can be codified into vivid sonic representations: “The most important aspect in my improvisation nerve, if you will, is my ability to close down my conscious mind and open up my sub-conscious, because things you have learned over the years stay there.” Danny intermingles the concepts of memory and sub-conscious, making them a single, fertile source for inspiration. Both concepts function in him as a personal “stock” of cognitive data loosely structured. In a sense, his “memories” act as building-blocks that provide an emotional and intellectual foundation to his extemporaneous discourse. According to Jeff Pressing, improvisers make ample use of short-term memory and “chunks” of information that are already circulating within a dynamic area of awareness (1984). In his review of mental processes related to extemporaneous performance, Pressing speaks about “action units” that are momentarily stored in the short-term memory. These action units are *patterns of cognition* that emerge from the musician’s long-term memory.

In other words, long-term memory (i.e., Danny's sub-conscious) behaves as an overarching repository of information from which "chunks" of unprocessed stimuli are subsequently taken to be shaped and codified into smaller and more manageable action units. Long-term memory, in this case, also determines certain idiosyncratic traits that translate into particular schemes and configurations—which are aspects pertaining to the improviser's unique set of experiences. In that regard, Pressing goes on to say that "the ability to construct new, meaningful pathways in an abstract cognitive space must be cultivated. Each such improvised pathway between action units will sometimes follow existing hierarchical connections, and other times break off in search of new connections" (1984: 12). Once the "raw" material has been extracted from the long-term memory, it is transformed into units and positioned within the reaches of the short-term memory. Afterwards, the units become usable patterns of cognition for the improviser.

Danny enacts a movement from one mode of being to another by "fearlessly" diving into his own sub-conscious. Throughout his symbolic "journey" across hidden memories, desires, and dreams, he is able to embody the information he discovers and re-process it in the form of sonic units. When I asked him about his improvisational methodology, he answered with an illustrative summary of this "sub-conscious approach:"

Combine all your favorite moments, whether they are feel-based moments or things you have read, and try to find the way to combine all those feelings with certain chordal things. Open up your mind to trust yourself when looking for a way to improvise. I was a classical and I used to trust my technique, not my memories. When I became an improviser, instead, I just had my instinct. The less you organize your ability to become an improviser the better improviser you will be. It is the individual human nature what makes you a good improviser. It is not that you say the table is red but the way you say *the table is red*. And that is what people like.

Additionally, Danny's approach pursues a diving not only into the memorial, but into an immemorial or primordial past. In a sense, he equates the individual's sub-conscious with the notion of an archaic and universal primeval origin.³⁹ By excavating his memories deeply enough,

³⁹Matt Morin said: "I have a theory that relates to that time-immemorial-physical existence [...] To me, when I am improvising just with instruments, with instrumental sounds, without words, you are tapping into this universal language. By universal I mean the physical universe. I don't mean universal culturally. I mean the *physics* of our universe. You are saying things that speak to those physical manifestations (molecular, nuclear, physical realities): the sounds of the universe. The music of our planet is so deeply connected to the physical universe that it

he educes —primordial things that are all pretty much building-blocks of the subconscious improvisational nature.” Through improvisation, the musician and the universe fuses into an all-embracing entity that constantly moves, describing a free exploratory motion:

An ability to let go on a improvisation and rehearsal type of nature, rehearsing yourself, finding those things that make you say —whatwas that?!!”... All these make you feel kind of *ancient*. Sometimes, when I am improvising, I say to myself —know that this is not a *normal* type of phrase.”

