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For definitive version see Alessandro Bertinetto & Marcello Ruta (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts*, Routledge, New York 2021

# Improvisation as Resonance

Giovanni Matteucci

## **Abstract**

Making use of notions such as “radical improvisation” and “resonance,” Giovanni Matteucci focuses on the articulation of expressive forms in the event of improvisation. Radical (“free”) improvisation is conceived as the coming into existence of a form through its materialization. “Resonance,” a concept taken from Merleau-Ponty (and nowadays extensively treated by Hartmut Rosa), concerns the aesthetic experience of attending to a radical improvisation by reacting to, or inhabiting, what happens without pre-formed expectations, in a kind of living vibration.

## **1 Introduction**

This paper aims to bring to the fore what it means to consider the phenomenon of improvisation as both meaningful and not governed by any external criteria. Namely, I will assume that improvisation takes on a peculiar, or even “radical,” sense insofar as it is something strictly contingent but not merely accidental. Whether such a conception is possible, under what theoretical conditions, and with what (if any) profitable implications are the issues that will be addressed here. Needless to say, I believe this conception is possible and fruitful. In my opinion, it allows us to grasp the aesthetic root of the meaningful interaction with the environment that characterizes human beings, according to an interpretation also recently supported by Johnson (2018).

This chapter is divided into three parts. The first (§§ 1–3) revolves around cardinal features of radical improvisation, such as the intertwining of “form” and “content,” the interactional field structure that is proper to experience, and the “primality” of this kind of creativity. The second part (§ 4) deals with some reflections provided by Merleau-Ponty on the expressive language, serving to introduce the key concept of resonance. Finally, the last part (§§ 5–7) follows the red thread of the resonance phenomenon in order to show the main theoretical implications that can be drawn from the approach adopted here.

In the following analysis, improvisation is not meant only as a musical praxis. If my examples privilege the dimension of music, it is primarily due to the limits of my own competences. But it’s not just about that. One of the central theses I advocate is that improvisation is radical to the extent that it concerns non-propositional and non-representational contents of experience, without, on the other hand, being meaningless or merely subjective. Therefore, it expresses an intrinsically musical core that connotes human interaction with the world as an aesthetic manifestation, in the form of resonance, of a mind that is “extended” according to an enactivist and non-functionalist conception (Matteucci 2019a; but see also Gallagher 2017). In this specific musical sense, I would conceive of improvisation as a primitive form of human creativity, whatever the context in which it takes place. All in all, then, even if I had other competences, the effort to imagine fitting examples supporting my claims would still have brought me into the musical sphere.

## **2 From the Pair Form-Content to the Twine Configuration-Material**

We could say that improvisation is generally characterized, among other things, by a full coincidence of “form” and “content” in a contingent experience. The sequence of elements or events we admire as improvisation fascinates us because of the way in which the simple manifestation of gestures, sounds, words, lines, etc. embody a shape that, by definition, we do not consider pre-existing. In other words, this shape is not an ideal structure that the performer would make perceptible; it is immanent in a concrete and flowing performance.

I would be reluctant to speak of improvisation, at least in its radical sense, if it were proved, on the contrary, that what is taking place is only the actualization of a previous structure. We become disappointed even when it is apparent that a performer is passing off as improvised something that is actually a prepackaged technical construction. Improvisation seems to be under

the motto *Ars est celare Artem* (art is to conceal art): the “coolness” surrounding the performance largely fades away when we perceive how much study it took for the performer to juggle the improvisation. It would be better, then, to speak simply of interpretation, execution, rendering, and so on. More generally, when evidence was found that each praxis couldn’t help but translate into reality a prior pattern, improvisation appeared to be a myth or a way of saying. The sworn enemies of its concept are both every form of genuine Platonism and the determinism thriving in reductionism. If any act we perform actually resulted from a neural-cognitive process that governs it “from the outside” because it is hard-wired in our neural system, there would be no room for a radical conception of improvisation (which I will refer to henceforth as “radical improvisation”). The latter would also amount to a practice of modules or models, albeit with all the sweetening “non-determination” clauses that should pacify our pride in wanting to be recognized as creative animals.

This does not mean that we need to consider improvisation unconstrained – quite the contrary. The clause of radical improvisation is the perceptual presence of “content” that does not have a logically or temporally extrinsic relationship with their own “form.” Both the internal/external distinction and the before/after succession are no longer relevant. Indeed, it would likely be misleading even to resort to the couple form and content, two categories that are traditionally compromised by a dichotomous relationship. Any oppositional scheme seems inappropriate for a phenomenon that always appears to be intrinsically unitary. Instead of two conflicting principles, what’s at stake here are two aspects of an overall texture. In the course of perception, they work as the different faces of a solid, each of which has the reason for its own development in each other’s compossibility, which is dictated by the state of affairs. There is a reciprocal and fruitful indeterminableness between them: the more a perspective is adopted that focuses unilaterally on one aspect, the more the other aspect acts as a reason for the development of the perceptual scene, not despite but precisely because the second aspect escapes the determination that conforms the adopted perspective. This gives the phenomenon as a whole an immanent bistability, which forces us always to switch from one aspect to another.

