

# Jazz Improvisation and Somatic Experience

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For Emi, Ignazio, Lele, Luca, Net, Piero:  
for our beautiful way of improvising  
in music and life in our youth.

“All that’s sacred comes from youth”.  
Pearl Jam, *Not For You*.

**Abstract:** *In this article I investigate musical improvisation from a somaesthetic perspective. I first provide a sketch of somaesthetics’ relationship to music and explain why, in dealing with improvisation, I mostly focus on jazz. Then I connect the question of jazz improvisation to the pragmatist attempt to reconcile art and life, and focus on the dimension of somatic knowledge in improvisation. Finally, I exemplify my ideas by referring to jazz drumming and the improvisational capacities that it is able to display and that are of interest for theoretical, practical and pragmatic somaesthetics.*

**Keywords:** *somaesthetics, jazz, performance, improvisation, drumming.*

## 1.

Ever since its introduction in the philosophical discourse of contemporaneity in the tenth chapter of the second edition of *Pragmatist aesthetics*, somaesthetics has been defined as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 267).<sup>1</sup> According to some of the distinctions introduced by the founder of somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman, the latter represents “a systematic framework” (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19) that has

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<sup>1</sup> In one of his most recent contributions to this field Shusterman has slightly changed and also broadened his definition to some extent, speaking of somaesthetics as “the critical study and meliorative cultivation of the body as the site not only of experienced subjectivity and sensory appreciation (*aesthesis*) that guides our action and performance but also of our creative self-fashioning through the ways we use, groom, and adorn our physical bodies to express our values and stylize ourselves. To realize its aims of improving somatic experience and expression, somaesthetics advocates integrating theory and practice” (Shusterman, 2019, p. 15).

three fundamental branches (analytic, pragmatic and practical), which in turn include “three dimensions” (representational, experiential and performative), depending on “whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience of the body” (Shusterman, 2016a, pp. 102–105). From this point of view, somaesthetics may be understood as a somewhat general and also interdisciplinary philosophical approach that can be applied to a great variety of problems and phenomena, and that is both comparable to, and compatible with, other relevant and general approaches (such as, for example, Marxist aesthetics, phenomenological aesthetics, hermeneutical aesthetics, etc.).

According to Shusterman, “aesthetics can be more usefully pluralistic” than it has usually been, both with regard to a plurality of complementary approaches and to a plurality of objects of inquiry, for example neither excluding “the most elevated fine arts” nor devaluating “the most common-day everyday aesthetic practices and popular artistic forms” (Shusterman, 2012, p. 105).<sup>2</sup> More recently, in the introduction to a collection significantly entitled *Aesthetic experience and somaesthetics*, Shusterman has observed that somaesthetics’ “integration of theory and practice, along with its melioristic thrust to improve [...] somatic experience and practice,” reflects this discipline’s “roots in pragmatist experience which puts aesthetic experience at the center of its philosophy of art,” and that the lived body or soma “clearly seems to be at the core of aesthetic experience both in the creation and appreciation of art” (Shusterman, 2018, p. 2).

On the basis of both the conceptual and thematic breadth of somaesthetics and of its variety, openness, plurality and flexibility, I will focus in this article on musical practice and experience, and I will especially investigate jazz improvisation from a somaesthetic perspective. Pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics have already been applied to the understanding of music, and especially of certain forms of popular music (like rock, rap and funk) by Shusterman himself in some important and indeed pioneering contributions to this field (Shusterman, 1999; Shusterman, 2000, pp. 169–235), which can be drawn close and compared to other significant works on popular music in contemporary aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Following Shusterman’s model, and further developing his intuitions and insights, other relevant contributions to a somaesthetics of musical practices and experiences were subsequently provided by other scholars in this field. For example, in a recent contribution on vocal somaesthetics it has been convincingly remarked that, “[i]n contrast to the traditional research of human vocality, vocal somaesthetics [is] interested in the bodily sensations of what it feels like to vocalize and to listen to another person vocalizing:” it can be described as “an approach that focuses on the bodily and experiential dimensions of producing vocal sounds and listening to them,” and it is aimed at creating “a comprehensive understanding of human being as a bodily, sentient and vocal being” which considers “human vocal behavior as somatic experience in all its manifestations” (Tarvainen, 2018, pp. 120–121, 136–138).<sup>4</sup>

With its focus on the need to “put experience at the heart of philosophy and [to] celebrate the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience” (Shusterman, 2008, p. XII), somaesthetics can also be successfully applied to jazz music, and can make it possible to arrive at an original understanding of some of its aspects, such as improvisation. An aim of this article is thus to add pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics to the list of the philosophical approaches

<sup>2</sup> On the somaesthetics of fashion, for example, see Shusterman, 2016a. On somaesthetics and the fine art of eating, see Shusterman, 2016b.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Theodore Gracyk’s important trilogy of books on this topic: *Rhythm and noise: An aesthetics of rock* (1996); *I wanna be me: Rock music and the politics of identity* (2001); *Listening to popular music: Or, how I learned to stop worrying and love Led Zeppelin* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> In her essay, Tarvainen also refers to the works on musical somaesthetics by Holgersen (2010) and Maus (2010). For a somaesthetic approach to contemporary rock music, see also Marino (2018).

capable of shedding light on jazz music, on the basis of the particular contribution that it can offer with regard to the role played by the body in musical practice.

