Defending the "Improvisation as Conversation" Model of Improvised Musical Performance

It was in the 1990s that the metaphor commonly employed to explain and understand improvisation in jazz, "improvisation as conversation" came into prominence. In 2015 however, Wilson and MacDonald, from the perspective of music psychology, argued that this widespread model for understanding improvisation via language metaphors was inadequate to explain improvisation in music, broadly construed. While I agree with Wilson and MacDonald that there are flaws in the "improvisation as conversation" model, I also believe this model offers benefits and insights worth preserving. Thus, rather do away with the model, in this paper I defend a conversational understanding of improvisation by re-thinking the idea of language and conversation that underpins the model. Instead of deploying a "rule-based" understanding of language, in this article I explore how understanding language as "conversation," such as explicated in the philosophies of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Donald Davidson, might effectively address some of the challenges presented by Wilson and MacDonald.

Introduction

It was in the 1990s that the metaphor commonly employed to theorise about improvisation in jazz, "improvisation as conversation" came into prominence, notably through the work of Paul F. Berliner, Ingrid Monson, and Keith Sawyer.[1] These models, which argue that jazz musicians are able to improvise with one another by virtue of having learned a shared musical "vocabulary" of musical components and a "grammar" of how those components should be put together, remain popular. While Monson's

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[1] Paul F. Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997; Keith Sawyer, "Music and conversation," in *Musical communication*, eds. Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves, 45-60. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

model, for instance, bears fruit within the specific context that she employs it, the "improvisation as conversation" model has since been taken out of its original context and widely deployed as a means to understand improvisation in music more broadly. This is problematic, for Wilson and MacDonald note that despite its widespread application, the model itself is inadequate to explain improvisation beyond the specific context in which it was originally employed. The model is inappropriate to understand musical improvisation, broadly construed, for its reliance upon a "rule-based" understanding of language and conversation.

The problem with a rule-based model, according to Wilson and MacDonald, is that musicians, both amateur and professional, demonstrably improvise with other musicians from vastly different musical backgrounds and with musicians with varying degrees of musical proficiency. This calls into question the assertion that musicians can improvise together because of their shared understanding of musical "language." If this were the case, just as we would fail to meaningfully converse with someone speaking a foreign language, so too would musicians be unable to improvise with other musicians who do not share a common language. This leads Wilson and MacDonald to argue that "a rule-based language learning model of musical improvisation may be inadequate to explain [musical improvisation]."[2] In agreeance with this viewpoint, the inquiry that follows rethinks the "rule-based" model of "improvisation as conversation" and presents a model of improvisation that draws from a *conversational* (rather than rule-based) understanding of language, such as is in evidence in the philosophies of both Davidson and Gadamer.

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[2] Wilson and MacDonald, "The sign of silence," 559.

Wilson and MacDonald appeal to discursive psychology as a means to uncover what is at issue in improvised musical performance, broadly construed, with interesting and insightful results. In contrast to this approach, below I inquire into the basic structure of conversation – a structure outlined by both Davidson and Gadamer, who, each in their own way, argue against understanding language as being based on syntactic or semantic rules and instead present an understanding of language as being social or conversational – and highlight the way in which this structure is at issue in improvised musical performance. While this approach differs from Wilson and MacDonald's and challenges certain aspects of their account, it may not necessarily be viewed as oppositional. Instead, in this paper I take up a question uncovered by Wilson and MacDonald and by taking a philosophical approach, offer a different, yet ultimately complementary, perspective.

I am interested in pursuing the relationship between conversation and improvised musical performance for two primary reasons. Firstly, the model, "improvisation as conversation" offers valuable insight into the practice of improvising music – it provides an effective and insightful "way in" to understand improvisatory practice. Secondly, and more importantly, the idea of conversation in Gadamer's work, and what appears in Davidson's work in terms of "triangulation," refers to a certain ontological structure comprising subject, object (or subject matter), and other – it is this basic *structure* of conversation that I suggest should underpin any discussion of "improvisation as conversation." Moreover, both Gadamer and Davidson argue against a "rule-based" understanding of language and instead present an understanding of language as being social or conversational. This is not to suggest that rules do not figure

in one's conversational deployment of language, instead they argue that language is not *reducible* to a shared system of syntactic and semantic rules that exist prior to the linguistic encounter;[3] a position also to be found in the later Wittgenstein. It is on the basis of this understanding of language and conversation that we can maintain the model of "improvisation as conversation," without encountering the pitfalls of a rule-based model identified by Wilson and MacDonald.