To describe radical improvisation, I therefore propose following a different terminology. On the one hand, *the texture as a whole shows itself in the aspect of a configuration*; it exists only in the way in which it is sedimented in a percept that, due to tendencies that appear inherent in it (i.e., vectorially), exceeds the simple collection of (scalar) data, of single elements; therefore,

configuration means a *Gestaltung* that is working in each of the segments in which the analysis could fragment the whole. On the other hand, *the texture as a whole shows itself in the aspect of a material*; the percept here acts not as an inert, static matter, devoid in itself of any meaning, but rather as something endowed with a certain constructive affordance (i.e., a material) that is loaded with potentialities of sense as soon as it shows up. And precisely because it carries development trends in itself, it always appears like it is about to shatter the simple formal structure that would seem to enclose it once the process has apparently ended, for the perceptual experience has ceased, e.g., for the musician stopped playing or the listener stopped paying attention. Just as it brings the “formal” aspect back to a configurative process, radical improvisation frees the “content” from a static conception. In this way, it embodies a cardinal principle of aesthetic experience. “Form” and “matter” are not simply situated side by side within a discrete whole, but one flows continuously into the other. As noted by Dewey, in aesthetic experience, “what is form in one connection is matter in another and vice-versa. Color that is matter with respect to expressiveness of some qualities and values is form when it is used to convey delicacy, brilliance, gayety” (Dewey 1987: 133).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning what happened to the musical genre of *impromptu* specifically in the 19th century. As the persistence of the label reveals, despite an increasingly formalized conception, in the hands of composers like Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms, it became basically a disguise practice of this bistable twine. It was perhaps seen as a residual instance of freedom in a musical world about to be dominated by hypercoding. However, it proved to be a case of mere bad conscience, so to speak, since it favored the regimentation of this bistability within that same world, with the progressive imposition of increasingly stable forms on increasingly determined contents.

### **3 The Dynamic Field of Improvisation**

Although in improvisation the bistable twine configuration-material does not conform to the sequence of an antecedent and a consequent, it being a process is undeniable. The problem is that in order to describe its development, we cannot refer to levels or patterns that respond to merely

oppositional logics, such as permanence of form vs flow of content. To this end, the notion of “field” is helpful.<sup>1</sup>

In an electromagnetic field, the amount of energy is inseparable from the arrangement of the whole: material and configuration are aspects of a single unitary phenomenon that physics captures in its bistability. Saying that each component of a field counts as a vector means that it is a configured material (an element with a tendency) and, at the same time, that it contributes to the material configuration (a force linked to a specific position). According to Heisenberg’s famous uncertainty principle, it is not possible to simultaneously determine the two physical quantities of “momentum” and “position,” although they presuppose each other as complementary variables of an overall phenomenon. The simple act of measuring is an interaction that alters the field as much as it gives rise to its manifestation according to determined aspects or qualities (see Heisenberg 1952: 77 ff.). The material aspects and the configurative aspects blend together in the efficient action of the energy that runs throughout the field, which consequently is intrinsically procedural insofar as it is interactional. Therefore, the problem can no longer be defining the reality of isolated contents as if they were elementary particles. The problem is expressing the interaction that is carried out as a behavior taken on by those “contents” while configuring an overall field, even in terms of a knowledge (see Heisenberg 1955: 12).

Projecting this matrix onto phenomena such as radical improvisation means describing experience by avoiding starting from entities that interact only downstream, by virtue of their allegedly autonomous constitution. Not only every vector, but every pole of a field also qualifies itself for how it behaves within a complex framework of interactions with all the vectors. In their concreteness, after all, even the poles can then be assimilated with vectors. And if the mind consists in operating a field like this, the mind implied here is, at the same time, extended (like a field) and embodied (like a material configuration). Every pole that stands out emerges from large areas of passive and anonymous constitution, resulting in, therefore, like any other vector, a material rather than a matter in the sense mentioned above.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to two (extremely different) classical applications of the concept of field to aesthetic experience, such as Berleant 2001 and Bourdieu 1993.

Thus, in musical improvisation the actors involved (the musician-instrument system, the piece that “takes voice,” and – as we will see at the end – its aesthetic effect) stand out only as outcomes of composite dynamics pervading the texture. From a phenomenological point of view, the pre-eminent co-belonging of these vectors prevents us from initially conceiving of a so-called subject as an entity that is abstractly separated from a so-called object. Both, like poles, act in the configurative continuity of their materiality, in which the organism of the musician linked to the body of the instrument, the voice of the piece, the aesthetic effect, which are all equally involved as aspects of a perceptual scene.

This is confirmed by the fact that any actual improvisation can integrate, as it almost fatally happens, its own bistable core with much more. The concrete improvised solo of a jazz musician is full of shreds of previous standards, harmonic evolutions foreseen by the musical system of reference, reflexes of rhythms and melodies acquired with exercise, virtuosity dictated by a specific musical instrument, familiarity with certain timbres to which it wants to get closer, idealized aesthetic effects, etc. And yet improvisation becomes captivating because all this, as material, is contingently sedimented in a configuration that is not, either before or after or now, something fixed. Even when an improvised solo is “repeated” twice, its first occurrence becomes material for the new performance; and in none of its occurrences it has an ideal value.