According to Danny, it is the —ability to let go” that defines an experienced improviser. It allows musicians to seamlessly move from one mode of being to another. Intuition—along with a brave desire to explore the hidden areas of mind and to reformulate different possible ways to think and perceive the world—permits Danny to master a highly individualized Improvising Transcendence technique. As a versed extemporizer, Danny feels at ease traversing multiple moods and emotions—the —complexes” he incarnates are manifold. Following this idea, he suggests that —the more varied the angles of experience, the richer the palette for improvisation.” Thus, memory plays an important role to him because it provides a workable stock of building-blocks and patterns—whether these contain aural, cognitive, or motor information. Nonetheless, he points out that the performative aspect is important too. The extemporizer has to willingly *move* from one mode of being to another through music-making. With this, Danny’s ideas resemble a central notion of transcendence: every type of experience is valuable and therefore it should be embodied and acknowledged. This is, in fact, a condition for a wholly lived existence. One has to not discriminate, but to be open while improvising. Danny refers to this —openness” as a place and a moment in the universe where and when he is able to manage the insurgence of multiple experiences and emotions:

Those types of things [i.e., the mental disposition to engage with the music] play the biggest part probably because I am finding this *place*, this *moment* in my mind, in my soul, that is so blank as far as being able to shut everything else out, the only things I am attracted to and visceversa is energy.

transcends our cultural restrictions and our cultural histories. Sometimes you get into this value judgment, when you feel like your structures aren’t communicating with other structures, and then you feel that maybe they are not universal as I am [...].”

Finally, Danny synthesizes the outbreak of multi-layered cognitive events as a purely flowing element that he calls “energy.” By being attracted and taught by the oscillations and gestalts described by this “energy,” he learns to adapt and humbly accept the shifting aspects of both inner and outer reality.

Putting Away the Instruments

The three sessions at the WMR ended in similar ways. After participants instinctively concerted to slow down the pace and thin out the texture of the music, their instruments’ sounds declined until a thick silence inundated the ambience. At this time, the cloud that pervaded the walls of the WMR was electrified with sparks of a different energy. Participants smiled, looked satisfied, and felt amazed about what just happened. I also remained unsure about how to categorize this experience. It was as if *I knew* that something significant and unusual had happened; at the same time, I was afraid that not everybody in the room was sharing these same feelings. I looked to the improvisers’ faces, searching for a sign of empathy or a cue regarding their thoughts. While everybody was putting their instruments aside, the cloud of energy dissipated and people began to talk. The results of the experience proved to be beneficial for everybody. There was a positive aura embracing each musician and the room—the “positive energies and ideas” that Koen sees as the basis for a gentle embodiment and transformation. A brief chat engaged us. We exchanged opinions about our individual experiences. While listening to the improvisers talk—and perceiving the calmness and the soft tones of their voices—I felt confident that, in truth, the sessions turned out to be a success. Although some participants mentioned momentary struggle in keeping up with the ensemble’s flow, now their semblances and words appeared much more fluent and tranquil than before playing. By reading the anonymous questionnaires, I confirmed that, indeed, no one was disappointed. I realized that disregarding the ups and downs of the experiment, the process of creating a full-fledged group improvisation was a source of pride, empowerment, satisfaction, and serenity to everybody in the room.

Play Whatever You Want to Play

Matt Morin came out with this intense and revealing testimony:

Improvisation has saved my life many times. Over and over again. I was a really difficult kid. Music provided me a way to get away from all that [a history of psychologies, therapy, and problems at school] Sometimes, it provided a door into that, also. The ethos of improvisation, not only music but *life improvisation*, that allowed me to relearn my equilibrium and allow me to arrive to a place on my own where I can then reintegrate into society. If I didn't have that ability that is facilitated by improvisation—to learn how to react to vibrations, deal with the unexpected, learn how to communicate back and forth—if I didn't have that, I would be lost and in the world of psychiatrists that were trying to heavily medicate me. I would not be who I am now.

In the same line, Jeff Brooks emphatically said that for him an impossibility to improvise would equal physical ~~death~~.” This visceral necessity for extempore creation comes from a certitude in its power to transform negative energies and ideas into beneficial forces. Improvisation is a personal technique that allows Jeff to exteriorize sad sentiments by making them ~~un~~funful:”

A lots of times, while improvising, I think about words. And often about dramatic events I had in my life, like deaths and things like that. When I am improvising that is a huge thing. A tune comes from a dark area; improvisation, the stuff that really expresses my emotions, comes from something that is really sad. For me, improvisation is a way to get those feelings out so I can move on.