It is important to note how the interrogation of conversation at issue here differs from that which is in evidence in Wilson and MacDonald's work. Indeed, it would seem that Wilson and MacDonald's aversion to the conversation model stems from taking the idea of conversation at face value. For instance, they express concern with way in which interlocutors in verbal dialogue "take turns" in the sense of question and answer.[4] They suggest that while interlocuters can only effectively communicate by taking turns, i.e., only one person can contribute at a time, musicians face no such restrictions. Indeed in most instances of collective improvisation we expect that musicians will contribute at the same time, rather than take turns. While there is a certain validity to such an observation, I am less interested in how conversation plays out in particular instances of conversation and instead, like Gadamer, am concerned with the structure that underpins

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[3] Jeff Malpas, "What is Common to All: Davidson on Agreement and Understanding," in *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 259.

[4] Graeme B. Wilson and Raymond A. R. MacDonald, "Musical choices during group free improvisation: A qualitative psychological investigation," *Psychology of Music* 44, no. 5 (2015): 1029-2043, DOI: 10.1177/0305735615606527.

each and every instance of conversation. When one attends to those underlying

structures, one realises that the nature of "taking turns" in verbal conversation is of

peripheral concern. As Gadamer demonstrates, one can speak of a genuine hermeneutic

conversation (one can genuinely converse with a text, for instance), or, as is my focus

here, a music-improvisational conversation, without recourse to metaphor. The same

basic structures are literally at issue.

Thus, one of the outcomes of the position I am suggesting is that the "improvisation as

conversation" model is not merely metaphorical. One might challenge such a position

by arguing that such an understanding of improvisation undermines the novelty of

artistic performance, for in effect, it renders human engagement in the world more

generally as conversational, and therefore improvisational. While I cannot address this

position in any detail here, suffice to say that this is an outcome I both accept and

endorse. It is the basic structure of improvisation that is my concern, a structure at stake

in myriad activities, rather than the particular manifestation of that structure in a

particular practice. Thus, while there is a sense of novelty in jazz improvisation that is,

for the most part, absent in verbal conversation, this need not rule out the idea that they

are both underpinned by the same basic structure. In this sense, too, the account below

may be said to highlight the way in which the accounts of human engagement in the

world given by Gadamer and Davidson are themselves present in improvised musical

performance.[5] Thus, the following discussion offers both an understanding of

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[5] While Davidson's account may be first and foremost considered epistemological rather than

ontological, it errs strongly toward the ontological and as Malpas highlights, is consistent

with Gadamer's ontological concerns. See, Malpas, "What is Common to All."

improvised musical performance as essentially conversational, and provides insight into the way in which certain ontological structures identified by Gadamer and Davidson are at work in improvised musical performance.

To present my argument, this paper will proceed as follows: I will begin by providing a brief overview of musical improvisation, as I understand it, to provide the relevant context for the ensuing discussion. I then move on to discuss the structure at issue in Davidson's notion of "triangulation" and Gadamer's idea of "conversation" – if we agree with Davidson and Gadamer (as I do), it is this basic structure that underpins not only Davidson's worldview and Gadamer's hermeneutics, but also improvised musical performance. Next I will consider the dynamic understanding of language and conversation presented by Davidson and Gadamer, which will lead me to consider what a conversational account of language is. It is this understanding of language that I suggest should underpin the "improvisation as conversation" model of improvised musical performance. I then discuss the nature of interaction at issue in improvised musical performance with respect to Gadamer's idea of play (*Spiel*) and by recourse to a musical example, before offering some concluding remarks.