## 2.

Musical improvisation is by no means limited only to jazz, but rather represents a fundamental component and element of music as such, at all levels and during the entire history of Western and non-Western musical traditions. All improvised music, not only jazz, calls for performance values that are different from those that are considered important in that part of so-called classical music based on what Lydia Goehr has called the *Werktreue* paradigm or ideal (see Goehr, 1992). It is therefore not surprising that a philosopher like Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, in outlining his hermeneutical ontology of art based on the notion of “transformation into structure,” indeed uses the example of improvisation but, in doing so, does not refer to jazz but rather to pre-Bachian “organ improvisation” (Gadamer, 2007, p. 202; see also Gadamer, 2004, pp. 110, 580).<sup>5</sup>

Although improvisation has played a constitutive role in the development of music as such throughout the world in all ages, and although there are surely other important traditions of improvisation in contemporary music, *if we focus on contemporary music* it is probably jazz that “involves the most highly developed improvisation” (Davies, 2005, p. 490), which is most often and quite spontaneously associated with improvisation by a vast number of listeners, and that not by chance is emphatically defined as “the infinite art of improvisation” (Berliner, 1994). As has been noted, “improvisation and swing are [...] the most important elements of jazz,” although sometimes “defining them has proved elusive” (Monson, 2002, p. 114).

Given the obvious existence of many different and sometimes opposite perspectives on both jazz and improvisation, it is important to add that, in my view, this argument can be valid and can be applied to jazz music in general, that is to the entire repertoire that, for a hundred years or more,<sup>6</sup> we have been used to considering and classifying as “jazz.” However, certain kinds of jazz (like big-band swing or so-called pop fusion and smooth jazz, for example) may fall prey to some extent to the objection of only being able to practice “pseudo-improvisation” rather than genuine and real improvisation, because of their tendency to reduce the role of improvisation to a limited, merely patterned and, as it were, pre-digested embellishment of details in so-called “breaks” whose function remains completely determined by the underlying harmonic and metric schemes.<sup>7</sup> Other kinds or forms of jazz (such as be-bop or free jazz, for example) seem to justify the fact that for many listeners today jazz represents “the paradigm example of improvisation” in a more convincing way (Brown, 2011, p. 59). In fact, notwithstanding the presence of established and style-compliant constraints, structures, schemata and habits also in be-bop improvisation and in some early forms of free jazz, the latter do not confine the practice of improvisation to a mere substitution and embellishment of details in pre-determined parts of

5 As has been noted, musical improvisation “has long been a common—indeed, perhaps basic—feature of music throughout the world” and, with regard to the European tradition, “[i]mprovisation in concert music [only] declined in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (Brown, 2011, p. 59).

6 As is well-known, the very first jazz recording commercially released, “Livery Stable Blues” by The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, dates back to 1917, but the origins of this genre are definitely older and rooted in Afro-American musical traditions including blues and ragtime.

7 I employ the concept of “pseudo-improvisation, deriving it from Adorno’s seminal essays on jazz and popular music from the 1930s-1940s, re-published now in English translation in his collection *Essays on music* (Adorno, 2002). While acknowledging that Adorno’s investigation of music, with his unique capacity to deduce philosophical and social implications from the musical material itself, remains of invaluable importance today, I disagree with his tendency to *sometimes* propose “totalizing claims” (such as the claim that *all jazz* is standardized and pseudo-individualized) instead of “a more fine-grained and concrete analysis of the various arts and the differing forms of their appropriation” (Shusterman, 2000, p. 170). On Adorno’s aesthetics of popular music, see Campbell, Gandesha and Marino, 2019.

the song, such as the “breaks,” but rather let improvisation profoundly influence and modify the structure of the song itself and thus determine its development and its meaning.

To be precise, not all jazz takes the specificities of improvised music to the extreme, however, while it is surely important to pay attention to the discontinuities between the different phases and stages of development of the history of jazz, from my perspective, in a somehow hermeneutical fashion, it is even more important to emphasize its continuity and to precisely ground it in the practice of improvisation.<sup>8</sup> As the Italian scholar of jazz, Gildo De Stefano, has claimed, “there is just one chain connecting the different styles in jazz,” and it is specifically improvisation: “improvisation [in jazz] is spontaneous but at the same time every note must always sound as inevitable and right, and must always let emerge a sense of wonder [...]. Imagination still remains the greatest gift that a jazz player can be equipped with” (De Stefano, 2014, pp. 146–148).

While some theorists and musicians have urged the importance of differentiating jazz sharply from so-called “non-idiomatic improvisation” or “free radical improvisation,” and thus of avoiding to classify the latter as “jazz” (see, for instance, Arena, 2018), in my view there is not a complete discontinuity between these forms of improvised music but rather a certain continuity. On this basis, I tend to consider “non-idiomatic improvisation” or “free radical improvisation” as a radicalization of a spirit and an attitude that has probably characterized all jazz music at least since the bebop era (although in various ways and with different degrees of freedom, of course), rather than as something totally different from jazz and incommensurable to it. In much the same way, for example, in my view there is also more continuity than discontinuity between the kind of improvisation that is usually practiced in jazz and the sometimes radical, spontaneous, dissonant and free improvisation that we can find traces of in the performances of some musicians that are usually classified as “rock” but that, due to their originality, freshness, energy, experimental and emancipatory attitude, destabilizing musical power, and also improvisational freedom, undoubtedly belong to the great figures of contemporary music. Just to name a few examples, we may mention Jimi Hendrix, Frank Zappa, The Velvet Underground, Tim Buckley, Led Zeppelin, King Crimson, Einstürzende Neubauten, Sonic Youth, Tortoise, and to some extent also a more mainstream-oriented band like Radiohead.

### 3.

In addition to what has been said before, the abovementioned idea that improvised music calls for values that are different from those that are considered important in other musical forms can be also applied to other aspects of this problem. For example, it can be applied to the different ways in which the bodies of both the musician and the listener (who, in many forms of music that call for higher or lower degrees of improvisation, is sometimes a listener and at the same time a dancer) are involved in the performance.

