

# Was I Only Imagining It?

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Improvisation gives form to imagination while simultaneously, taking its form from imagination. It is a strange feeling then, when reality confronts imagination. After all, the best realities celebrate imagination, but the best imaginations are rarely found in realities. My experience of two improvised music performances – as a performer in one and an audience member in the other – seem to reflect this phenomenon. While my performance is a manifestation of imagination, the performance I attended reflected a reality of that imagination. This is not a comparative analysis between two performances in the manner of selecting one for another. Rather, it is to delineate the spaces between the process and product of improvisation. Its purpose is to test our perceptions of improvisation and how we conceive of musicianship in an improvised performance. Crucially, my reflection forms the third performance, asking myself: what am I hearing when I listen to free improvisation? What is real and what is imagined when I consider my experience of noise or music? I interrogate my first instinct to free improvisation as a performer, which is 'music,' with my first reactions to free as a performer, which is 'music,' with my first reactions to free improvisation as a listener, which is 'noise.' Admittedly, listening is very contextual, layered, and temporal. Furthermore, in the process of writing this reflection, my listening has dissolved from reality into degrees of memory and imagination.



As much as written text represents reality to an extent, it is very much based on an imagination of what happened sonically in both performances. Thus, 'reality' and 'imagination' become loaded terms in working through my intentions as a musician and expectations as an audience member. The writing of this paper also interplays between reality and imagination in trying to represent the music in absolute terms: improvisation or noise? Musical or creative? There are no absolutes when thinking about music, but there are absolutes when writing about music. Words do not float vaguely as sentiments but set up particular expressions. Here lurks the basis of my frustration when writing about music and this paper indirectly examines the tricky positions between musician-listener-writer embodied in one. Nevertheless, the purpose is not to discuss the properties (or even necessity) of written or recorded text in capturing a music performance. Rather, it is to wrestle with a musical practice that has no musical text to begin with and to put into textual form its intention, content, and impact. It can be at best, dynamic and profound; at worst, contradictory and debased. I hope to give rise to all these perceptions at once – to hold words accountable to a myriad of reactions, just as improvisation does.

The first performance I reference is by Veryan Weston (piano), Bei Bei Wang (percussion), and myself (violin), titled 'As You Hear' at London's Vortex Jazz Club on 6th August 2018. The backstory to this project provides a colourful context: the ensemble was formed by Weston after an invitation to perform at the Warsaw Improvisation Festival (1st-3rd December 2017). While the project was led by Weston, he decided against naming the group 'Veryan Weston Trio'. Instead, in discussion with us, he decided to name the concert 'As You Hear' with the implicit intention of having the audience identify the performance and ensemble for themselves – 'as they hear'. After all, we had never performed together before and naming the ensemble eponymously would have been presumptuous and perhaps, misleading. For my part, I had only met Weston once to have an informal jam. It was, all in all, an untested and unfamiliar ensemble that was invited to perform at an international festival – something that the organisers were unaware of.

While these circumstances may serve to induce an improvised performance, listeners expect a degree of preparation and rehearsal to frame a performance, despite how farcical it may seem in the context of free improvisation. The presumption of those attending the

performance would be that the ensemble is an established unit, at least, by association to a particular sound or style of performance. On this occasion, we used that presumption, complicit with our tacit preparation and made it the listeners' job to construct for themselves what that sound and style would be. This contrasts with the second performance I reference, performed by Rachel Musson (tenor saxophone), Julie Kjaer (alto saxophone), and Hannah Marshall (cello) at London's IKLECTIK on 19th August 2018, titled simply 'Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall'. The performance was preceded, as it were, by the reputation of the musicians, informing the listeners of what to expect, even pre-constructing it.

'Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall' offers a certainty which 'As You Hear' does not. The certainty of which musicians, and thus, what instruments to expect, is absolute in the former more than in the latter. This comparison struck me as affective to the outcome of our performance. Bei Bei Wang, our percussionist, is naturally a multi-instrumentalist and her improvisation rests on what percussions are available to her on the day – or what is supplied by the organisers. In Warsaw, we had no idea what instruments to expect save for a few small gongs and other smaller instruments that she managed to pack

in her suitcase. While we had the benefit of larger instruments like marimba and timpani at the Warsaw performance (courtesy of the organisers), we had no such luxury at The Vortex and, therefore, had to negotiate among ourselves what was possible and desirable. While the performance was certainly different to the Warsaw concert by virtue of instrumentation, I felt that the essence of our performance lay in us, not our tools – that in recapturing the improvisation spirit of the Warsaw performance, we should not feel compromised by our instrument selection.