A Brief Characterisation of Musical Improvisation

I cannot, here, present a detailed account of what musical improvisation is – to do so would require more space than is available. I do, however, want to provide an appropriate background on which to develop a conversational account of improvised musical performance. I take improvisation in music (my focus here is musical performance such that occurs in jazz and free improvisation) to be an interpretive activity where players attend and respond to the work. The idea of "work," here, it

should be noted, perhaps goes beyond what we might typically think of as a "work" in terms of something supposedly complete or clearly defined. The "work," as I am referring to it, is better conceived in terms of "a common matter of concern." There is no singular thing toward which players may be said to concern themselves – they attend to the work in a broad sense, but they may also attend to individual sounds, the movements and gestures of the other players, and so forth. The "work," then, refers to those elements beyond the player that contribute to the way in which the work is "worked out," if you will. The "work" is always the "happening of the work," or, better, "the happening of the *event*." That is, the work is not merely its representation in a score, for instance, but is that which one encounters in concrete experience.

Players attend and respond to those common matters of concern by virtue of their "prejudice." The idea of "prejudice" at issue here should be understood positively in line with Gadamer's understanding of the term, an understanding that predates French and English Enlightenment.[6] Conceived as such, one's prejudices do not distort or blind them from the truth so much as they "constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience."[7] That is, it is because of, not in spite of, the musician's prejudice that they become curious about and work to develop certain skillsets and not others. Moreover, despite the abundance of phenomena that may constitute a "matter of concern" present during improvised musical performance, it is largely the prejudice of

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[6] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge, 3-17, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

[7] Ibid., 9.

the player that directs them to engage with certain aspects of the improvisational situation at the expense of others.

Players are not so much responding to *one another* as they are each responding to the work that exists *between* them. That is, what improvising musicians engage with and respond to – the work – is external the player(s), i.e., the work is a distinct entity and is not merely reducible to the subjectivity of the musicians. There is a circularity of sorts, a to-and-fro, between player and work. Just as subject matter of verbal conversation cannot be wholly attributed to either interlocuter, but emerges *between* them, and thus interlocutors primarily attend to a certain subject matter as opposed to one another directly, so too does the musical work exist *between*, that is, externally to, the players and constitute that toward which players orient themselves. One's engagement with the work, which in each case will be different, is always a being placed in a certain improvisatory situation, in relation to a particular work. For example, consider the same ensemble playing the same tune on two separate occasions. Each "occasion" is a distinct improvisatory situation and the work emerges from and is particular to *that* situation.

Characterised in this way, improvisation is a mode of action available to musicians of any discipline and skill level – it is quite simply the act of attending and responding to the work (although, as any improvising musician knows, one should not underestimate how challenging such an activity can be!). Thus, we can understand improvisation in this way regardless of one's background, discipline, and even ensemble size; solo performers attend and respond to the work just as much as participants of a large collective do. This is the basic understanding of improvisation that I would like to begin with in order to (re)assert that improvisation is essentially conversational in nature. To

be clear, I am interested in the *activity* of improvisation as such; in this paper I am not interested in judging the quality or outcomes of the improvisatory process.

A Tripartite Structure

The structure I contend is central to improvised musical performance is a tripartite structure evident in the work of both Davidson and Gadamer. Davidson discusses three varieties of knowledge related to self, other, and world, and outlines three basic problems of the mind: "how a mind can know the world of nature, how it is possible for one mind to know another, and how it is possible to know the contents of our own minds without resort to observation or evidence."[8] For ease of discussion these might be simplified to: objectivity, other-subjectivity, and subjectivity. Davidson argues "it is a mistake … to suppose that these questions can be collapsed into two, or taken in isolation."[9] It is Davidson's conviction that the very basis of knowledge demands their essential irreducibility and interconnectedness.

As one learns from Gadamer, understanding is always already structured by one's historical situatedness and thus understanding always involves at least some awareness of other views. This other-subjective view – one's (at least partial) awareness of the thoughts of others – is not, however, the foundation upon which understanding occurs. Rather, this other-subjective view emerges on the basis that self and other both exist in a

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[8] Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," in *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 30*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 155.