In his rich, interesting and very well-documented survey of the field entitled *The body in music*, the Italian musicologist Luca Marconi has explained that “every sound (either vocal or instrumental) is necessarily perceived in more or less direct connection to body attitudes and behaviors that are potentially able to produce an equivalent sound” (Marconi, 2009, p. 49). So, “a presence of somatic phenomena” is always implied by music as such (Marconi, 2010, p. 177). At the same time, however, following intuitions and insights provided by Davide Sparti and Vincenzo Caporaletti in their theories of “the unheard-of sound” and “the audiotactile principle,” but also

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow this general conception, and apply it freely here to the particular phenomenon of jazz music, from Gadamer’s (2004, p. 83). idea of “the hermeneutic continuity of human existence [that] constitutes our being” philosophical hermeneutics.

softening some of their conclusions that appear to him too radical or extreme, Marconi adds that certain forms of music definitely emphasize “the bodily adhesion to the sound dimension” more than others: for example, “all ‘African-derived genres’ (*above all jazz*, but also blues and rock) promote and appreciate listening and paying attention to the bodily gestures through which every performer develops his/her personal way of playing music,” whereas other musical styles tend to reduce the importance of the role of the body in the performance and hence, as it were, “desomatize the sound” (Marconi, 2009, pp. 51, 60).

As examples of the different features and values that are called for in different musical traditions, in his article Marconi mentions, for instance, some ritual forms of music in Ghana, Tanzania and Latin America, which explicitly provide for “improvised variations on codified repeated musical patterns” and that “generate in the participants to the musical and dance rituals [...] a sense of *communitas*, a shared feeling of fraternity and equality perceived through different body attitudes” (Marconi, 2010, pp. 163, 168). As I have said, however, “African-derived genres” (all implying a more or less pronounced component of improvisation) and, in occasional cases, even such forms of “European serious music” as “the performances of collective improvisations in avant-garde music” (Marconi, 2010, p. 170), may also call for very different bodily attitudes and interactions than those that we are more frequently used to associating with music on the basis of certain traditions that we have become familiar with, and that, as it were, have become commonsense for us.

Connecting these examples to those provided by Shusterman (taken from contemporary popular music but referring anyway to “African-derived genres,” inasmuch as he mostly focuses on rock, rap and funky music), we can then see that the experience of this music (which often requires a high degree of improvisation, in turn):

*...can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession. [...] Rock songs are typically enjoyed through moving, dancing, and singing along with the music, often with such vigorous efforts that we break a sweat and eventually exhaust ourselves. [...] Clearly, on the somatic level, there is much more effortful activity in the appreciation of rock than in that of high-brow music, whose concerts compel us to sit in a motionless silence which often induces not mere torpid passivity but snoring sleep. [...] The much more energetic and kinesthetic response evoked by rock exposes the fundamental passivity of the traditional aesthetic attitude of disinterested, distanced contemplation – a contemplative attitude that has its roots in the quest for philosophical and theological knowledge rather than pleasure (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 178–184).*

#### 4.

Some recent philosophical contributions on musical improvisation, with a special focus on jazz, have proposed that we “solve the puzzle” concerning this particular practice with conceptual tools provided by, for example, contemporary philosophers like Wittgenstein and Derrida, with a particular emphasis on the role of mistakes as surprising experiences of creativity, and the capacity to face the unknown and to freely decide how to proceed, in jazz (see, for instance, Bertinetto, 2018b and 2018c; and Goldoni, 2018a and 2018b). Other recent contributions on this topic have tried to investigate jazz improvisation, and especially Ornette Coleman’s free jazz, by bringing it into conversation with Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of time consciousness and retention-protection scheme (Angelino, 2019). As I have already said, in this article I would

like to add pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics to this list, on the basis of the particular contribution that this approach can offer, especially with regard to the role played by the body in all musical practice and experience, and in improvised music in particular.

A passage from Shusterman's book *Body consciousness* can be of help in explaining why a pragmatist and somaesthetic perspective in this specific field can be interesting and useful. In Chapter Four of his book Shusterman quotes a long passage from Wittgenstein's *Vermischte Bemerkungen* on the body's crucial role in music, and then adds that this recognition would need "to be taken a step further in a pragmatic direction:" in fact, "if one's body [...] is capable of being more finely tuned to perceive, respond, and perform aesthetically," then it is probably reasonable to try "to learn and train this 'instrument of instruments' by more careful attention to somaesthetic feelings" (Shusterman, 2008, p. 126). For Shusterman, "[m]ore than guitars or violins or pianos or even drums, our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music," and also "more than records, radios, tapes, or CDs, bodies are the basic, irreplaceable medium for its appreciation:" in general, "our bodies are the ultimate and necessary instrument for music" at all levels, both in theory and practice, both for musical creation and enjoyment (Shusterman, 2008, p. 126).

Now, such a *seemingly* easy and, as it were, obvious remark such as "our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music" is actually very powerful, and even radical in emphasizing something that, in my opinion, other philosophical and also scientific approaches to music sometimes tend to forget and don't pay adequate attention to: namely, the unavoidable somatic component that is present in all music-making and that certain forms of musical performance take to the extreme. This is something that, conversely, pragmatist and somaesthetic approaches to music can help us to remember, to pay attention to, and thus to investigate in its various dimensions (representational, experiential and performative). This is also something that, although of great value and importance for all kinds of music (including the repertoire of classical music with its rigorous distinction between the composer and the performer, with its *Werktreue* ideal of performance, with its very precise postures prescribed to the musicians and also to the listeners, etc.), is especially important in the particular case of improvised music. In addition, it must also be noted that in the scientific investigation of music the body has often been referred to "as an instrument" in a somehow reductionist way, whereas the somaesthetics of music, "instead of focusing on the acoustic or physiological facts" in making music, prioritizes the study and cultivation of bodily-musical experiences, i.e. what we may also call "the inside perspective" (Tarvainen, 2018, p. 122).

