

Composing Interpretation, Improvising Interpretation

An artistic research-project regarding the role of musical notation in improvisational music.

Introduction

November 2021

I'm in studio with the band Cort Piil. The saxophonist is the composer of the tune. It's beautiful, yet, the fast bass riff conflicts with the drums, making the bass sound indistinct. I consider simplifying it, but hesitate, concerned whether altering the written line would be disrespectful to the composer and untrue to the composition.



Illustration 1: Cort Piil - Snowfall in Piemont
(Can be heard in attached audio example 1)

January 2021

I'm in rehearsals with the band Briotrio. I am the composer of the tune. I've notated a simple idea, intended to be developed and changed to ever new polyrhythms. Yet, the preciseness of the notation leads the musician to understand it in a stricter manner than what I intended. The notation makes it seem like instruction, where I meant it as suggestion.



Illustration 2: Briotrio - Alice
(Audio example 2)

These cases illustrate a central issue in contemporary jazz: that the medium of musical notation in many cases may inhibit the creativity of improvising musicians. In both instances, the specificity of notation makes the performer feel obliged to perform as written, dislocating their intuitive creativity. Yet, the clarity and reproducibility of notation remains an invaluable asset in conceiving and conveying compositional ideas - one I do not wish to abandon. As of so, the research question I ask myself is: *How can I conceptualise, approach and interpret musical notation in such a way that it inspires improvisational creativity in myself and my band-members?*

My methods for exploring this question are outlined below. The first method will constitute the first half of the main section, while the second and third method are intertwined in the second half.

- 1) Reading and expounding relevant literature and perspectives originating within the jazz context.
- 2) Reading and relating philosophical works, who offer divergent perspectives on the role and function of the written medium.
- 3) Most importantly: composing, rehearsing and performing an exam concert, consisting of newly written compositions for the band Briotrio. The compositions experiment and explores the research question in various ways.

The project is situated in a performing composer-discourse, reflexive of my musical praxis. As a professional jazz double bassist, I compose a significant part of the repertoire for the ensembles I perform in. This blurs the dichotomy between composer and performer, composition and improvisation, work and interpretation. The reciprocity between composing and performing, and the reflections they offer to one another regarding notation and interpretation lies at the core of my project.

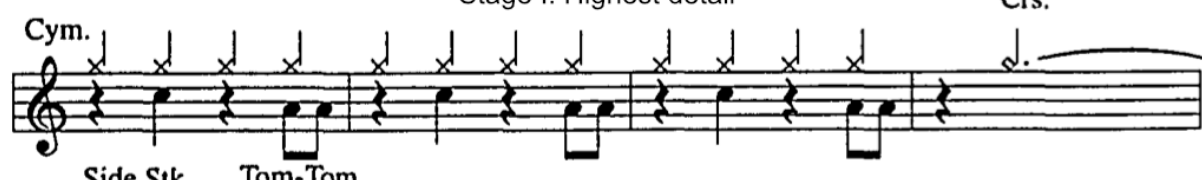
Expounding Established Expertise - Part I: Cooper

Jazz big band composer John Cooper exemplifies in the appendix to his doctoral thesis (Cooper, 1996, p. 233-234) different levels of prescriptive notation for drums and piano.

Though intermediary stages could be added, his models show how jazz composers modify the medium of notation to their purpose, seeking a kind of creative symbiosis between composer and performer. The stages show a gradual devolution from a notation prescribing everything, to a notation prescribing nothing.

Notation For Drums

Stage I: Highest detail



Stage II: Middle detail




Illustration 3a: Cooper's stages of drum notation (Cooper, 1996, p. 234)