[9] Ibid., 155.

shared world and experience the same things and subject matters in that world. One can only converse with another about a particular object insofar as both interlocutors can identify that object as such, and that each person knows the other person is referring to the same object that they are. Davidson refers to this tripartite structure in terms of "triangulation" and it appears in Gadamer's work with respect to his model of "conversation," where the agent (subjective) directs their attention toward a subject matter (objective) and converses with another on the basis that they both understand their interlocutor is also directing their attention toward the same subject matter (other-subjectivity).

As noted, this same structure is present in improvised musical performance. There is always something beyond the individual player – a common matter of concern – toward which they orient themselves. Their acting is always toward and in virtue of this common matter of concern, typically thought of as the "work." When one performs with others in collaboration there is at least an implicit understanding that the other ensemble member(s) is/are equally concerned with the same set of circumstances. The actions of the other are only meaningful or intelligible insofar as each party understands that the other is attending to the same work that they are. The intersubjective relationship between players only emerges on the basis of this tripartite structure, despite the broader structure itself rarely being acknowledged. That is, an intersubjective relationship only makes sense on the basis that there is equally a subject-object or player-work relationship, where the work that players attend and respond to possesses and retains its own authority, and yet, like the players, is not independent of the happening of the event.

This tripartite structure equally exists in solo performance. The very intelligibility of the performance – such that it can be apprehended and appreciated as music – depends upon such a structure. Wittgenstein hints to the reason why this is the case in his rejection of the idea of a "private language."[10] It is only on the basis that someone else knows the language one speaks that one's propositions bear any real meaning. Equally, it is only on the basis that someone else understands the musical practice of the solo performer – the solo performer's conversation with the work – that their performance is intelligible. The solo performer presupposes that someone else (the other) will be able to identify their performance as musical and intelligible on the basis of being musical. As Gadamer writes, "artistic presentation, by its nature, exists for someone, even if there is no one there who merely listens or watches."[11]

Any attempt to understand what is at issue in improvised musical performance by appealing to only one or two elements of this three-fold structure, or by attempting to hold those elements apart, unquestionably obscures part of what is at issue. Indeed, Davidson writes that these three elements form a tripod: "if any leg were lost, no part would stand."[12] While the subjective and the intersubjective relationship have been explored in great detail in the literature, albeit largely in isolation, what I am particularly interested in drawing out is the role of the "work" in this structure. What is at issue here is the way in which *what comes out* of the improvisational event is not

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[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2009.

[11] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 114.

[12] Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," 166.

reducible to the intentionality or purposiveness of the players, nor only to what the player contributes. The performance is not meaningful solely based upon supposed meaning given to it by the players. The player does not stand apart from the work, creating it absolutely as if they are the sole arbiters of truth, but is rather "called" by the work to respond, a result of being an interconnected part of the tripartite structure at issue. In their conversational attending and responding to the work, the work draws out, as it were, certain responses from the players. Work and player are inseparable and mutually irreducible.

Language as Conversation

Both Davidson and Gadamer suggest, each in their own way, that understanding is always tied to the situation or encounter. One arrives at understanding, to use Davidson's terminology, by virtue of "passing theories," as opposed to "prior theories." For Davidson, prior theories refer a shared system of understanding "governed by learned conventions or regularities,"[13] which is indicative of the account of conversation given by Monson with respect to jazz improvisation. Passing theories, on the other hand, are those *geared to the occasion*, where interpreters derive information from the situation as it emerges, and they spontaneously adjust their theories of understanding in light of the evidence presented – a distinctly improvisatory process.

Davidson argues we employ certain "theories" of interpretation in order to understand regardless of whether or not we are aware of those theories. He writes,

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[13] Davidson, *Truth, Language and History*, 254.