At this point, I would like to add a few remarks on the concept of improvisation as such, not only limited to music, in order to develop a sufficiently broad idea of improvisation that may also be of help for the pragmatist aim to reconnect art and life. In fact, just as musical improvisation is by no means limited only to jazz music, so improvisation in general is by no means limited only to music, or even only to the performance arts in general. In Alessandro Bertinetto's recent and indeed ambitious theorization, which explicitly recalls in its very title Nietzsche's famous formula about the birth of Greek tragedy from the spirit of music, the birth of art can be traced back to the spirit of improvisation. This is true because improvisation, in turn, is such a fundamental part of human life in general that it may be well conceived of as "the link between human practices and art:" for Bertinetto, "improvisation *incorporates* and genetically shows the specificity of autonomous art as well as [...] the link between human practices [of all kinds] and art as a *specific* human practice" (Bertinetto 2018a, p. 119). Other relevant insights into this fundamental connection between the particular human practice of art and the global

realm of human practices and experiences that always include an improvisational component, can be found in recent important works on improvisation in life and art, with a specific focus on “the body that improvises” (see Amoroso and De Fazio, 2018, and in general the contributions collected in Pelgrefi, 2018).

Improvisation must be thus understood as a human practice by no means limited to music, or, more in general, to art, but rather must be understood in a broad way, with a broad meaning, as a part (and, indeed, a fundamental and unavoidable one) of the human world-experience in general, as a cultural practice that is connected to a specific expertise or competence and that displays itself at various levels in all dimensions of life. As a matter of fact, there is a certain and often indefinable degree of improvisation in most everything we do: we improvise to some extent at work, in our personal relationships, during a conversation, while having sex, when taking an exam, when riding our bicycle or driving our car, in many aspects of our everyday life in general, and then of course in art and music. From this point of view, it surely makes sense to emphasize the links between improvisation in everyday life and artistic improvisation, while at the same time recognizing the differences between them, and thus distinguishing them: in fact, if the performance of *all* actions involves certain improvisational elements and components, then in the specific case of the artistic field improvisation must be understood as a kind of development of creativity and rearrangement of forms, materials and techniques in real time.

If improvisation is a genuinely human practice, a genuine component of human life experience in general and not only in art, it is nevertheless in art, and particularly in music, that the specific features of improvisation manifest themselves in perhaps the clearest way, and become fully explicit, thus also facilitating a philosophical understanding of this capacity. In other words, improvisation in art, and in particular in music, highlights, emphasizes, strengthens and increases in value the characteristics of improvisation in general, and thus makes it easier for theorists to grasp its essence, to identify its basic features and distinctive characters. If so, then “improvisation in the performing arts shows at a micro level what happens, at a macro level, in artistic practices in general,” and the latter, in turn, shows what happens at a still greater macro level in life in general (Bertinetto, 2018a, pp. 129, 131–132).

## 5.

On the basis of these presuppositions, placing an inquiry into jazz improvisation into a somaesthetic context of investigation can prove to be useful and important so as to deepen, enrich and refashion our understanding of improvisation in both life and art. As noted by Davide Sparti (2005, p. 135), improvisation is also a genuine source of knowledge, and more precisely a kind of knowledge that is more a “knowing-how” than a “knowing-that,” and a kind of knowledge that can be described in terms of “embodied skills”. This is already clear on the many occasions in which we must face the unknown and the unexpected in everyday life—the very term “improvisation” deriving from the Latin *ex improvviso* (Bertinetto, 2016, pp. 189–220). This becomes even clearer and more explicit in performance art and especially in music and dance: namely, in forms of art in which the body plays a very fundamental and special role (also in comparison to other art forms or genres), both in itself and in its tight and sometimes inseparable relationship with the musical instrument.

The kind of knowledge and skill that is required to be a musician can be also indeed be considered an embodied knowledge. This is true in general, and thus at all levels and in all musical styles or genres, but it is especially true in the case of good, prepared and well-trained

musicians, and in the case of improvised music, since in improvised music the musician, in order to be able to face the challenge of the unknown and the unexpected on stage in the free interplay with their musical partners, with the audience and with the surrounding environment, must be really in sync with their instrument as if it was a part of their body. As explained by Bill Bruford (2018, pp. 12, 18–19, 199)—a legendary rock and jazz drummer but also a PhD scholar and the author of an academic book on creativity that, among other things, is also based on the precepts of John Dewey’s philosophical theory of art as experience, as far as its theoretical background is concerned—, the unforeseen is a “foundational construct of creativity:” as showed by the Latin etymology, it is also linked to the notion of improvisation, “a key skill of the jazz performer as she or he deals literally with the unforeseen in real time” during a process or activity that can be described as an embodied performance.<sup>9</sup>

Ever since Pythagoras, Plato and St. Augustine, up to Medieval and early-modern conceptions of the so-called “music of the spheres” or “harmony of the spheres,” and arriving at the present age with Adorno’s idea of “music as knowledge” (Adorno, 2006, pp. 96–99) and still other theorists, music has often been associated with truth and knowledge.<sup>10</sup> If music has been understood as a form of knowledge from many different philosophical and also religious or mystical perspectives, from a pragmatist and especially somaesthetic point of view it can be said that musical knowledge represents a form of embodied knowledge that can be also of great importance to broaden and deepen one’s “body consciousness,” to adapt a famous expression by Shusterman for my purposes. according to Sparti, however, if we ask ourselves the question: “How can one become able to play improvised jazz?,” then in trying to answer it we find ourselves compelled, as it were, to develop

*...a theory of practical knowledge that stresses the embedded and embodied aspect of musical knowledge and skill, namely that required to be able to play an instrument and especially to show the kind of performative capacity that improvising is. [...] [I]t is crucial to differentiate between knowledge mediated by mental representations and knowledge-in-action, immediately embodied in acting. [...] When we start from the observation of an expert improviser and try to trace back his/her ability to a complete catalogue of codified and explicit instructions, then we understand how difficult our task is. Moreover, what has been learned are not only and not so much the rules but rather a sort of sensitivity or touch, namely the sensitivity or touch required to realize a flow of coordinated and generative actions, a sort of dynamic circuit between the musician [scil. with his/her body: SM], the instrument, the co-players and the sound event. [...] It is necessary to clarify the practical features of the particular form of creation of the new that improvising is. Many music critics and musicologists have developed their analyses at a level that is [intellectually] too high, thus omitting precisely the embodied practices that have generated the music that one aims to report on: the history of jazz, the songs, but already and also the actions of the musician, presuppose the existence of arms and hands, of a resonating voice, of a selectively listening ear, of a sight directed in certain directions: in other words, they presuppose aspects of perception and human embodiment that cannot be overcome or taken for granted. One must thus develop a*