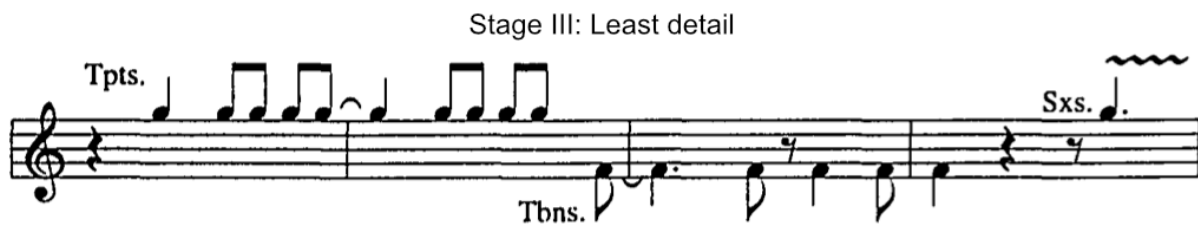


Illustration 3b

In the first stage of his model for drums, every single note is written, leaving the drummer with interpretative possibilities limited to sound, dynamics, microrhythm, timbre, etc. In the second stage, the composer gives a general example, but opens up the interpretative space for the drummer to decide details, variations, interplay etc. The third stage gives complete interpretative, and maybe even compositional liberty to the drummer. It offers no indications whatsoever on what the drums should perform, rather showing a guideline to keep track of the rest of the music.

For piano, Cooper outlines five stages. He begins in complete notation of an accompanying piano style, then incrementally delegating the aspects of harmony and rhythm to the performer's interpretation. These examples provide a template for similar reflections on notational praxis for other instruments as well.

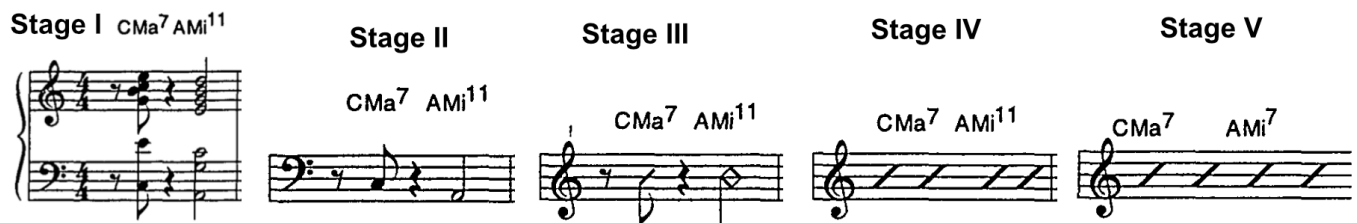


Illustration 4: Cooper's stages of piano notation. (Cooper, 1996, p. 233)

Expounding Established Expertise - Part II: Ellington

When discussing my research question with fellow performing composers, many have been swift to bring up Duke Ellington and his musician-idiomatic approach to composition. *"You've got to write with certain men in mind. You write just for their abilities and natural tendencies and give them places where they do their best."* (Ellington, 1966, as cited in Berliner, 1994, p. 305)

Most composers write instrument-idiomatic, being inspired by and adjusting to the possibilities of an instrument. Ellington develops this school of thought further, extending it to writing idiomatic for the individual musician. This presupposes an understanding of the musician's stylistic preferences, aesthetics and interpretative praxis, which can differ widely, and utilising their strengths in compositions. Ellington's perspective is not only efficient for achieving a musical vision, but also embodies an ethical vision. At its best, the composer is searching for the potential

of each individual, empowering them to be what they already are. Ellington's approach show signs of being widely influential in the Norwegian jazz scene.

Ellington's perspective is also inspiring to bring into the realm of interpretation. When I perform music by others, approaching the composition with an assumption that the part I am playing is written for me sparks my creativity. It changes how I approach the written score - irregardless of whether it actually is intended to be musician-idiomatic or not. It gives me a sense of ownership in the music, where I can co-create the musical product, utilise my strengths and perform at what I am best. Of course, there exists situations and genres in which such an approach would be inappropriate. But in the context of contemporary jazz, I assess that this very much conforms to the prevailing aesthetics.

Expounding Established Expertise - Part III: Collier

In conceptualising what jazz composition entails and how it balances improvisation with composition, jazz musician Graham Collier gives valuable perspectives.

