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Catching the waves and surfing your way out of them or into them" – Creativity in musicians' discourse about free improvisation

Keywords: music improvisation, discourse, practices, representations, linguistic creativity, intersubjectivity

This title quote from saxophonist Tony Malaby illustrates musicians' experience when they are improvising as opposed to interpreting a pre-existing composition. More specifically, free improvisation refers to non-idiomatic improvisation (Bailey, 1992), i.e. without following musical constraints implied by a tradition. Previous research on free improvisation in music has been conducted mainly in Musicology. In Cognitive Sciences, this practice has received scant attention despite the increase of works studying creativity in dance and theatre (Nakano & Okada, 2012; Magerko et al., 2009). In this communication, we investigate musicians' practices and representations in the context of free improvisation, within and through their discourse.

We interviewed twelve New-York-based musicians with diverse social and cultural backgrounds, all recognized as professional improvisers with more than fifteen years' experience. Our semi-structured interview guide combined i) questions about the inside of the practice, e.g. personal motivations, feelings related to a specific performance; and ii) questions about the outside of the practice, e.g. solo versus ensemble playing, free improvisation versus other musical genres. As we did not want to rely on musicians' memory and capacity to share their experience only through discourse, we also recorded them in concert and then collected their feedback while listening to their performances.

We analyzed all the free-format data following three approaches: i) identifying emergent concepts by using the constant comparison technique of Grounded Theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008); ii) isolating idiosyncratic representations from consensual knowledge in musicians' discourses by tracking various linguistic cues such as the use of personal pronouns (Dubois, 2008); and iii) detecting linguistic creativity such as metaphors, lexical creations and unexpected variation in prosody (Cloiseau, 2007). We focus the presentation of our findings on the connections between the musicians' practice of free improvisation and their identity; the musicians' relationship with their instrument; and the possible synaesthesia between sounds and textures, kinaesthesia or visualizations.



To investigate the practice of free improvisation that can be either personal and/or collective, our approach conceives of language as a practice that contributes to express, share and therefore construct individual representations and consensual knowledge. In keeping with this approach, language participates to the co-construction of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Furthermore, tracking creativity in musicians' discourse allows us to highlight the interdependence of their personality and their artistic practice. In this interdisciplinary research we thus develop new methods to address the link between representations and practices in order to investigate the musicians' perspective on their own experience of free improvisation.

References

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