9 On the underlying Deweyan presuppositions of Bruford’s investigation of creativity, based on his academic study of this topic but also grounded in his 41-year career as a drummer that led him to actively collaborate with, among others, Yes, King Crimson, Genesis, UK, Earthworks, Michiel Borstlap, Patrick Moraz, Ralph Towner and Eddie Gomez, David Torn and many more, see Bruford, 2018, pp. 20–37.

10 In Frank Zappa’s well-known and funny, but at the same time serious view, music is even more important than knowledge: “information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, wisdom is not truth, truth is not beauty, beauty is not love, love is not music, music is the best” (Zappa and Occhiogrosso, 1989, p. 79).

*carnal sociology [scil. and philosophy: SM] of music, not one of the body but, more radically, one from the body* (Sparti, 2005, pp. 136–137; my emphasis).

Following Shusterman's original intuitions, "if we put aside traditional philosophical prejudice against the body and simply recall philosophy's central aims of knowledge, self-knowledge, right action, and its quest for the good life, then the philosophical value of somaesthetics should become clear in several ways:" if "knowledge is largely based on sensory perception" but the latter's "reliability often proves questionable," then the route offered by somaesthetics is "to correct the actual functional performance of our senses by an improved direction of one's body, since the senses belong to and are conditioned by the soma" (Shusterman, 2000, p. 267). From a somaesthetic perspective, knowledge of the world and also self-knowledge are not only important as such but also improvable, and can be improved "not by denying our bodily senses but by perfecting them" through specific methods, experiences, practices and arts (Shusterman, 2000, p. 268).

## 6.

On the basis of what has been said above, jazz improvisation can be understood: (1) as an artistic practice that promotes, in a Deweyan pragmatist spirit, the attempt to reconcile and reconnect art and life; (2) as an artistic practice that, like all music and all performance art, is based among other things on a strong, indeed unavoidable somatic component, i.e. on a fundamental role played by the body during the performance, with the musician's body completely involved and "immersed" in the performance: in the specific case of jazz, let us think of the particular and often inimitable postures and uses of their bodies by such different jazz musicians as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Charles Mingus, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett, John Scofield, Pat Metheny, Brad Mehldau, and many more; (3) as an artistic practice that, precisely due to the level of somatic involvement by the musician in the playing of music that is (partially or totally, depending on the kind of musical improvisation) "instantly composed" during the performance, requires a great competence and mastery of the musical instrument. Namely, it requires a relationship with the instrument that arrives at understanding it, and above all at feeling it, as something like an appendage of one's own limbs (please consider, as a somewhat typical example, the drummer's relationship with drums, percussions and cymbals forming the "drum kit" as almost appendages of their own arms and legs).<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, the capacity to arrive at a good level of improvisation in music thus requires a great deal of musical knowledge<sup>12</sup> and also somatic knowledge, a progressively increased knowledge of one's own body, of its potentialities and also of its limits. On the other hand, in a somaesthetic spirit of pragmatic meliorism, this may also prove to be a genuine

11 As noted by Bill Bruford in his book on creativity in performance explained through the example of drumming, "it is important to highlight [that] the instrument is played with some combination of all four limbs in play. [...] Assuming a four-limbed drummer is playing a standard seven-piece drum set of bass drum, snare drum, hi-hat, high tom, low tom, ride, and crash cymbals, she or he may strike any combination of seven instruments with any combination of up to four limbs" (Bruford, 2018, p. 106)—that which clearly requires a great mastery not only of the instrument, i.e. the drum kit, but also of the drummer's body, with a high level of bodily coordination and somatic consciousness.

12 Of course, this musical knowledge can be, but must not necessarily be, an academic one, as in the case of many excellent self-taught jazz musicians. It must also be added that learning to play an instrument fluently is not in itself a sufficient condition for original, brilliant improvising and, in general, for creativity. To again quote Bill Bruford (2018, pp. 68, 209), "[t]he importance of technical control in music invention lies in its affordance of possible options from which to select", but there is "no direct linear connection between technical dexterity (or the amount of deliberate practice needed to achieve it) and creativity" which, in turn, is defined by Bruford in his academic inquiry into "creative performance" as "sociocultural, intersubjective and interactive" (and embodied, I add), as "embedded within a meaningful shared experience around collaboration and community", and as "an action in between actors and their environment rather than a psychological phenomenon entirely located within the individual mind".

source of improvement of one's capacities to use one's body in new, unexpected, creative ways. For this reason, *not only* can be music compared to a form of knowledge that also includes a component of somatic knowledge, as argued before; and *not only* can be musical improvisation be understood as one of the varieties of music that mostly testify this fact:<sup>13</sup> *in addition*, it is *also* remarkable that musical improvisation can be approached from a somaesthetic perspective from the analytic, the pragmatic and the practical dimension of somaesthetics, and also from both the representational and the experiential side of this discipline (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 271–276).