Collier does not conceptualise jazz composition as a singular substance, but rather describes it as existing in three overlapping areas (2009, p. 8-9):

- 1) A tune, being *"something written to provide the basis for improvisation."* A tune is simple, short and straightforward, giving the musicians only what they need to get going in improvisation and no more. Collier gives C-Jam Blues (Ellington, 1942) as an example, which consists of simply two notes and three chords.
- 2) An arrangement *"refers to the art of writing specific parts for each musician in a specific predetermined group."* An arrangement can be written over a simple tune, but is distinct in adding more compositional detail. For instance, Cooper's models (1996, p. 233-234) are situated in an arrangement-oriented tradition.
- 3) A composition is *"a way of writing where there is some development of idea, some sign of an individual being in charge and, most importantly, an essence of integration between what is written and what is improvised."* Jazz composition has a grander musical vision than tunes and arrangements, but is differentiated from classical composition in integrating improvisation as an essential element.

Collier's conceptions showcase the manifold meaning of composition. He shows how the concepts of composition and improvisation are not a binary either/or, but end points on a continuous scale. I have simplified Graham's theories to a model on the next page. The outer ends are marked with the concepts of "total" composition and "free" improvisation. Yet, the continuum extends beyond them, as a performance either excluding any spontaneity, or any preconception whatsoever is exceedingly hard to carry through, if at all possible. For the sake of clarity, I have designated Collier's definitions as "jazz composition," "jazz arrangement" and "jazz tune" in order to differentiate between his specific definitions, and the general definitions of the words.



Illustration 5: The composition-improvisation continuum.

The model is essentially a comment on the traditional definition of composition as something “*necessarily distinct from improvisation.*” (Ringer, 1998) I will claim that in any interpretation, be it by jazz, classical or contemporary, any skilled musician interprets in a musical way that adds detail not found in the musical notation. They can range from nuances, such as the exact dynamical development within a single tone, to more elaborate elements such as improvised solos or cadenzas. Interpretative details will, in my experience, undergo minor or major changes from performance to performance, every performance being unique. As such, with influence from Colliers writing, I claim that improvisation is an omnipresent element in music - though its presence might sometimes be unobtrusive and slight.

Case Study - Part I: Demring

Moving on to my own artistic praxis: Demring (translated dawn or twilight) is a composition I’ve written as part of this semester’s project. It will provide a in-depth case study for the research question. How the tune has developed and evolved as a mental and notational object illustrates how notation may inhibit improvisational compositional ideas, but also illustrates some ways this can be overcome.

In its foundational idea, Demring is a melodically driven composition. The almost Gregorian-style melody is harmonised in parallel consonant intervals, and the sustain pedal of the piano paints it into a beautiful, almost ambient soundscape.¹ It draws influences from Eple Trio’s album *Universal Cycle* (Eple Trio, 2015) as well as John Cage’s work *In a Landscape* (Cage, 1948) in its harmonic and timbral approach.

It originated through simple improvisations in C-major on piano, of which ideas stuck and were developed into the final composition I wanted to bring the improvisational feel of its origin into the musical product, and also want to give room for the musicians I work with to express their individuality, strengths and personalities in the composition. In such a way, each performance should differ

¹ Ambient here referring to the musical style, coined and popularised by Brian Eno. (1978)

widely, but conserve an integrity of composition that is recognisable through all performances. To quote Collier, “*What I am trying to do is find the third colour which exists between what is composed and what is written.*” (2009, p. 15)

Recorded excerpts of the compositional process can be heard in audio example 3 from 22. March, and audio example 4 from 24. March. Each audio example shows a different interpretative/improvisational take on the same compositional idea. After assessing what its essential compositional idea is, I notated a first draft.



Illustration 6: First draft for Demring

The notational draft is highly accurate to the compositional idea. The notes and rhythms are placed exactly where I would like them to be, and the sheet is easily readable. Yet; when I look and listen, it strikes me that I experience sheet and sound entirely different. The sheet music seems to convey the letter of the composition, but not its spirit. The audio example, particularly audio example 4, has a feeling of freedom - of breath - of beauty. But the sheet conveys something more rigid, metric and precise than the composition is intended to be. Even though all details are correctly transcribed, the medium of notation alters my musical idea.