When we are listening to an improvisation and recognize a pre-existing thematic cell, what’s appreciated is how it lives in the unprecedented improvised ecosystem. It changes materially in order to configure itself so that it is vectorially integrated with the field that is being carried out, i.e., with our aesthetic experience. In jazz practice, this often takes on the features of an, “And yet!” experience. In the course of some improvisations a standard’s pattern can emerge, which does not take over, but, rather, disguises itself and plays hide and seek among the textures of the developing material. There are moments in which it looms markedly, alternating with other moments in which it flows back into the configuration. Then we experience *and yet* we do not experience the standard, which fascinates us precisely because it surfaces from *and yet* sinks into the overlying waves of the field. The standard does not count in itself either as a form that is imposed or as a content that is given. It counts insofar as it becomes a material that feeds the configuration of that field. It is like when an oasis of harmonic repleteness sticks out against the horizon of a disharmonious desert without sublimating the latter in a cloying roundness. That is why sometimes we are pleased to recognize the most banal tune at the heart of a jazz

performance addressed to fine connoisseurs. It is not simply quotation or appropriation, but reactivation of configurable materials for the benefit of improvisation as such. One famous case is the long minutes of Di Meola's and McLaughlin's pure improvisation, where their call into play of every material, noises included, flows into the cursory reprise of *The Pink Panther* theme.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4 Improvisation as a Primitive Experiential Core

By definition, improvisation must be experienced “all at once” and “unexpectedly.” It appears immediate in a twofold sense: it shows up abruptly and hides the traces of every mediation, namely, it takes on the guise of a gratuitous *apparition* oscillating between material and configurative aspects. But then an improvisation is neither subsumable to any concept nor does it subsume any individual under itself. As for its way of appearing, it is a “particular-universal.” Improvisation makes a specific arc of experience unique, as if a singular performance has the illocutionary force of a baptism. It is however its own proper name that the performance reveals – embodying, at the same time, officiant and subject of one of those rites of passage in which someone takes on a new name according to the character he/she expresses for the community. Perhaps it could be said that improvisation combines in itself the apodictic power of the type and the assertive force of the token.<sup>3</sup> The other side of this coin is its extreme fragility, or even evanescence, in contingent moments of maximum density. Everything that can fall within it, even the whole technical-cognitive contribution provided by the performer, must be exhausted as a vector that contributes to feeding a core where configuration and material do not refer to anything substantial beyond their own manifestation.

This core is the limit of an infinitely small neighborhood if it is obtained by subtraction from both technical-cognitive contributions and what is mediated by conventions. As small as it can be, it orients every vector and, therefore, makes “improvisational” the sense of a whole arc that can reach enormous dimensions. When it comes to the virtuosos of improvisation, we admire their ability to temporally and spatially extend this core.

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<sup>2</sup> I'm referring to the piece *Short Tales of the Black Forest* performed during the memorable live concert held by the two guitarists together with De Lucia in 1980 in San Francisco.

<sup>3</sup> On the difficulty of applying the type/token scheme in a canonical way, see Bertinetto 2016a, in particular, chapter 3.



Improvisation understood in this way may appear to be an ideal case, never properly achievable as such (see Bertinetto 2011: 92). However, it delineates a crucial phenomenon. If we adopt a perspective that avoids mythologizing not only spirit and nature but also human reason, we will have to recognize that there is no norm, rule, or model for a field of interaction before its immanent articulation in its crucial moments. It is for the way the field manifests itself as something that is constitutively *in-provisus* (unexpected because unforeseen) that dense neighborhoods become salient foci. Norms, rules, or models arise as formal projections of this primitive material *a priori*. Therefore, what is embodied in radical improvisation seems to be a decisive component of human experience. Indeed, our experience still retains an echo of a primitive interaction in the measure, degrees, and moments it preserves – the crosswise and tacitly operative connection between organism and environment. Only against this background can a meaningful cognitive thematization of something like an object for a subject arise. It is by improvising that the human interaction between organism and environment becomes a context and a theater also for distinctions and hiatuses where that juxtaposition between subject and object dominates, which is hypostatized through *hysteron proteron* by the typically modern theory of knowledge. As a consequence, in relation to radical improvisation, we should go deeper into the expressive force of material-configurative constraints. Pace Kantianism of all sorts, it's not in terms of either "determinant" or "reflective" rules that we can do justice to (this form of) creativity.<sup>4</sup>

## 5 Expressive Language as Improvisation

Elements to describe the phenomenon at hand can be drawn from Merleau-Ponty. To unravel our tangle, we can use his analysis of language as "expressive," namely, not understood as a vehicle for already established information packets. On this, in *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty says:

Speaking and listening, action and perception, are quite distinct operations for me only when I reflect upon them. Then I analyze the spoken words into "motor impulses" or "articulated elements," understanding them as auditory "sensations and perceptions." When I am actually

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<sup>4</sup> An attempt to illustrate this conception of creativity is Matteucci 2019b.

speaking I do not first *figure* the *movements* involved [*à faire*]. My whole bodily system concentrates on finding and saying the word, in the same way that my hand moves toward what is offered to me. Furthermore, it is not even the word or phrase that I have in mind but the person. I speak to him as I find him, with a certainty that at times is prodigious. I use words and phrases he can understand or to which he can react [*être sensible*]. If I have any tact, my words [*ma parole*] are both a means of action and feeling; there are eyes at the tips of my fingers [*cette main porte des yeux à son extrémité* = this hand bears eyes at its extremity]. When I am listening, it is not necessary that I have an *auditory perception* of the articulated sounds but [...] the conversation pronounces itself [*se parle*] within me. It summons me and grips me [*il m'interpelle et je retentis* = it summons me and I resound]; it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what from it.