Thus, to exorcize feelings of loss and anxiety, Jeff creates extempore. Improvisation is the natural avenue he takes to extract burdensome experiences from his ~~dark~~ area.” Such an area is a place where manifold destructive emotions accumulate and potentially generate disease. In that manner, by excavating harmful memories and reshaping them as the positive source of creative expression, Jeff transcends such detrimental modes of being and enacts a new self.

All these valuable and honest testimonies—both the ones gathered through the pilot study and the interview to improvisers—led me to formulate a central question that perhaps animates all my research endeavors: —~~What~~ *What motivates me to improvise?*” In a sense, it is a desire to reproduce that first moment of transcendence I experienced while making music with my friend Jaime. Not only that, it is the knowledge that a real and favorable change occurred in my life when I decided to play sounds that utterly *came from me*, sounds that I instilled with personal meaning. When I decided to jump ahead and emplaced myself in the immensity of that particular moment—a winter ash-gray evening in Lima, while hanging out at Jaime's studio,

with no goals or hopes in life, completely lost—my life dissolved and reintegrated into a new synthesis. I plucked the strings of the guitar randomly, full of passion, like the first time I ever played an instrument. I played truly what I wanted to play. Nothing but my own will commanded me to continue pushing forward. The sense of rigidity and the lack of alternatives that blocked my life during those years of inactivity altered into an impulse that made me enjoy the music I produced. During that unusual moment, a new way to perceive life was awakened in me. From that moment thereafter, I have not stopped improvising.

POSTLUDE

Applying the Model

In the context of the six stages suggested in the Improvising Transcendence Model, the three improvisatory sessions held at the WMR may be outlined as follows.

- **First Stage:** The sessions at the WMR offered us the vantage of entering the *temenos* through clear symbolic and performative actions. Our playground was a physical space where decoration (filled with instruments and iconographies from around the world) implicitly demarked a liminality—a breach between everyday activity and non-ordinary reality.⁴⁰ Once in the room, and while setting up the instruments, I explained to the participants that the main goal of the session was to improvise and explore the “magical” powers of Hildegard’s melody. This created expectation and instilled in the improvisers a proneness to use intuition and fantasy. Many participants wrote in their answers that the image of Hildegard and Medieval monasteries pervaded their minds while playing. Thus, the aura of “specialness” steeped in the walls of the WMR was reinforced by the mysterious powers ascribed to Hildegard Von Bingen’s music.
- **Second Stage:** Each improviser at the WMR had a music stand with a page containing the following: a title written in bold font (“Pattern A”) and an excerpt of Hildegard’s play *Ordo Virtutum*. These contents were specifically laid down to make sight-reading easy. Moreover,

⁴⁰ Boyce-Tillman proposes that liminality (and therefore a “ritual” dimension) can be accessed through meaningful music-making: “music has the possibility of creating a liminal space and the perceived effectiveness of a musical experience is often closely related to this area. Insofar as a musical experience takes us out of everyday consciousness with its concerns for food, clothing, and practical issues and moves us into another dimension, we regard the musical experience as successful, whether we are a composer, performer, or listener” (2009: 6).

having the page in front proved to be an important ingredient in the experiment. While performing, I registered an intense concentration in the participants' faces and bodies. Each player was connected to the printed page and to the sounding material. The materiality of the printed page and music written on it was intended to be a referential *pattern*—an aural, visual, and cognitive point of departure for the improvisers. In that manner, the pilot study aimed to investigate how a playful engagement with some micro-structures (e.g., a short melody) may foster mind-body flexibility. Moreover, participants at the WMR had to enact bodily movements strategically designed to target certain pitches, certain dynamics in their instruments. Paying attention to the pattern printed on the page, and the pattern *sounding* in the room, improvisers developed the ability to focus closely on different layers of perception. Additionally, the flow of the music demanded a rapid shift in the attentional focus. Players felt compelled to change and adapt to the flow of music. For that purpose, they needed to re-adjust continuously. Mind-body concentration was thereafter interlaced with the emotions awaked in each individual.