Case Study - Part II: Deconstructing the written medium

The philosophy of Jacques Derrida and his comments on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophy sheds illuminating light on the silent workings of the written medium. Rousseau (partly) condemns the medium of writing (Derrida, 1967/2016, p. 154). Rousseau describes how the advent of writing lead to a perfecting of language, making it “*lose its former energy*” (1967/2016, p. 216). In valuing writing higher than speech, the natural subtlety of oral communicational flow is exchanged for a calculative, systematised, grammatical and perfected expression.

This is comparable to my experience with notation on Demring. Derrida makes the connection explicit. “*(...) The desolating separation of song and speech, has the form of writing as “dangerous supplements” (...) The history of music is paralleled*

to the history of the language, its evil is in essence graphic." (1967/2016, p. 216) Derrida's use of the word graphic refers to the visual element of the written format. Rousseau and Derrida's critiques resound with my own artistic experiences. In Demring's musical notation, the energy and subtlety expressed in audio example 4 is reduced into something resembling a mechanical blueprint in illustration 6. Marshall McLuhan's iconic quote "*The medium is the message*" (1964, p. 7) resonates in memory. The very medium of musical notation is inconspicuously changing the musical message I want to convey, bending and contorting it into something strange and impersonal - something I never envisioned.

So, it may be asked, if the writing of music embodies such problematic elements, why not do a complete shift into oral composition? This question must be addressed before I can return to Demring and the mentioned philosophical perspectives.

Case Study - Part III: Oral composition and transmission

Say I were to conceive of composition as a pure mental and memory-based object, conveyed orally through sound rather than paper. It might solve many of my problems with musical notation that I have described. There is even a significant tradition of oral composition and oral transmission in jazz. Charles Mingus, for instance, conveyed the majority of his music orally until the late sixties, including big band arrangements. (Berliner, 1994, p. 301)

However oral composition and transmission also constitutes a medium of conveyance, posing its own unique challenges and drawbacks. The obvious issue is efficiency, which even Duke Ellington admitted as his main reason for utilising notation (Ellington, 1966, as cited in Berliner, 1994, p. 305). Oral transmission is generally much more time consuming than transmission through musical notation.

The issue that concerns me most, however, is more aesthetic in nature: namely the issue of specificity in composition. One of notation's primary strengths in an interpretative context, is the possibility of indicating some musical aspects and not others. The sheet indicates tone and rhythm, but it does not necessarily indicate timbre, accent, variations etc. However, were I to use my voice, instrument or an audio recording as the oral medium for the composition, the aspects I regard as essential become indistinguishable from the aspects I regard as interchangeable. I aesthetically want the musicians I work with to express their individuality and develop their unique interpretations of the music I create. To localise the interpretative room, the possibilities for change within the composition, becomes

harder as the lines between the composer's composition and the composer's interpretation becomes blurred.

I experienced this issue first-hand on another composition of this project, *A Sunny Day in Bergen Town*, shown in Illustration 7 and performed live 21. april on audio example 5. This tune is written both musically and graphically in a straight-ahead jazz convention. The goal of this experiment was to explore the interpretative tradition of traditional jazz. In this tradition, the musicians are expected to interpret the melody *“with a range of freedoms to depart from the chart or the score of the song. Moreover, if the singer [or melodic instrument, my comment] fails to avail herself of any of those freedoms, it is arguably not a jazz interpretation at all.”* (Levinson, 2013) In my experience, musicians interpret modern jazz in a much stricter manner than they interpret traditional jazz. I wanted to tap into the interpretational convention of traditional jazz, but in a contemporary composition.



Illustration 7: A Sunny Day in Bergen Town

However, the band wished to learn the composition by oral transmission, which showed itself to be a hurdle for this experiment. By repeatedly singing the exact same melody in the exact same manner dozens of times, that particular interpretation stuck to memory. It took much effort to defamiliarise oneself with that interpretation and open the imagination for alternative interpretations. In this experiment, I experienced that the medium of notation in certain situations could convey interpretative liberty better than the medium of oral transmission.