(Merleau-Ponty 1973: 18 f.)<sup>5</sup>

The full coincidence between speaking and listening in expressive language is comparable to what has been introduced above in terms of radical improvisation, although what's at stake in the latter is not the interpersonal communication of linguistic meanings. Here, the specific reference to the musical sphere becomes very instructive.

The equivalent of the interlocutor for the musician at work is in the first place the piece itself that is being carried out. It, too, appears as an integrated vector of that overall body that “envelops and inhabits” also the alleged subject of the performance, namely the musician-instrument system. Since the improvisation is by definition unforeseen, it proceeds without anyone being able to “see” the piece in the sense of a Cartesian vision. By succeeding in carrying on the performance, the performing system can rely only on its sense of touch or tact, on “hands with eyes at their extremities,” sensitive receptors able to see through contact. The musician-instrument system sees the piece on its fingertips, like the blind sees with his/her stick, according to Bateson's example (1972: 231 ff.), or like the miner sees by groping in the dark of the gallery, according to Adorno's example (1977: 298). This *aisthesis* is not transparent, nor ideal or idealizable in the proper sense of the *idea*. If anything, it is a concrete and opaque praxis, embedded in an extended materiality (evident already in the musician-instrument vector system),

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<sup>5</sup> I sometimes also quote the original text, as it is not always perfectly respected by the English translator.

which is based on qualitative and immersive correspondences, according to a matrix of the *corrélations* that can be traced back to Baudelaire. The frontal position of a subject who faces a target or object is excluded. It is the whole field that proceeds blindly with respect to presumed defined outcomes. To this end, each material is exploited to the full. It counts not for what can be said or known about it, but for the experience that the all-at-once interaction with it can generate.

A peculiar aesthetic ability is so accomplished. The key word to describe it is “resonance.” As Merleau-Ponty writes, the contingent overall texture, the ongoing interaction, “summons me and I resound.” Speaking or, musically, producing sounds is already listening, in the sense of knowing how to obey not some rule but what is constraining in this material configuration, of knowing how to follow not a rule but the energy curves that are manifesting themselves. The roles of subject and object that the musician-instrument and the piece take on appear always to be on the verge of being reversed. In this sense, improvising, as – for Merleau-Ponty – uttering a “speaking” word rather than a “spoken” one, is knowing how to give the ongoing field further resonance that vibrates in every vector. That is, improvisation, in its being bodily and extra-cranial, is resonance. It comes to the fore as a dense texture in which the vectors mutually respond to each other; its nature is that “of the echo” or, “in other words, of a carnal generality: what warms me, warms him [*scil.*: my interlocutor]; it is founded on the magical action of like upon like (the *warm* sun makes me *warm*), on the fusion of me embodied and the world [*fusion moi incarné – monde*]” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 20 n.).

Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty provides another indication for understanding the twine configuration-material as it is extraneous to any mind-world, or subject-object, dualism and is, therefore, irreducible to any abstraction from the analytic materiality of the interaction. This can be found when he speaks directly of improvisation in a pictorial and literary sense. He notes that one thing is the mere extemporaneity of the use of words and colors, while another is the practice in which already acquired contents enter as a material to give voice to a primitive field as a complex of aspects and therefore as a resonant body coinciding with an extended mind – namely, “the improvisation of the artist who [...], turned toward the world, [...] has finally composed for himself an expressive organ, like an acquired voice which is more his own than his primordial cry [*que son cri des origines*]” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 56).

All this confirms the possibility of extending Merleau-Ponty's paradigm concerning expressive language to radical improvisation. Their common denominator is an experience that proceeds through overall resonance. As Merleau-Ponty notes, what happens in these cases occurs in the very perception as a primitive interaction between organism and environment. Here the qualities are correspondences according to which the field takes on a particular expressive connotation. Everything seems to speak the language of those characters, albeit in the medium that is chosen as the matrix of the configuration that is getting articulated. The contrast with Descartes and his model of disembodied, intra-cranial, and a-medial mind becomes evident when Merleau-Ponty considers the perception of a woman we suddenly meet. Our perception here is far from similar to the detached contemplation of a mere mannequin; it is materially accomplished as a resonance thanks to those sensitive receptors that act and let us see by contact. It is difficult not to think of Baudelaire's *À une passante*, that sketches and puts to music an encounter of this kind and its resonance as a constitutive natural echo:

A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a colored mannequin, a spectacle in a given spot. She is "an individual, sentimental, sexual expression." She is a flesh in its full presence, with its vigor and weakness there in her walk or the click of her heel on the ground. She is a unique way of varying the accent of feminine being and thus of human being, which I understand the way I understand a sentence, namely, because it finds in me the system of resonators that it needs.

(Merleau-Ponty 1973: 59 f.)