- **Third Stage:** The eagerness to match the flow of the ensemble was key to bolster multi-layered focuses of attention. That is, the intensity and variety of the stimuli being captured in a sense overwhelmed and transported the player to a state of “~~extreme~~” permeability. Playing and listening involved a dynamic awareness. Some of the elements demanding the attention and engagement of participants were disperse harmonic movements, dense, sometimes busy textures, multiplicity of melodic lines intermingling and unbraiding, bodily cues, layered syncopations and rhythms, anticipation to changes in dynamics and tempi, and so forth. Such engagement was reflected in flexible types of perception that simultaneously comprised a global awareness⁴¹ and a one-pointedness of focus. The shifting and immediate nature of performance spurred a break in the quotidian modes of attention.
- **Fouth Stage:** By feeling at ease with the music or striving to catch the flow, players similarly became immersed in the unfolding of the sound. They both produced and were pulled by the stream of interlinked patterns. As was evidenced by the conversation and interviews that followed the experiment, improvisers at this stage experienced a cascade of emotion. Then, overflowing perception and strong surge of feelings produced a phenomenon of “~~global mapping~~” in which the individual was transformed physically (its neural apparatus is “~~a-wired~~”) and emotionally (a phenomenological gestalt conflates various feelings and memories).
- **Fifth Stage:** The acceptance of such multifaceted and polyvalent experience, in the light of a learned flexibility and suppleness, made the improviser feel at ease and whole. Dichotomies were

blurred—for example, when saying “I can feel both joy and sadness simultaneously,” or “It is OK to feel bad now, life will continue.” Acceptance is at the core of becoming whole. Contradictions are resolved in affirmation. Affirmation, in turn, is expressed through performance. There is no ambiguity in improvisation: wrong or right, music comes out of the instrument and “exists” in the world. It unfolds as a prolongation of the inner-self. That continuation of the inner reality is a *transcendence* of the individual into the body and mind of the listeners from the body and mind of the player himself. Improvisation stood out as a highly rewarding activity that opened the participants’ spheres of awareness and made them achieve a gentle way of being-in-the-world. Complexity of reality was solved by affirming life through extemporaneous performance.

- **Sixth Stage:** By affirming life and accepting the sometimes contradictory aspects of reality, participants learn cognitive flexibility. They find out how to face the shifting and unstoppable essence of nature. They adopt a lithe attitude to confront facts that cannot be changed. They manage to integrate their different emotions (anxiety, joy, awe, fear) into a positive manifestation and creative affirmation of the self. A form of adaptation is enacted. Improvisers are then enplaced and embodied within the stream of a multilayered, polyvalent, and rewarding reality that embraces all types of emotions and thoughts.

The Ethnography of Improvising Musicians centered on the analysis of the data collected during fieldwork. The main purpose was to expand the discussion of improvisation as a healing practice and to incorporate the Improvising Transcendence Model. In the next section, a brief conclusion will summarize the main points I proposed in this thesis. In addition, the idea of improvisation as a *philosophy of the present* will reframe and consolidate my main findings. Such a philosophy will establish a more succinct global understanding of the variety of processes and concepts hitherto discussed.

CONCLUSION

This thesis explored the healing possibilities of music improvisation using a two-fold approach. First, I reviewed a heuristic array of sources and proposed a framework to understand improvisation as a preventive or curative event. Second, I employed the Improvising Transcendence Model to frame data collected through fieldwork and a pilot study. The main argument was that improvisation leads to the experience of transcendence, and that the experience of transcendence is a vehicle to promote health and healing. Throughout the analysis, manifold processes and concepts have been brought into play. Different approaches have been applied to investigate musical improvisation and, especially, to learn more about the inner-experience of improvising individuals. Nevertheless, the subjective essence of spontaneous behavior (and the broad spectrum of emotional and cognitive processes it purports) was not exhausted. Further, I did not attempt to posit an all-encompassing “definition” or “explanation” of the term. I only pursued an interdisciplinary exploration, guided by ethnomusicological and medical-anthropological perspectives.