I do not know what the motivations were for Musson, Kjaer, and Marshall to record their concert but 'As You Hear' at the Vortex was picked up by the Polish label *Fundacja Sluchaj!* to be recorded after producer, Maciej Karlowski, heard us in Warsaw. Hence, the desire (if not, obligation) to deliver something similar to what we had previously performed. Weston was adamant that we try to get a marimba for the gig, but Wang was not keen on moving her 5-octave marimba set to the venue as it would take a huge effort and cost to accomplish that safely. After much deliberation, which even included suggestions of alternate percussion players (not that it resolved the marimba issue), I reasoned with Weston that surely *Sluchaj!* was interested in

capturing 'the ensemble,' not particular instruments that we circumstantially encountered that day. After all, having conspired so naturally with improvisation in Warsaw, this detail should not now be a wrangle in our second performance together.

Consequently, I became mindful about identity and style in free improvisation. If, as I believe, 'the ensemble' sound is what defines the performance, what exactly do listeners hear when they listen to an improvised performance – and especially one that is of the same ensemble? Would the improvisation not be the same kind of sonic experience, save for material differences like instrumentation or venue? In my feeble attempts to distinguish improvisation as 'music' or 'noise,' I acknowledge that consolidating improvisation to either one perspective is not only inappropriate but, quite possibly, misleading. Yet, Weston's anxiety to replicate the Warsaw performance for the benefit of the recording (especially because it was offered based on Maciej's impression of that performance) reflects this question about 'what' is heard in improvisation. There seemed to be real and imagined aspects of the performance for both the musicians and listeners that may not be aligned. This can lead to misplaced criticisms and general

misunderstanding of the creative process, which can affect subsequent creative work.

Several issues here need unpacking. The point about similar sonic experiences is too *laissez-faire* a notion; while the different connotations in improvisation about 'music vs. noise' is too subjective for meaningful conversation to take place. What calls to me is the state of experiencing improvisation – one as process, the other as product. This was evident in the way Weston wanted to replicate a 'product' that was the result of a 'process'. However, replicating 'process' in improvisation is no guarantee of getting the same 'product'. It is a conundrum that teases my perceptions of what is real and imagined in improvisation and challenges me to form meaningful reflections about the practice. Thus, if improvisation cannot be bullied into material form, sonic experience becomes accountable to the appeal of an improvised performance. Why do listeners choose to listen to a particular ensemble or musician repeatedly in a free improvisation context? I attended 'Musson/Kjaer/ Marshall' to fulfil a musical curiosity about the ensemble, but having satisfied it, I feel that any subsequent performances I attend in the future will hinge on non-musical reasons. Yet the nature of improvised performances means that there is

always the possibility of experiencing something new with each performance, compelling me to listen repeatedly. The choice to listen to an improvised performance based on sonic experience is as arbitrary as it is deliberate.

But, let me attempt to dissect my sonic experience of both performances as the listening incurred thoughtful ideas for my practice.

The correlation between both performances are high and the comparisons clung to each other naturally. I enjoyed performing 'As You Hear' with the express intention of constructing my improvisation 'as I heard' – yet, it is only in comparison with 'Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall' that I truly understood what 'as you hear' meant, drawing out previously unthought-of elements. Unlike 'Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall', 'As You Hear' will always change materially given the percussion instruments available to Wang. For all my overtures about the immateriality of which percussive instruments we have in performance, I found it entirely different to play with the Vortex version of Wang compared to Warsaw-Wang. It could have been her use of the whirly tube, first thing in the performance, that caught me off guard. Rotated like a whip in hand, it was such a powerful gesture that I could not help but look on. It was a

few moments before I engaged with performing. So much for trying to illustrate my sonic experience with such material impact! If this was what it felt like to me on stage, what effect did it have on the audience?