In using the term “discipline,” it can be interestingly observed that this term has characteristically “[a] double meaning,” indicating both “*a branch of learning or instruction and [...] a corporal form of training or exercise*,” and that this perfectly applies to somaesthetics as “a discipline of theory and practice” (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 271, 276) but also perfectly applies to music. As a matter of fact, to express the concept by using the “discipline/indiscipline” terminological pair that also gives the title to two masterpieces in Robert Fripp's catalogue with King Crimson,<sup>14</sup> the development of musical capacities at all levels undoubtedly requires a great deal of “discipline” (both theoretical-technical and somatic-practical) in order to arrive at a significant, expressive and aesthetically rich level of musical “indiscipline.” This is exemplified in a perfect way, once again, by what happens during a jazz improvisation, if we simply think of how much “disciplined” and at the same time “undisciplined” all great performers in the history of jazz have always been, and of how much their postures and the uses of their body are connected to their capacity to “express the inexpressible” through their voices and their instruments<sup>15</sup>—where the pair “discipline/indiscipline” does not completely overlap, but can nevertheless be fruitfully connected with, other pairs such as “structure/expression,” “convention/innovation,” “habit/changes,” “style and commonality/liberty and individuality,” “order/chaos” etc.

## 7.

At this point, I would like to exemplify the previous interpretations and argumentations by referring to the abovementioned (and, in my view, really exemplary) case of the drummer's explicitly and emphatically somatic relationship with their musical instrument. As a matter of fact, although the same phenomenon can be observed in jazz in the cases of saxophone players, trumpet players, guitar players, bass players, piano players and of course also singers, then due to the perhaps higher level of somatic involvement that an activity like drumming requires

13 Learning to play an instrument so fluently as to be able to “instantly compose” a musical piece, as happens during real improvisations, requires what Robert Fripp has so described with reference to his development of particular guitar techniques in his Guitar Craft students' group: “There was a *knowing in the hand through doing it* for years which I consulted. [...] *My body knew what was involved*, but I didn't know about it” (quoted in Tamm, 1991, p. 15; my emphasis). See also Tamm, 1991, p. 78, on the somatic component involved in Fripp's guitar methods as a teacher: “Many of [George Ivanovich] Gurdjieff's exercises involved or began with some sort of gradual relaxation of the muscles, starting with the muscles of the face and working downward through the body. Fripp has said that we can do nothing when not relaxed, and since his time at Sherborne [*scil.* where Fripp attended courses of John G. Bennett, a former student of Gurdjieff] has practiced a regular routine of relaxation in the morning before breakfast; such a ritual, led by a qualified instructor, has been worked into the Guitar Craft seminars. Along with relaxation there is a type of exercise for sensing the different parts of the body ‘from the inside.’ In these and analogous experiences, the somatic component of musical practice interestingly appears to be inextricably connected and interlaced with mental and sometimes quasi-mystical components that are nevertheless not autonomous, as it were, but indeed inseparable from the physical, somatic dimension of music playing, and actually grounded in it.

14 Quite interestingly, in a recent description of the present “incarnation” of King Crimson as an eight-piece band that has been quoted in the booklet of their double CD *Live in Chicago 2017*, the music of the band has been defined as characterized, among other things, by extraordinary capacities for improvisation: “The precision of an orchestra, the freedom of a jazz band, and the power of a rock band”.

15 I borrow this description from Adorno. In his view, we fail to do justice to the essence of all genuine philosophizing if we do not grasp “the philosophical urge to express the inexpressible. The more anxiously a philosophy resists that urge, which is its peculiarity, the greater the temptation to tackle the inexpressible directly, without the labor of Sisyphus – which, by the way, would not be the worst definition of philosophy and does so much to bring ridicule upon it. [...] Philosophy is neither a science nor the ‘cogitative poetry’ to which positivists would degrade it in a stupid oxymoron. It is a form transmitted to those which differ from it as well as distinguished from them. Its suspended state is nothing but the expression of its inexpressibility. In this respect it is a true sister of music” (Adorno, 2004, pp. 108–109).

because of its very nature, the latter may prove to be more useful for our purposes (with all the limbs of the body being simultaneously and in coordination active in beating drums, cymbals, cowbells and so on, so that the role of the body as agent to create music becomes especially tangible in drumming). Different musical styles in jazz drumming, as exhibited and displayed especially in improvisations, are indeed not only revealing of different technical skills, different aesthetic choices and taste preferences in the use of certain cymbals or drums, different shades and nuances in the application of single- or double-stroke rolls, paradiddles, single- or double-bass drum pedal techniques, and all other “rudiments” for drumming, but are also revealing of different “somatic styles” (borrowing the concept of somatic style from Shusterman, (2011)).

Just to name a few examples of leading figures in modern jazz drumming from the 1970s onwards, please consider how inseparable Jack DeJohnette’s, Joey Baron’s or Brian Blade’s passionate and overwhelming drum style is from their tumultuous and at times even somewhat “uncoordinated” (due to an unrestrained musical enthusiasm and expressiveness, especially in Baron’s or Blade’s cases) physical approach to the instrument.<sup>16</sup> Or, vice-versa, consider how inseparable Steve Gadd’s, Vinnie Colaiuta’s or Dave Weckl’s extraordinarily precise, calculated and metronomic drum style is from the accurately controlled and “hyper-coordinated” movements of all their limbs and parts of their bodies during the performance.<sup>17</sup> Consider how inseparable Peter Erskine’s, Manu Katche’s or Bill Bruford’s impeccable class, sensitivity and touch is from their relaxed, non-ostentatious and “disciplined” somatic style, even when playing very “undisciplined” and ferociously improvised tunes (still using the “discipline/indiscipline” conceptual pair, given Bruford’s long-time involvement with at least three “incarnations” of King Crimson).<sup>18</sup> Consider how inseparable Billy Cobham’s, Dennis Chambers’ or Omar Hakim’s energetic, powerful and, so-to-speak, muscular drum style is from a posture that immediately shows, at the very level of their bodies’ movements, the capacity to connect a high level of fluency and mastery of their instrument to a unique feeling for funky rhythms and the primordial function of drums for dancing.<sup>19</sup> Consider also how much the distinct drum styles of various drummers enrolled in a certain band in different years are also connected to, and reflected by, their dissimilar somatic styles; and how much, this, in turn, can influence the entire band’s practices of musical composition and performance at various levels. Useful examples in contemporary jazz may be those of the different musical and somatic styles provided by Danny Gottlieb, Paul Wertico and Antonio Sanchez in the Pat Metheny Group, or by Marvin “Smitty” Smith, Billy Kilson, Nate Smith and Eric Harland in the Dave Holland Quartets, Quintets, Sextets, Octets and Big Bands. Finally, consider how relevant and striking, eye-catching, impossible-to-pass-unnoticed is the connection between the purely musical dimension of drumming and its somatic dimension on the occasion of drum duets starring musicians characterized by heterogeneous styles. Just to mention a few well-known examples, let me remind the reader of such exciting drum duets as those between Bill Stewart and Gregory Hutchinson,<sup>20</sup> or between