Human spontaneity, I argued, exceeds fixed theoretical assumptions. As a performative event, it asserts individuality and mutuality. It also instills beneficial modes of being and creative transformation of new personas and new forms of being-with-others. The movement from one mode of being to another was associated with transcendence. More specifically, I posed that individual agency crystallizes through extemporization, making improvising individuals become whole and heal.

Scholarship centered on improvisatory endeavors has expanded considerably during the last two decades. Multiple studies have searched new angles to explicate the problem of spontaneity and creation *ex-nihilo*. Some fundamental questions spur from the scrutiny of this matter. Can musicians, and human beings in general, truly create *original* art-objects out of inspiration? Does the individual have the power to insert newly created objects into the world? Should investigators talk more about *re-creation* and *re-formulation* of existing material while discussing the generative power of art disciplines? Is spontaneity and spiritually-meaningful creation always molded, canalized, and refrained by culture and social milieu? These questions step into a philosophical dilemma that surpasses the goals of the present study. In fact, I purposely have attempted to avoid such discussion. The chief argument called for an understanding of musical improvisation as a performative event grounded in culture. Its

culturally-dependent aspects, nevertheless, represent no hindrance for the individual to transcend social and cultural realms. Indeed, the act of *transcending* such rootedness enacts positive progression, movement, and adaptation into the shifting world.

My investigation considered different branches of scholarship. Ideas were drawn from anthropological and ethnomusicological sources. Models taken from cognitive studies and the “hard sciences” were also intermingled. By this means, the thesis aimed to establish a multifocal and polyvalent approximation of musical spontaneity. One possible critique regarding this approach may concern the methodological “vagueness” informing the project. The multiplicity of inner-events described along with a persistent reformulation of theoretical constructs, nevertheless, intended to “flow” together with the constantly expanding meaning ingrained in a type of creative performance (i.e., extemporization) that is always re-defining itself. Nonetheless, I now propose a concluding thought to summarize and consolidate the ongoing conversation. Musical improvisation, and the various processes correlated—e.g., “global mapping,” “transcendence,” “embodiment”—promote a wholesome emplacement in the here and now. That is, a successful improvisation and enactment of healing forces demand from the improvising musician a thorough living in the *now*.

The idea of opening an invigorating and nourishing space in time for the inner-realization of the individual corresponds to the very essence of the rituality found in the Improvising Transcendence Model. It follows, then, that by co-creating and inhabiting an unbound sense of “being-present-in-time” and “being-present-in-the-world,” extemporizers transcend harmful modes of being and renew themselves.

Improvisation: a Philosophy of the Present

One of my post-session field notes bears reproduction at length here as a point of departure for some final thoughts on the views of improvisation I have developed as a result of this study:

My participation as “non-observer” improviser within the WMR session taught me much about accepting other people’s voices and internal rhythms. I now visualize how a search for transcendence in improvisation cannot be induced through fixed methodological means. On the other hand, transcendence may be fostered applying a protean, self-evolving, and cooperative understanding of the intersubjective dynamics that govern the *temenos*. The ritual time in which participants and I entered was perhaps not completely lacking of goal-oriented rules. Some of us, including myself, were preoccupied with esthetic and technical aspects. Others were distracted by

feelings of distress or anxiety. Nevertheless, the final product we were able to achieve—that is, the *process* of spontaneous creation itself rather than the material production of recordings and videotapes—helped me to interiorize that transcendence necessarily involves an *acceptance* of myself and of the other; above all, that transcendence imprints a deeply felt *philosophy of the present*.