Case Study - Part IV: Reconstructing notation

While Rosseau articulated the problematic sides of the written medium with emphatic clarity, he nevertheless did not abandon it. He dedicated his life's work to the work of writing, while at the very same time criticising the very medium he utilises. Derrida says of him *“he valorises and disqualifies writing at the same time. At the same time; that is to say, in one divided but coherent movement. We must not try to lose sight of its strange unity.”* (Derrida, 1967/2016, p. 154) The key to

Rosseau's approach is seeking to "*rehabilitate*," even "*exorcise*" writing - rather than to cast it aside. Rosseau seems to argue that an active rehabilitation of the written medium can amend its inherent problems. This principle has been guiding in my further work with the composition *Demring*, which I will now return to.

In an experiment to rehabilitate the medium of notation for my purposes, I drew inspiration from the medieval notational method of neumes, shown in illustration 8. The musical element that was most misconstrued in notating *Demring* in illustration 6, is the rhythmic aspect. I searched for ways to notate less specific rhythms than modern notation will allow, and found medieval neumes suitable to the compositional idea. In this way, the notation of the melody can convey a looser element of time, with more interpretative liberty.



Illustration 8 (Wick et al. 2019, p. 2)

In finishing the compositions, I made several other manoeuvres as well to counteract the rigidity of the written format, conceptualising it as more of a tune than a composition in Collier's sense of the words (2009, p. 8). As of so, I decided to structure the notation in the format of the lead sheet, rather than instrument-specific parts, as I this could convey more of the general idea and less unnecessary specifics. On several aspects, I decided to give the musicians options of variation using text notation to say "do X, or Y." I also felt a need for a B-part in the composition, deciding to make it more rhythmical, as that is more musician-idiomatic to the drummer who thrives in musical contexts with a clear groove.

The unifying theme of these manoeuvres is what I will call *unfinishing the composition*. In the past, my final stage of composition would entail deciding details that weren't yet decided, removing ambiguity, defining what can be defined etc. Now, however, my aesthetic choice was to place a significant amount of the responsibility and content of the musical product in the hands of the performers (including myself). In unfinishing the composition, I am approaching it with an attitude of "less is more". I am trying to define what is essential for this composition's vision and distinctive character, keeping those aspects intact, but searching for creative ways to delegate everything else to the interpretation of the performers. In challenging conventional notation, I was also required to challenge the possibilities of notational software, as creating the sheet music I envisioned required a combination of notational software and photo-editing software.

Demring

Thomas Aurlund Lossius

A Rubato, or free rhythmic melody over $\text{♩}=260$

$\text{♩}=130$
C7(SUS4)

B Solos in tempo

12 F(SUS2) A \flat (SUS2) C(SUS2) X4

16 D \flat maj7 E \flat 6/9 G \flat maj7

20 D \flat maj7 E \flat 6/9 C/E

On A:
On every breathing mark, one may freely improvise.
Piano: All tones and phrases may be harmonized in 10ths, 6ths or 3rds.
Drums: Can be performed rubato or in fast 1/4 rhythmic feel.

Illustration 9: The final sheet for Demring.

Case Study - Part V: Interpreting notation

Following the finishing of the score, I presented it to my band. I was excited to see how they would interpret it, and how I would interpret it with them. As I presented the composition to them, I noticed how they were listening intently to the oral transmission happening in my performance and examples. The elements of mood,

sound and tonality, which are pivotal to the composition, were unbeknownst to them. Because of this, my performance as a performing composer served a dual function. It functioned as musical performance in itself, but also functioned as a kind of conducting, even oral composition in a sense. Were I to perform faster, slower, louder, softer etc., those musical aspects were not just attributed as “my performance”, but were attributed as *the* expression of the composition itself, leading to immediate imitation. The musicians were listening intently to my performance, conforming their approach to interpretation with my interpretation.

The field of sociology has a particular discourse regarding the written medium that very much echoes this experience. Symbolic interactionist theory studies how symbols form an essential part of human interaction, and how the interaction regarding the symbols define the meaning the meaning of those very symbols. From such a perspective, musical meaning is not seen as being inherent in notation itself, but is construed by its interpreters. Herbert Blumer presents three premises to a symbolic interactionist approach (Blumer, 1969, as cited in Appelrouth & Edles, 2016, p. 535), which I'll relate to musical notation:

- 1) *“The first premise is that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.”*

In the case of musical notation, how one uses notation in interpretation and performance is a consequence of how one conceptualises its meaning. For instance, whether I understand notation as suggestion, instruction, starting point, blueprint or command, etc., deeply shapes my use of it in musical performance.