Thus, for the performer who's improvising, any accident mediated by any sensory but also generally cognitive channel can become his/her interaction partner. It contributes to the overall resonance, inhabiting the threshold where the complex of perception is about to become a well-formed expression. If the audience applauds, the musician replies by "applauding with his/her own instrument," whatever this may concretely mean; maybe just by adding an expressive accent to the piece. Even what could appear to be a mistake if measured against the yardstick of a predefined reference system, in improvisation becomes configuration-material twine. As Hancock says in an anecdote about an interaction between him and Miles Davis, it is "something that happened," "without any *a priori* positive or negative connotations" (Bertinetto 2016b: 92).

Perhaps this is why indeed every sequence of notes can become improvisation in that musical practice, which, at least by convention, places improvisation at the center of its status. Perhaps, however, this is also why jazz always risks falling into something cloying when, through these reprises, it lets itself be dominated not by configuration and material, but by form and content, by fixed compositional principles, and by mythically natural sound matters, that is, when it turns the peculiar field dynamism of improvisation into static structures.

To test the consistency of the strategy adopted here it is necessary to go deeper into the concept of resonance. To this end, we will consider different analysis plans that, although descriptively distinguishable, are not mutually separated.

## **6 Resonance Phenomena: Sound Box and Sounding Board**

A first plan of analysis concerns not only the fact that, but also the way in which, the notion of resonance implies the violation of the classical dual scheme that considers activity and passivity as irreconcilably opposed. Resonance displays a relational pattern in which it is impossible to ascribe activity and passivity in a linear and univocal manner to vectors that are distinct *per se*, as an (active) subject and a (passive) object should be. It is precisely this basic structure that guarantees its congruence with radical improvisation.

One may have the impression that speaking of resonance this way could lead to a sort of regression to a magical-mythical conception of the world, in which what populates the environmental scenario seems to directly address those who experience it. But by doing so, we would assimilate resonance with the resounding of a sound in an empty cavity that amplifies it, as would be the sound box of a musical instrument. The subject would act as a merely formal, hollow space that hosts content coming from the outside and being amplified, i.e., as a discontinuous portion of reality that is folded back into its interiority. This would be completely consistent with the Cartesian image of the intracranial mind, which is distinct in principle from that which surrounds it.

On the contrary, the specific element of resonance is, to still follow the example of the musical instrument, not the amplification that happens in a hollow sound box, but the transmission of the sound throughout the solid body of a vibrating sounding board. Here a sound manifests itself with a peculiar timbre because, thanks to resonance, it is less and less mere acoustic height, and finds a real enactment, becoming fully acoustic body. Then, even before assuming an optional

attitude, the so-called subject is nothing but a sounding board of material voices that populate the environment in which the same subject spreads out as embodied and embedded mind (namely, he/she is resonance of an extended mind according to a dynamic and energetic sense).

Cooren's metaphor of ventriloquism seems to fit quite well all this, since it expresses "the phenomenon by which an actor makes another actor speak through the production of a given utterance" (Cooren 2010: 1). It is not a matter of amplifying an extraneous voice acting as a sound box, but of giving voice, as a sounding board, to the weaving of the energy field in which one is embedded and of which one is at the same time constituted. This is well explained by Bruno Latour in his preface to Cooren's book: "we are being acted upon by those invisible entities that 'haunt' us and populate (or even crowd) the interactions" (Latour 2010: XV).

Such a claim involves the effective overcoming of the dichotomous distribution of activity and passivity in the experiential interaction, since according to this way of conceiving of interaction, the interactants are not only considered "as ventriloquists who make dummies say or do things," but they "can *also* be seen as animated or moved by specific agencies (principles, values, norms, etc.) that ventriloquize them." As a consequence, Cooren's idea "is not to *reduce* interactants to puppets or dummies but to show that any action implies a form of passion, of passivity" (Cooren 2010: 9). The spoken, explicit voice of those who take part in an interaction allows the implicit voices of what through this interaction comes to expression to resonate while being almost tacit and, therefore, even more materially. We don't distinguish between them except for the grain that they give to the sound timbre. Resonance is material, while amplification *per se* is only a further development of resonance in the strict sense. The materiality of the resonance provides, then, a good image of the complexity of an interactional context beyond the usual image of dialogic conversation, since it highlights the potential and impersonal energies that act from within this context (see Cooren 2010: 136).

The implications appear to be of great importance if connected with the so-called material engagement theory, which sheds particular light on the theory of evolution itself and, therefore, in general, on the interaction between organism and environment for *Homo sapiens*, a being who is in constant cultural improvement of its own biology (see Malafouris 2012: 245 f.). Aesthetic resonance is a primitive manifestation of the experience with the surrounding environment that is also expressed in the gestures (bodily, verbal, iconic, musical, etc.) of a vector that is materially involved in it.