Acceptance of everyone's voice and inner rhythms is necessary in the context of group improvisation. Moreover, acceptance of one's own individuality and performance is intrinsically needed if we want music to radiate an unfolding self. The dialogical textures and the orchestration of musical statements—inspired in both pattern A and the participants' inner-reality—conveyed the beauty of our improvisational process. They also instilled a sense of calmness and relief in each musician. Communication—and a "real" transaction of experiences—was the basis for a type of transcendence that understands the "inter" as the moment, place, and *being* in which one becomes whole, reunited, understood, expanded, and fulfilled. Listening to and performing meaningful sound was the avenue to crystallize those *I* and *Thou* transactions Jackson proposes in his "intersubjective" approach. Communication was an outcome of spontaneous behavior. Participants declared that they felt at ease with the world after having achieved, during the performance, the disclosure of an inner-reality and the radiant discovery of other people's voices.

At the end, in considering all that we did and said during the session, I can affirm now that the one, single idea that is coming back over and over to my mind is that, by improvising transcendence, "we thoroughly lived the present." We were open and whole during those 25-minutes of free, improvisatory dialogue. We did not lose even a second thinking about things that were out of our hands. We simply played the music we wanted to play and engaged with it.

The idea of an unbound "present"—a peak experience of time as an open window for inner-realization—serves to reframe and sum up the variety of processes discussed throughout the study. Not only that, a philosophy of the present helps to make more accessible the connection between transcending individuals and healing spontaneity. For instance, moving from one mode of being to another, the extemporizer transgresses unilateral and flat notions of common-day reality. That is, by thoroughly positioning mind and body activity within the flow of present action, one overcomes the dissipation of life's energies. One engages, with and through his own body, the shifting surroundings. One becomes unified with the rhythms of existence and finds a gentle mode of being-in-the-world. A form of meditation is enacted.

This "catching" of life as it flows is laden with spiritual overtones. For example, Zen philosopher D.T. Suzuki explains that "Zen attempts to take hold of life in its act of living; to

stop the flow of life and to look into it is not the business of Zen. The constant presence of the koan [a cognitive pattern or riddle] before our mental vision keeps the mind always occupied; that is, in full activity. Satori is attained in the midst of this activity and not by suppressing it” (1954: 81). In a sense, illumination enlightens apprentices’ minds when their constant focusing in a koan allows action and thought to synthesize in a non-premeditated gesture that liberates.

Another interesting point of view comes from German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who sees —living the present” as the only possible avenue for self-actualization. Schopenhauer believes that the —will”—an insatiable universal force that engenders all that later objectifies in the material world—manifests exclusively in the substance of a present action. Therefore, an affirmative movement of the self performed extemporaneously brings to the front an eternal and immediate moment in which individuals transgress the notion of a static world:

We have not to search for the past before life, nor the future after death: we have, rather, to know the present, the only form in which the will manifests itself. It won’t elude the will, nor the will elude it. So the person who is content with life as it is, the person who in every way affirms life, may confidently see it as endless, and banish the fear of death as an illusion that suggests to him the foolish fear that he can ever lose the present; and foreshadows a time in which there is no present (Schopenhauer 1995: 182).

This transgression of dichotomies and experiential restrictions leads to a re-conceptualization of reality as a multi-fractal dimension. Spontaneous performance embarks the individual on an integrative gestalt, where not only individual agency, but the forces of nature and reality coalesce. Such beneficial energies flow lithely and freely in and out of one’s body, impregnating self-experience with the sparks of creation. This image—the condition of being dissolved in a stream of natural forces—has been brought about in the *Upanishads*, the collection of sacred Hindu texts (2007: 195).

The flowing river is lost in the sea;

The illumined sage is lost in the Self.

The flowing river has become the sea;

The illumined sage has become the Self

That is, by achieving a “flowing” state within the present moment, one loses himself, but at the same time fosters a unitive awareness of the fractal realities that compound the world. By losing the self in action and performance, one is illuminated.