While the piano and percussion will naturally give more variety in texture and sound than a pair of saxophones, it was listening to the cello that occupied me. This prompted recognition that the string instruments in both ensembles were the pivot point of creative difference. Even as I explored with pitch bends and other effects on the violin, it was revelatory to see how far Hannah Marshall takes it. She instinctively uses the cello as a percussive instrument and her use of scordatura was compelling. Scordatura is a technique of altering the standard tuning of stringed instruments. As a compositional tool, it is typically used to play harmonies that would not be possible in standard tuning. As an improviser, scordatura opens new realms of possibilities on the instrument. Watching Marshall perform scordatura on her cello evoked both an appeal and repulsion to the method. I acknowledge that it has to be managed with a deftness that aligns with both concept and attitude of improvisation.

I have toyed with the idea of using scordatura in my improvisations but have never gone through with it

because of the uncertainty of finding my notes. It would be like playing a completely different instrument and finding intended pitches would take some navigation – negating the ludic nature of improvisation. And yet, to perform scordatura being deliberately unintentional (an oxymoron in itself) is difficult for me to reconcile as creative practice. This gives rise to questions about the nature of improvisation – is it ever intentional, or just accidental? To be sure, improvisation is incidental, but it is impossible to determine between intention and accident, and with it, all microcosms of real and imagined sounds. Consequently, improvisation is viewed as a lesser practice to the highly controlled form of art music: as Gavin Bryars notes, it is possible to ‘sham’ in an improvisation (Bailey, 1992, p.113).

Still, my disconnect with scordatura has nothing to do with mastering or utilizing it. In comparing against Marshall’s performance, I realized I was examining my improvisation for an aspect of transcendence. This is critical in illuminating my distinction of improvisation that is music or noise. While our first performance in Warsaw was free from any preconceived notions, transcending the sum of us, the Vortex performance teemed with all sorts of expectations. In anticipation of a recording, we felt a greater need to identify aspects that

made the first performance ‘successful,’ which can problematically subscribe to various features like musicality, creativity, or recording opportunity, in order to replicate it. However, I am more troubled by criticisms of improvisation that hinge on habitual practice. Here, we must be careful not to think of replication as synonymous with repetition. John Cage often speaks of his opposition to improvisation as an objection to spontaneous expression saying ‘(...) you do only what you remember’ (1996, p.270). Yet, spontaneity relies also on instinctive, reactionary play, which is shaped by accidental reactions, to be sure, but largely by habitual practice. So, Cage hit the nail on the head by asking: ‘How can we find ways of improvising that release us from our habits?’ (ibid.)

Scordatura is that for me now. Yet, once I have mastered it and worked out methods to overcome its tricky practical issues, will I not then succumb to my habits? Gavin Bryars notes that: ‘I could only get out of improvisation what I brought into it’ (Bailey, 1992, p.114), pointing to a creative limitation in free improvisation. John Cage makes similar claims about musicians playing ‘what they already know’ (1996, p.270). This implies that a number of things that I already know (and brought into the performance) could compromise the improvisation, such as: how to play my instrument, how long will the

performance be, who am I playing with? But if musicians play only what they do not know, it can become, as Bryars claims, a descent into a 'sham'. That is, if we begin to tear down structures that sets up a performance, identity, or form, we will be left with a kind of mindlessness about music and surely that is what 'noise' is.

Yet, even as I understand Cage's proposition to overcome habitual performance, I am not sure if it is possible in practice. His well-documented use of chance operations to construct indeterminacy in his music demonstrates that chance is the anarchy to improvisation, not the cure to performance habits. It merely adds another mechanism to manage. Even then, the decision to follow instructions prescribed by chance can be ignored or complied with, as arbitrary as it is deliberate. David Toop sums it up best noting: 'For Cage, indeterminacy and chance methods were strategies for asking questions without the necessities of also providing answers' (2016, p.60). I consider Cage's criticism of improvisation as lacking spontaneous expression or based on repeated action to be untrue. Instead, I suggest that his criticisms are based on a perception of improvisation that is idiomatically constructed.