Thus, a decisive characteristic also for radical improvisation emerges. With the sound it “produces,” the musician-instrument system becomes the material medium of vibrations of the overall field that is taking shape. In improvisation, one is implicated as a body (with *its* multiple intelligences), not as an abstract mind. Therefore, a merely cognitive analysis of improvisation is unsatisfactory, even though it is based on the model of the extended mind (see Cochrane 2008: 333 f.). This is shown whenever the musician grimaces and assumes postures in an attempt to get in tune with the experiential field that is taking voice. Here the bodily musician-instrument system acquires, in its own terms, the configuration of the piece, of which it is a negative in the photographic sense, a footprint. The piece can be “played only by being like this”: in an effort to correspond to the expressiveness that is being shown, the musician “must” get up from the piano stool to twist his/her torso, or hump him/herself on the handle of the double bass, or raise the elbows of the arms that hold the sax. They are all habits that, observed without participating in the game, become easy prey for ridicule and irony, but to which we correspond in turn performatively if we feel “colluded” in the game. The more one plays well in an improvisation the more his/her effort to resonate as a body (embodied mind) is taken to the extreme by intrinsically coupling with the instrument and the piece (extended mind), according to the needs of the overall field (embedded mind). And whoever has this aesthetic competence (which is, in fact, a bodily pattern as impersonal as it is assumed as one’s own, like one’s voice grain) will manage to exercise it sometimes, regardless of this or that instrumental means. It’s not really surprising, then, to see that great musicians know “all at once” how to improvise on the most diverse musical instruments or even without musical instruments, simply by manipulating trivial pieces of the world. Indeed, a primordial expressive organ turns out to be the voice in its indefinite balance between inside and outside.

Against this, well-disciplined music, however much it may challenge the performer’s virtuosity, has long been able to dispense an equivalent body discipline. Almost economically, it made use of real musical “instruments” in all those executive practices that have been systematically perpetrated in the conservatories. It’s almost like it wanted to declare its alignment on the side of an algid, abstract, and transparent mind, not compromised by corporeality, and of its formal rationality. The current way of performing even “conservatory music” is apparently freer. Perhaps, despite all the ambiguities of the spectacularization, this makes evident the subversive power of radical improvisation, which even infiltrates the territory where hypercoded pieces

reign, to the extent that, with their execution, one wants to reach cells of primitive expressiveness. In these cases, sweat is literally necessary if one aspires to rejoin the virtual focus of the embodied and extended connection from which the sound flows as an aesthetic phenomenon. Here reverberates an improvised freedom, i.e. a formally gratuitous but materially constrained resonance, which even so-called classical music, if great, cannot fail to nurture. Its overturned image is the colorful and shiny uniforms displayed by performers who confuse all this with a mere show. They basically replace the musician's uniform that is heir to the servile livery with an even more servile celebration of a well-studied and convenient non-conformism.

## **7 To Sound and to Resonate**

All this implies a particular conception of what we usually name "effect." In resonance phenomena, the so-called effect is not simply something that is caused, or even something that is passive with respect to an external activity. The peculiar status of resonance is due to the fact that within it there is no phenomenon without effect, nor something like a cause. Indeed, it intrinsically encompasses the effect. The outcome expresses the dynamic complex of a field that would otherwise remain outside the scope of experience. It is precisely because we become vectors of the field in which we are immersed that we enter into resonance with it expressing its effect. The agency is not to be ascribed to a supposed external input, but to the field as such in its own being carried out, in its working, *and* its effect. In order to understand this, we can focus on the distinction between sounding and resonating.

When a string "resonates," for instance, by being on pitch with the A of a tuning fork, its vibration is not simply provoked by the tuning fork that approaches it; it is actually corresponding to the tuning fork within a shared field whose vibrations involve both. The relationship between generation and manifestation of the phenomenon is not synthetic, as if it were between two heterogeneous entities that are a cause and an effect. It is analytical: the vanishing of one coincides with the disappearance of the other. That which is caused does not follow the act of causing it but is identified with it. That's why we say: "To go in resonance," and not (except in very technical phrases): "To be resonated." This is because the action of the tuning fork is not enough to produce the phenomenon. The resonant body must correspond to it with a characteristic of its own, which moreover manifests itself only in relation to the shared field. Both the tuning fork and the body that corresponds to it are resonant. It is not an action of



cause or effect proper to one of them – so much so that it is reversible: a tuning fork resonates too when approached with a vibrating string on the right pitch. Resonance, therefore, belongs to the field in which both the “cause” and the “effect” take part as vectors.

Hence, to make a string “sound,” for instance by pinching it, and to make it “resonate” are different phenomena. Between the finger that pinches (an action) and the sound emitted (an acoustic event) there is a difformity and therefore a causal transition from a cause to an effect. On the other hand, there is no such difference (indeed, there is intimate conformity) between the field of vibrations that radiates around an acoustic vector and what is immersed in it and which therefore corresponds according to its own characteristics.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, any characteristic of the vectors reveals a way of appearing of the field according to an aspect. For example, it shows a complex of harmonics implicated in the vibration, but which, without that resonance, would not have manifested themselves, at least not in the way that is each time currently active. This element is exploited in some musical instruments such as the viola d’amore or the barytone, which have what are precisely called resonance strings, whose heirs are the aliquot strings in the piano as much as the so-called prepared piano.

Only obliquely does the string that vibrates because it has been plucked reveal something of the finger, of the hand, of the organism that pinched it; and the relationship is irreversible, we cannot invert the order of its factors. Instead, the string that resonates intrinsically reveals the characteristics of an energy field of resonance, or of the manifestative complex that involves it precisely as an aspect of it or a subset of aspects. The string becomes the voice of that field expressed according to the twist conferred by its own texture. Phenomenologically (not ontologically or empirically): (1) when a finger pinches a string, the sound is *provoked*; (2) when a resonance field incorporates a string, the sound is *evoked*. Proof of this is the fact that it is possible to correct and modulate directly the way one sounds by acting causally, but not the way of resonating (which exhibits an immanent “string”), whose manipulation is always vague and uncertain.