Clarinetist Jeff Brook pointed out the existing relationship between contemporaneity and extemporaneity: —My improvisation is rooted in the way I am feeling at the time. I really don’t have a style that I can really say.” As Jeff suggested, assuming improvisation as an essential and visceral mode of being leads to a restatement of music esthetics. This means that—following not only Jeff Brook’s testimony, but a myriad others that point out the same idea—the main source for analytical studies in improvisation should be looked for within its performative essence, and not in the topography of its final product (i.e., recording and transcription). Moreover, Jeff’s words hint at an important issue concerning the distinction between contemporaneity and extemporaneity. Broadly, they are two different facets of the same event, defined by immediacy and spontaneity. Specifically, contemporaneity is the synchronicity of action performance with the ongoing rhythm of existence. Extemporaneity is the crystallization of action with no premeditation. It is an embodied flexibility that permits the unscripted unfolding of selves. In that regard, it is possible to affirm that a philosophy of the present is concomitant to transcendence. Moreover, deep motor and cognitive concentration in the here and now kindles a type of lucid awareness, thereafter conducing to groundbreaking transformation. That is, healing events are dependent upon the visualization of reality (and rituality) as an embodied immediacy. In this regard, psychologist and art therapist Mitchell S. Kossak discusses transcendent experiences achieved through musical improvisation using the following argument:

[Transpersonal] literature suggests that focusing on the *present moment* in creative process creates a shift in awareness of ordinary daily experience in what expressive arts therapist Natalie Rogers calls a “transcendent moment” where “there is a loss of space and time change.” Natalie Rogers also suggests that the spontaneous free playing that takes place in expressive therapies with material, space, and sound helps to create a non-linear frame where the lines of conscious and unconscious are blurred (2007: 49).

As Kossak emphasizes, the importance of engaging the present is fundamental to ensure successful healing events. Such engagement is in direct relation to the performativity of non-ordinary states I discussed throughout the thesis. Musicians who are able to reproduce a sharp focusing on the actuality of life (on the crystalline contemplation and embodiment of thought and

action being carried out) enter into a *special* mode of awareness. Assuming this line of thinking, other processes related to the Improvising Transcendence Model can be reassessed as follows.

- Transcendence is rooted in the present.
- The movement from one world to another occurs in the present.
- *Illud tempus*, the times of origins, reenacts the present.
- —“Globamapping” is a neural phenomenon activated in the immediate biological time of the body.
- Cognitive flexibility conveys the experience of the present with all its variants. It is fostered when individuals behave at ease, spending no time deciding what to do but acting spontaneously and intuitively.
- Improvisation is composing in real-time.
- Non-ordinary states encourage a living in the present, a wholly emplacement in the shifting reality.

Lastly, I reiterate my overarching goal in this thesis: to posit a model for further investigation in the area of musical improvisation. By no means has the analysis of extemporaneous behavior and non-ordinary states been exhausted. In that spirit, I propose that extemporaneity can be researched as *process* and as *performance* rather than as musical activity associated with extant esthetic theories. I also believe that the performative aspects of improvisation are co-adjutant to the experience of transcendence. Viewed as a spectrum of processes and events, transcendence is considered in this study a source for beneficial modes of being and transformation. By exploring the various sides of this argument, I hoped to establish a new conceptual dimension for exploring spontaneity as a healthful, even perhaps curative practice. Furthermore, I wish my study to serve as a foundation for a broader research project centered on larger ethnographic samples. Improvisation studies offer much room for additional experimental investigation. More importantly, they contain theoretical tools to potentially generate pragmatic ways for assisting individuals in improving their quality of life through the performance of spontaneity.

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APPENDIX A

Office of the Vice President For Research
Human Subjects Committee
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: 6/3/2010

To: Carlos Odria

Address: [REDACTED]
Dept.: MUSIC SCHOOL

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research
Improvising Transcendence for Health and Healing: a Literary Review and Pilot Study

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by 6/2/2011 you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the Chair of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Benjamin Koen, Advisor
HSC No. 2010.4087

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Research on Healing and Music Improvisation

You are invited to be part of a research study on the exploration of the ways in which improvisation affects the musician's emotional and physical persona. You were selected as participant because of your willingness to share your background as a musician and improviser. Your testimony will expand this research's scope, helping to clarify aspects that cooperate in the making of improvised music. We ask that you to read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the research. This study is being conducted by Carlos Odria, graduate student from the Musicology department at Florida State University.