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16 For example, respectively: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lj26nzEM-Gs>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwlyJRPFXU>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VdtC9WhnKg>.

17 For example, these three great drummers soloing together and having a beautiful improvised conversation with drums, cymbals and percussions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czOjnlvHrQU>.

18 For example, respectively: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B2qlsrfuAO8>; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP\\_iWAtU4A8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP_iWAtU4A8); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQHkjYewJoU>.

19 For example, respectively: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ljn1RLYEtE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJkzNnUx7BY>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5AO0aeuR6Q>.

20 For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lhDjMsSsfD0>.

Terry Bozzio and Chad Wackerman,<sup>21</sup> two of Frank Zappa's favorite drummers, with their very different musical and somatic styles, and with their unique capacity to provide different but equally valid interpretations of *The black page*.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, an account of musical creativity that, as already hinted at above, understands it on the basis of a Deweyan background, that also pays attention to the dimension of surprise, of the unforeseen and unexpected and thus of improvisation (with a special focus on jazz), and that precisely exemplifies through drumming its conception of creativity and performance as a meditated, common and diffused (instead than individual or "person-centric", as in "the 'lone genius' paradigm posited by the Romantic conception"), embedded and also embodied "action in context," has been offered by Bill Bruford, one of most famous rock-jazz drummers of recent decades and the author of the academic study *Uncharted: Creativity and the expert drummer* (Bruford 2018, pp. 3–14, 45–52, 199–201). Although Bruford's book is not specifically dedicated to trying to answer such questions as, for example, how embodied knowledge is present, needed and learned/developed in the case of improvisation in jazz drumming, or what the embodied knowledge here entails in specific or concrete terms, or how embodied knowledge and experience are connected in improvisation in jazz drumming, or what the lack of such knowledge might reveal and how would it be revealed, in some chapters it nevertheless pays close attention to the somatic dimension of music (with a focus also on jazz and improvisation). This is the case, for example, in his intriguing observations on the way in which musical activities (in the matter in question, those of jazz and rock drummers) "are governed by a cultural tradition that regulates and shapes the experience of creative practice, and take place within a community that mediates and promotes the psychological behavior and meaning-making of the individual. [...] Embracing a particularly corrosive ideology, however, the broader drum culture (that enfolds the community) is something of an extreme case," as testified by a few "sets of issue" among which, for Bruford, prominently figures a deep-rooted anti-somatic prejudice deriving from no less than "the impact of the Cartesian mind/body split" (Bruford, 2018, pp. 16–17).

As a matter of fact, according to Bruford "the link between creativity and the drum culture" (that especially manifests itself during jazz improvisations<sup>23</sup>) is problematically "mediated by the corrosive influence of the culture's organizing ideology," defined as "the articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs that can be abstracted as the 'worldview' of the drum community," and that, at least to some extent, seems to reinforce "distinctions between the culture of drummers and other instrumentalists," which can be connected to "Western music culture's perceived predisposition against the 'rhythmatist'" (Bruford, 2018, p. 133). In a genuinely pragmatist and even somaesthetic fashion, Bruford indeed criticizes a certain "historical insistence that notions of aesthetics, mind, harmony, and the intellect are superior to hedonism, body, rhythm" which "has become embedded" in a widespread but mistaken "drum ideology" that, in a philosophically ambitious way, he even dares to trace back "to René Descartes and the seventeenth century dualist notion of the 'mind/body split.'" Referring to Simon Frith's sociological analysis of popular music, which can be intriguingly compared to Shusterman's philosophical critique of the high

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21 For example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRiZNOvC5J8>.

22 Frank Zappa's composition *The black page* has been emphatically defined as "the most complex rhythmic composition humanly performable" (Salvatore, 2000, pp. 136–137). It is "a written piece of music that, while simulating improvisation" (i.e. sounding as if it was an improvised piece played by the drummer), "reveals instead its real character of written musical score," "a sound experience that has to do with the possibility of impossibility" (Montecchi, 2000, p. 191).

23 "Jazz performance", according to Bruford (2018, p. 87), can be understood as "an ongoing interaction between person, product, and environment, one which an audience is invited to observe. It is expected that the product (the performed outcomes of these interactions) will change frequently and in response to multiple environmental conditions. The emphasis is on the process, not the product."

culture/popular culture dichotomy in *Pragmatist aesthetics* and elsewhere, Bruford observes that “the equation of ‘serious’ with the mind and high culture, and ‘fun’ with the body and thus low culture, became established in the United States and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century,” and that characteristically, while “a good classical performance [is] measured by the stillness it commands, [...] a good rock concert [is] measured by the audience’s physical response and bodily movement” (Bruford, 2018, p. 133).