The history of musical instruments and performance practice seems to be a valid witness in this regard. Precisely in the 18th century – the century of the birth of both aesthetics and the notion of

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<sup>6</sup> The key issue is what happens in the field of resonance as such, without considering any external cause that might have activated it. It doesn’t matter whether, empirically, the latter event can or cannot be traced back to “sounding” instead of “resonating.”

“fine arts” – some musical instruments were created and used while trying to subdue the dimension of resonance to the extreme, a dimension that previously was widely dominant in its own pregnant vagueness. The process parallels the introduction of increasingly refined temperament systems that will lead to the “equal” one. Also in the 18th century in the German area, where aesthetics was born in the context of rationalism, the “mysterious temperament” of Bach was of course a crucial step, but Andreas Werckmeister was already on this path, which moreover was clearly intuited by Leibniz himself. These new temperaments tended to progressively neutralize and sterilize “irrational” intervals and profusion of “random” harmonics. The transition was therefore from overall manifestative complexes to well-defined tonal developments. Thus the so-called “natural” harmony was abandoned and there was a new tendency towards a harmony of a physical-theoretical – and therefore artificial and orthopedic – kind, based on the paradigm of the *mathesis universalis* (twelve intervals exactly identical from the arithmetic point of view that form the “equal temperament”). From an ideal of holistic sonority, we then move on to the ideal of a sort of linear sonority. Instead, so to speak, of the musical *image*, a musical *language* takes prominence, which develops according to an order in which its character of rationalization is emphasized.

The distinction between sounding and resonating emerges here as a contrast between two different conceptions of composition: (1) as the ability to rule sounds (a cognitive competence with aesthetic implications) and (2) as the ability to express a resonance (an aesthetic competence with cognitive implications). And here we find the right place for radical improvisation. For the jazz performer will be more effective the more he/she will be able to stand expressively inside the resonance, to vibrate along with it, rather than generating grammatically correct sequences of sounds. It’s a matter of constraints, not rules. This ability is very similar to what happens when a dispositional capacity is revealed, as it would be potentially immanent in the device, which, in its procedural praxis, expresses the same capacity. Moreover, Western music has privileged this direction not only up to Bach’s epoch, but also since the mid-20th century, as testified to by many post-dodecaphonic and neo-Dadaist musical avant-gardes. We can metaphorically broaden the point by talking of two different ways of seeing creativity and artistic creation: (1) creativity as producing sounds stresses the intentional dimension and the rational control which suits a subjective intra-cranial and transparent mind; and (2) creativity as standing inside the resonance reveals the game of interaction between activity and passivity,

namely, the overall manifestation of the twine configuration-material. The first one is an experience *of* a musical matter and the second is an experience *with* a musical material. The former tends to privilege and perimeter well-codifiable areas, as the fine arts have long been believed to be. The latter instead highlights the aesthetic practice in its potential diffusivity, in direct continuity with radical improvisation.

Consequently, as stated above, we need to contrast the tendential resolution of resonance in the effect of amplification.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, I suggested the image of the material resonance that occurs in the sounding board of a musical instrument. Yet, we could also think about the experience of the Tibetan bell. The expressiveness that invests the interactants is not a content *of* their experience that is separable from them, but something they experience *with* and in which they feel extended. All the more so since the relationship between musician, instrument, and piece in musical improvisation embodies a type of expressiveness that is propagated in further vectors: from the listener to the critic. Thus, the typical structure of an aesthetic niche emerges, marking the mind as embodied and extended by virtue of its aesthetic creativity.

## 8 Improvisation as an Aesthetic Effect

Above, I stressed that resonance is an acoustic phenomenon that exists exclusively in its own performance, in its expression. Suddenly, as an improvisation. What is expressed is not perceptible either before or after or beyond the event. It finds precisely in the ongoing event its own resonance, and *therefore* its amplification. As a consequence, the experience of someone getting involved in this field, that is, the classic figure of the beholder, can't be understood by adopting the empathy model. The latter would lead to speaking of aesthetic experience as "embodied simulation,"<sup>8</sup> but there is nothing simulated here. Instead, it would be better to speak of the staging of an embodied and extended mind that resonates in the occurring interaction according to its own complex of aspects, neural system included.

The beholder's experience can be grasped starting from the formulation it finds in something that has the form of "the description of an aesthetic effect." The so-called aesthetic effect that we can get from, e.g. a piece of music indeed implies also a performance. It is not a nuclear state of

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<sup>7</sup> This is the limit, for instance, of the extensive research recently carried out on this concept by Rosa 2019.