- 2) *“(...) The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.”*

Symbolic interactionist theory designates the meaning of musical notation not through definitions or textbooks, but rather through the social interactions that surrounds it. This, particularly, is where I see a clear link to my own praxis in a collective interpretational context such as a jazz band. My conceptualisation and interpretation of musical notation inspires the other musicians' interpretations, and vice versa, their interpretation inspires mine, even as the compose.

- 3) *“The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with things he encounters.”*

Finally, Blumer describes how the process of interpreting symbols such as notation is constructed within a person, making them independent. As one has performed the social, interpretative process repeatedly, the process is institutionalised in the individual, yet still being subject to change when engaging in interaction.

This manner of thought helps me, as an interpreting performer, to approach notation with a mindset of improvisational creativity and interplay. It helps me to point my ears and eyes just as much to the interpretation of my co-musicians, as to the notation being interpreted. It diminishes obsession with “right and wrong” interpretation, rather shifting focus onto the collective creative processes happening in real time, in which the true aesthetic value of jazz can be found.

This interpretative approach is helpful both in interpreting others’ compositions, but also my own. In interpreting my own composition, I am exploring what the meaning of the notational idea is, what its meaning potentially could be, and how its meaning has changed since yesterday. I am listening to the interpretation of the musicians I’m performing with, letting their interpretation shape mine, allowing their musical ideas alter the musical product. Unfortunately, no audio recording of Demring as a musical product exist, so my descriptions will have to suffice.

Conclusion

“The Industrial Age brought with it an excessive emphasis on specialisation and professionalism in all fields of living. Most musicians confined themselves to the note-for-note playing of scores written by a handful of composers who somehow had access to the mysterious and godlike creative process. Composition and performance became progressively split from each other, to the detriment of both.”
(Nachamanovitch, 1990, p. 8)

This text has illustrated how the approach of performing composer-discourse offers valuable reflections to both fields: performance and composition. It has reflected on the role of notation in an improvisational context, including both its challenges and possible methods for adjusting it for new contexts.

To return to the research question: *How can I conceptualise, approach and interpret musical notation in such a way that it inspires improvisational creativity in myself and my band-members?* Offering a concluding answer to the question would diminish its role as an artistic research question. Its answer must lie in artistic practice, not in academic text. However, I will summarise some findings:

- 1) **The importance of oral composition.** During the course of the semester, my viewpoint on composition has changed. From having a philosophy of composition that was score-oriented at the start, I've gradually seen the importance of oral composition in symbiosis with musical notation. I've seen how instructions and discussions in rehearsal drastically impact the musical product, expanding compositional and creative possibilities.
- 2) **The benefits of unconventional notation.** Though experimental approaches to notation have been widely used in contemporary music for more than half a century, I believe that jazz musicians might benefit from exploring this further. Unconventional notation may in many cases lend itself better to the kinds of improvisational aesthetics sought by jazz musician than traditional notation.
- 3) **Interpreting notation's intentions.** In approaching sheet music, I have in the past been preoccupied with playing "correctly," performing the musical notation as written. However, in seeing, as a composer, how notation does not necessarily convey the intentions of compositional ideas, this impacts my interpretative praxis. In many cases, a looser interpretation of the notation might be more in line with what the composer actually attempts to convey, and such an approach certainly inspires me as a musician to express my creativity.

In concluding, I will present some comments on this very text. Much like the music I seek to compose, this text is not a culmination but an outset. My current compositions intends to inspire interpretation among performers, providing them with a basis for improvisational creativity. In the same manner, this text is not intended as a comprehensive overview of the topic, but as briefly presenting a wide amount of perspectives that may inspire you, the reader, in your artistic praxis. This text bounces off ideas to you, introducing lines of thought that you may elaborate much further if desired. I will encourage taking note of the ideas that resonate with you, albeit they may have been presented in brief. Treat this text, not as as a reflectional product of its author, but rather as a source of inspiration for you, intended to be interpreted through the lens of improvisational creativity.

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