Idiomatic improvisation is often seen

as belonging to particular musical traditions such as Baroque, jazz or Indian Karnatic. However, it can just as easily be conceived by musicians. We possess our own idiom in the way we play our instrument and think about creative expression. In comparing myself to Hannah Marshall, I recognise aspects of string-playing that are transferable between the two instruments, yet we possess completely different improvisatory idioms. This is based on a musical construct that is both personal and mutual. The disparaging perspectives of improvisation as conceptually limiting and repetitive is positioned from a conservative understanding of creative self. Gavin Bryars' opinion of ensembles that perform together whereby 'the longer you play in the same situation of group (...) the less appropriate it becomes to describe the music as 'free' anything' (Bailey, 1992, p.115) indicates an unwillingness to recognize that personal idioms are the very definition of creative liberty. How often in our early musical training do we suppress our idiosyncrasies to conform to standard practice and repertory?

For an ensemble that has improvised together for a long time, the easy assumption is that the creative style has ossified to become closely identified with the player(s), unable to transcend its situation. That may be the case with 'Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall,' as they have

performed together for several years. But it is indistinguishable and incalculable to listeners whether the improvisation is spontaneous or repetitive. The same consideration applies to a 'new' ensemble such as Vervan Weston's 'As You Hear'. In Warsaw, listeners were indiscriminate and unable to discern if we had 'ossified' into style or come together in wonderful cosmos. The idealistic assumption is for the latter, but too much has been said about the paradox of improvisation for kismet to take place. Yet, at the end of it all, how much does it really matter? And, to whom does it matter – the musicians or the listeners? I am slowly coming to the understanding that improvisation is a working paradox; that performing and listening to improvisation are held in tension of two extremes, not in contrast with each other.

A few years after speaking to Derek Bailey, Bryars revised his position to one that is more moderate. From the position of total disengagement with improvisation, he concedes that he would prefer to participate as a musician than as a listener (1992:116-117); suggesting that Bryars may have the same impressions as I do about perceiving improvisation as 'music' in performance, and 'noise' when listening to it. Yet, I am not making a blanket claim that all musicians consider their performances more

positively than when listening to an improvisation. Rather, I believe the state of experiencing improvisation matters here. So often I check my reactions to improvisation, asking: 'was I only imagining it, this music or this noise?' Again, I return to my analogy of real and imagined perspectives in improvisation.

Here is what I think happens in improvisation. True spontaneity occurs when we play what we know but are unconscious to the fact that we do so. Indeed, when I improvise, I am reacting spontaneously to my ensemble members without reasoning if I am doing so using methods that I am familiar with. It is purely instinctive, with no thought for how it might be perceived. Musicians, in the process of improvising, can only conceive the improvisation without complete perception of the product. The situation is flipped, however, for listeners as they are only able to perceive improvisation as a product, without experience of the process. For all my insight as an improvising musician, I cannot claim to fully know the concept behind the improvisation that I listen to. Indeed, many musicians would go as far as to say that it is unnecessary to have any knowledge of the process in order to enjoy the work. Thus, a listener's perception of true spontaneity in improvisation will be, in many ways, real and imagined – wholly



distinct to what the musicians have conceived. So, how do we manage the discrepancies between musician and listener?

Perhaps, the best way to perceive improvisation is not to reason with spontaneous expression but rather to listen with spontaneous engagement. Even as we ask how one can improvise spontaneously, we should also apply the same values to our listening. That is, how can we listen spontaneously? Perhaps, Vryan Weston was on to the right thing – listen ‘as you hear’.

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#### Author's Note:

The Vortex gig (6th August 2018) was recorded by Alex Bonney and released on *Fundacja Sluchaj!* on 3rd June 2019.

<https://sluchaj.bandcamp.com/album/four-seasonings>

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#### Concert Reference:

Vryan Weston Trio 'As You Hear' (3rd December 2017) - <http://jazz.jazzarium.pl/kalendarz/festiwal-improwizacje-veryan-weston-trio>

Vryan Weston's As You Hear (6th August 2018) – (Past Event) <http://www.vortexjazz.co.uk/event/veryan-westons-as-you-hear/>

Musson/ Kjaer/ Marshall (19th August 2018) - <https://iklektikartlab.com/mussonkjaermarshall/>