Starting from these presuppositions, if we shift our attention to the specific case of drumming, and in particular of jazz performances based on improvisation,<sup>24</sup> we can see some effects of “[t]his musical dichotomy of aesthetic/mind versus hedonistic/body” grounded in “the falsity of the mind/split [and] the separation of thought from feeling” (Bruford, 2018, pp. 134, 136). That is, we can understand – and, on the basis of this understanding, reasonably criticize—the still quite common but wrong idea of “bodily responses [as] mindless” and, as a consequence of the high level of somatic involvement that drumming requires, “[t]he conception of drumming as ‘mindless’” and the fact that “the Western kit drummer [has] become imbued with the primitive, the sexual, and the mindless” (Bruford, 2018, pp. 134–135). With regard to this, the experience and practice of drumming can offer a good example to support the efforts of pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics to put aside traditional prejudices against the body and reevaluate its central role in art and performance, while the somaesthetics’ critique of the sad somatic neglect that has been characteristic of a great part of Western philosophy and culture, in turn, can provide a suitable theoretical framework for a reevaluation of improvisation in drumming, not in spite of its pronounced somatic character, but precisely because of the latter and the importance of the body that it displays.

Last but not least, jazz improvisation may be of interest to a philosophical discipline like somaesthetics not only from an artistic point of view, but also from a more practical point of view that can be connected to the pragmatic/practical dimension of somaesthetics interested in “proposing specific methods of somatic improvement” and in “practicing such care through intelligently disciplined body work aimed at somatic self-improvement,” that is, “concerned not with saying but with *doing*” (Shusterman, 2000, pp. 272, 276). Based on my own experience as a musician and indeed as a drummer, after almost three decades I can still exactly remember the very first lesson I attended with my teacher, a very well-trained professional drummer named Enzo Augello, who (to my surprise and partial disappointment, as a teenager who unrealistically expected to be able to play like John Bonham or Stewart Copeland after one or two drum lessons!), before even teaching me how to play a single-stroke roll or how to alternate hi-hat, bass drum and snare drum in very a simple 4/4 rhythm, devoted almost three hours to teaching me how to sit on the stool, how to correctly place my body in front of the drum kit, how to correctly hold the drumsticks, at which height I should correctly place the cymbals on the basis of the dimensions of my body, and so on. This is exactly what a good music teacher will immediately pay attention to with their pupils from the very first lesson: purely somatic teaching, in a sense, before even hitting the snare drum or the floor tom for the first time with the drumsticks. This is exactly what proved to be essential, in my modest experience as an amateur and non-professional drummer, in order to prevent the bodily problems that can otherwise occur in such a physically demanding activity as playing drums (inflammations, muscular spasms, tendinitis, etc.) and that can even evolve into more serious problems concerning one’s somaesthetic feelings with music. As observed by Shusterman,

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24 As noted by Bruford, improvisation, as a partially or totally “instant composition” with a particularly important role assigned to the performer in comparison to the composer, has also been subject for decades to negative prejudices and devaluation (Bruford, 2018, pp. 9–13).

*...the body deserves humanistic study to improve its use in the various artistic and scholarly pursuits that it underlies and serves. Musicians, actors, dancers, and other artists can perform better and longer with less attendant pain and fatigue when they learn the proper somatic comportment for their arts, how to handle their instruments and themselves so as to avoid unwanted, unnecessary muscle contractions that result from unreflective habits of effort, detract from efficiency and ease of movement, and ultimately generate pain and disability. A famous case in point concerns the somatic theorist-therapist F. M. Alexander, who first developed his acclaimed technique to address his own problems of hoarseness and loss of voice in theatrical acting that were generated by faulty positioning of his head and neck. Such learning of intelligent somatic self-use is not a matter of blind drill in mechanical techniques but requires a careful cultivation of somatic awareness (Shusterman, 2006, p. 10; my emphasis).*

I would thus like to conclude with another example taken from modern jazz drumming, and indeed a prominent and famous one, namely Roy Haynes. I consider Hayne's example as a good and indeed fitting one to make reference to because it proves useful to exemplify and, as it were, to embody the interest of somaesthetics in a vast plurality of different aesthetic practices and experiences not only from a purely theoretical point of view but also from a practical one, including their potential health benefits and help in improving the use of our body and our general well-being. As a matter of fact, Haynes, who is now 94 years old and can be proud of an outstanding 70 year long career that has led him to collaborate as drummer and group leader with (among others) Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, Sonny Rollins, Thelonious Monk, Stan Getz, Miles Davis, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, Chick Corea and Michel Petrucciani, still continues to perform worldwide and to generously delight audiences from all over the world with his expressive, inimitable style ("Snap Crackle" was a nickname given him in the 1950s).<sup>25</sup>

The example of Haynes can be compared to many other analogous cases of extraordinarily healthy old musicians in jazz but also in other genres from classical music to heavy metal, but at the same time he definitely stands out because of his uncommon age, his still-excellent level of musical skills at 94 and the particularly demanding physical effort required by his instrument. What this example shows is that, if viewed from a certain perspective, some forms of musical practice can perhaps also be included in the list of the "pragmatic disciplines [...] recommended to improve our experience and use of the body" that pragmatic/practical somaesthetics is interested in, such as "diverse diets, body piercing and scarification, forms of dance and martial arts, yoga, massage, aerobics, bodybuilding, various erotic arts [...], and such modern psychosomatic therapies as the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Bioenergetics, Roling, etc." (Shusterman, 2000, p. 272). The somehow unique example of a musician like Roy Haynes shows how, in a pragmatist melioristic spirit, the continual, repeated, well-balanced and adequate practice of jazz can lead to what Shusterman correctly defines as the "learning of intelligent somatic self-use," "careful cultivation of somatic awareness" and "improved use of the body:" jazz drumming as a form of somaesthetic knowledge comparable to yoga meditation and practice, in a way.

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<sup>25</sup> "Haynes extracted the rhythmic qualities from melodies and created unique new drum and cymbal patterns in an idiosyncratic, now instantly recognizable style. Rather than using cymbals strictly for effect, Haynes brought them to the forefront of his unique rhythmic approach. He also established a distinctively crisp and rapid-fire sound on the snare; this was the inspiration for his nickname, 'Snap Crackle'" (Roy Haynes, n.d.).

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