Time commitment and Location

If you participate in an interview, you will determine the time and place of the interview depending upon the availability of the researcher. The interview will last 50 to 60 minutes and will include a set of 15-20 questions. After this span of time, you will be free to leave with no further commitments.

If you participate in a performance: you and the researcher will meet in a designated room at the FSU School of Music. The performance will last between 40 to 60 minutes. Afterwards, you will be asked to fill in a questionnaire which might take 20 minutes. Then, you will be free to leave with no further commitment.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to collect testimonies and information to help the researcher understand the dynamics involved in the performance of improvised music. The personal and unique character of the experiences enacted during musical improvisation calls for a close analysis of each individual's experiences. This is why this study employs multiple tools to explore the improviser's world, for example: interviews, recorded conversations, and informal gatherings. Your music and the way you feel it, are of the most important value.

Procedure:

If you agree to be in this study, your participation will involve one or more of the following tasks:

- *Fill in a questionnaire regarding your experience as improviser
- *Agree to be recorded during a performance, interview, or rehearsal
- *Participate in an oral interview that will touch on your experience as a music improviser
- *Participate in a music improvisatory performance with the researcher.

None these tasks are mandatory. You have the right to refuse to participate at any time. Participation is voluntary, and there is no penalty for nonparticipation.

Risks and benefits of being in the Study:

This study has a mild risk: you might experience discomfort while sharing and describing personal experiences. This discomfort may arise from the fact that you will be asked about your experience as a musician. Sometimes, recapitulating past experiences may convey the revival of not desired strong emotions, such as sadness or anxiety. The investigator will keep in mind that the information you share comprises a fundamental part of your persona, and it will be always handled with proper care. This means that we will suspend the interview or performance in which you participate if any sign of discomfort or distress is noticed. In addition, the conductor will have an informal chat with you prior to the interview or performance to verify that you still feel apt to proceed. Under no circumstances will you be forced to continue if you do feel that such undesirable emotions may arise. Be aware that we will also ask you about spiritual/religious matters. This might make you feel uncomfortable because of the private nature of the topics. For this reason, you are free to withdraw from this study without penalty at any time.

The benefits of this study are various: first, you will share your music and your artistry with other musicians. Second, your participation in interviews and recordings might help you to discover new facets of your own personality, as well as to expand your esthetic point of view.

Compensation:

You will not receive a payment for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private and confidential to the extent permitted by law. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject (unless you expressly provide consent for us to do so). Research records will be stored in the researcher's personal computer secured under password. Only the researcher (Carlos Odria) and his faculty advisors will have access to it. At the end of this study, the audio files containing oral interviews and/or music performances will be stored in an external digital hard drive secured under password only known by the researcher (although we can erase these files if you ask us to do so) The questionnaires with your written answers will be destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Florida State University.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Carlos Odria. If you have a question, you are encouraged to contact him by phone (██████████) or by e-mail (██████████). The advisor of this research is Dr. Benjamin Koen (bkoen@fsu.edu, phone #850-644-4642).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the FSU IRB at 2010 Levy Street, Research Building B, Suite 276, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742, or 850-644-8633, or by email at human.subjects@magnet.fsu.edu

FSU Human Subjects Committee approved on 6/3/10. Void after 6/2/11. HSC# 2010.4087

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Carlos Odria received the Bachelor of Arts in music, a Certificate in Music of the Americas, and a Minor in Religion Studies in 2009 from Florida State University (FSU). In 2011, he also received a Master of Music in Ethnomusicology from the same institution. Odria is currently the director of Aconcagua, the South American music ensemble at FSU. He has presented at scholarly conferences and offered lecture-performances on Latin American musics across the state of Florida and beyond. His primary research interests involve improvisation studies, medical and applied ethnomusicology, Brazilian choro, Afro-Peruvian genres, and Latin American cultural diversity. As a guitarist, Odria has performed in various universities and festivals, both in Peru and United States. He studied classical guitar and Peruvian folk music Pepe Torres and jazz theory with Dr. Leo Welch.