<sup>8</sup> For a critical treatment of this issue, see Brinck 2018.

affairs that we can simply denote as something that we face externally. It, rather, consists in the further effective development of an otherwise an energy endowment that otherwise would not be experienceable. That's why sometimes we call it the "affective import." So, when the aesthetic effect is expressed in the form of a description, it is futile to look for the described content outside this manifestation. If I say: "This piano solo explores the depths of my soul," it is not simply a metaphorical description. It is not a description at all. It is an expressive configuration of a material: I actually mean that the piano solo, due to its material configuration, makes me have and undergo that experience which is the exploration of the depths of my soul. I don't explore anything. The (correspondence with the) solo explores; and this exploration wouldn't be otherwise accessible to me since it does not have content which can be explored as such. When the solo resonates, the depths of my soul correspond to it, they are evoked as a sound. And this cannot happen either "before" or "after," like a state of affairs I could properly describe. While description implies the possibility of rephrasing the same content *salva veritate*, it is only as I'm interacting with that solo that this exploration arises as its aesthetic effect. Improvisation as a twine configuration-material implies this crucial element. When the performance stops, I would not be able to draw a map of "the depths of my soul" which I could later use or access. Any other expression of it could only carry out this interaction by analogy, renewing its configuration. Therefore, if the description at issue is aesthetically effective, what is "described" appears to be tuned to itself: it resonates in the description, from which it is evoked rather than provoked. To accomplish aesthetic descriptions (or: an aesthetic effect as a description) we need an expressive language, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. The root of this kind of descriptions lies in the *elocutio*, to which the vectors involved in its own field are tuned. It is not *adaequatio*, but *expressio*. The effect should be understood as an expression, a presentation, not as something that is caused, the representation of a content. The first "description" of an improvisation's aesthetic effect is the way we behave during our listening. In this sense, music and dance are unavoidably intertwined. And it's not a matter of taste, if we take that to mean an instrumental ability that we can have (either innate or acquired). It's rather a matter of passively being constituted by the interaction we are corresponding to and that we didn't have at our disposal "before" the field as such emerges. The expressive component of this element is well exemplified whenever we look for the "right" word without being able to say which word we are constrained to use to accomplish our expressive task.

This opens up an interesting perspective on the relationship between the *dense* (in a topological sense: like a set of rational numbers) phenomenon of resonance and each of its *discrete* configurations (like a set of integers), both in images and in words. Instead of referring to a state of affairs that would be designated (or even provoked) by the enunciative act, or instead of representing it, resonance phenomena show an effect that is one with its own presentation. It is each time nothing but its own particular staging. Only by losing or forgetting their own propositional or representational function can word- and picture-systems become capable of expressing the musical material configuration of our experience in its sensible, aesthetic manifestation. The coincidence of form and content as a twine configuration-material – namely, the core of radical improvisation – thus, shows to be the core of the so-called aesthetic, creativity, also as a receptive and interpretive exercise. This is what must be not only preserved, but also carried out by any “aesthetic judgment” that aims at being effective, whether it be a critical intervention or a variation on the theme created through means even inhomogeneous to the matrix of the theme itself. It expresses a figural articulation of the overall experiential interaction with an affective field, and it does so intransitively: a different “description” would indeed not succeed in replacing it by performing with the same efficacy the function it performs of “emphasizing or concentrating upon some object or some feature of an object” (Wollheim 1980: 95).

In these cases, a passage between expressive registers endowed with different densities (as perception, representation, and verbalization are) takes place. In order to be efficient, this passage must be “in tune.” Namely, it must be attuned to a core of material configuration, a sort of residue of a radical improvisation, which is preserved at all levels. The key role is played by the resonating bistability of the field (a “how”) instead of any propositional content (a “what”), by something that is meaningful yet lacking any designating function, just like music can be. From this resonance matrix is derived the paradigmatic role of *musical* improvisation for the creativity of the aesthetic in general. Only thanks to this musicality already embodied in perception does it become clear how much can be shared by different expressive practices. The soundtrack of Louis Malle’s *Ascenseur pour l’échafaud*, created in a few hours by Miles Davis in 1957, is a masterful return effect of it. The downside is that, despite being expressed in a propositional form, the description of improvisation as a resonance phenomenon can never appeal to abstractly general categories without losing the aesthetic effect. It is bound to carry out

a particular-universal field with further instances expressed by apparent judgments. That is, it must aim at making aesthetic experience occur (perceptualization), rather than at making something known (conceptualization).

It would seem to take the point too far if we were to say that the formally descriptive enunciation accomplishes the experience of an aesthetic effect. As long as it is a phenomenon of resonance, it is a question of not illocutory but elocutory acts, whose predicate intransitively exhibits the figure that the manifestative complex of experience takes on. It was not by chance that I spoke earlier of a baptism where the officiant-baptized reveals its proper name. Practicing these elocutory acts means moving within the framework of the *logos semantikos* (Aristotle 2002: 44–9; *De int.*: 16b–17a), which does not describe nor inscribe in the truth-falsity of a judgement what it expresses, as the *logos apophantikos* would do, but actually “puts it into effect,” makes it “come” (not “be”) true, carries out its resonance. According to a specific inflection bound to the medium, each “predicated” property is at the same time presented, it intervenes operationally as a resonating harmonic note, that is, it becomes perceivable and felt in a single act. The *elocutio* of these configurations has, therefore, the force of the *invitation* to make an experience *with* the aesthetic device (and *with* the whole field). They are invitations to perceptualize that reveal the performative character of *aisthesis*. They are invitations to share, to cooperate, to a common construction of an aesthetic niche. By virtue of their musical core, which guarantees power and effect, they give further way to improvisation as resonance.

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