An interpreter has, at any moment of a speech transaction, what I persist in

calling a theory. … I assume that the interpreter's theory has been adjusted

to the evidence so far available to him: knowledge of the character, dress,

role, sex, of the speaker, and whatever else has been gained by observing the

speaker's behaviour, linguistic or otherwise. As the speaker speaks his piece

the interpreter alters his theory, entering hypotheses about new names,

altering the interpretation of familiar predicates, and revising past

interpretations of particular utterances in the light of new evidence.[14]

Davidson suggests that one does not know what theory of understanding one must use

to interpret particular phrases until those phrases are encountered. This is an example of

"triangulation" at work: one's understanding is tied to both the speaker and the subject

matter that is of common concern. By attending to the subject matter toward which both

parties are oriented the interpreter is able to "triangulate" an interpretation. This is a

necessarily spontaneous, dynamic, and active process riddled with indeterminacy

comparable to improvising music. Davidsonian, no less than Gadamerian, conversation

is inherently improvisational.

To highlight a flaw in rules-based understandings of language, Davidson uses the

example of malapropisms, for "malapropisms," he writes, "introduce expression not

covered by prior learning."[15] What is of note is how we are often able to interpret and

understand expressions that include malapropisms. Further, Davidson examines how

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[14] Ibid., 100.

[15] Ibid., 255.

one can interpret "words [one has] never heard before, to correct slips of the tongue, or cope with new idiolects."[16] He provides the following example:

> Mrs Malaprop's theory, prior and passing, is that "A nice derangement of epitaphs" means a nice arrangement of epithets. An interpreter who, as we say, knows English, but does not know the verbal habits of Mrs Malaprop, has a prior theory according to which "A nice derangement of epitaphs" means a nice derangement of epitaphs; but his passing theory agrees with that of Mrs Malaprop if he understands her words.[17]

It is the passing theory that allows the interpreter to understand Mrs Malaprop. If one adheres only to a prior theory, they understand the *words* Mrs Malaprop speaks, but misses what she is *trying to say*. Davidson provides a great variety of examples of simple and everyday malapropisms that people "get away with" in everyday communication, where neither speaker nor interpreter notice the malaprop, yet understanding has not been impeded. Davidson elucidates how even if we are not aware of it, we routinely rely on passing theories in everyday communication.

Of course, Davidson acknowledges that one's prior understanding of language is important, but only insofar as it allows the interpreter to arrive at a passing theory. A similar position is held by Gadamer, where language is understood as conversation, i.e., language is not predetermined but emerges in its application. For both Davidson and Gadamer, language and understanding can never be reduced to pre-established rules, i.e., what Davidson refers to as "prior theories." Similarly, in improvised musical

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[16] Ibid., 255.

[17] Ibid., 262.

performance, prior understanding of music is certainly important, but only insofar as it affords a foundation to offer meaningful responses to that which is encountered during performance. When players encounter the work in performance they do not attempt to rethink or remember the appropriate action that is known to correlate with the work; that is, they do not cohere to pre-given rules or meanings. Instead, the actions of the musician are determined *by the work* as the player encounters it and converses with it *there* in the happening of the event. Thus, the conversational model of improvised musical performance I propose is dependent on the musical equivalent of "passing theories," rather than being derived from a rule-based model of language and conversation.

When speaking of the work toward which players orient themselves it is important to be clear about what it is players attend and respond to. Engaging with the work, players rarely experience "bare" intervals and rhythms, for example. Of course, jazz musicians, for instance, may perceive shifts in tonality – they may hear the cycle of fourths, or notice a harmonic shift up or down a semitone – or, perhaps players are momentarily startled by an unexpected rimshot from the drummer. But this is captured in the broader structure of the *work*, which, the reader will recall, is best characterised as a common matter of concern – a constellation of phenomena "playing out" in the happening of performance. Players rarely hear just intervals and rhythms. Rather they perceive these things in a particular context; the difference between playing the same notes staccato or legato, clean or with distortion, is significant, just as the same words take on a different meaning when yelled or whispered, spoken matter of fact or sarcastically. Moreover, it is the situation itself that gives meaning to what is encountered. Distortion guitar has a different emphasis in jazz than it does in heavy metal, for instance, just as two people

yelling at the top of their voices while sailing in strong winds is not the same as two

people yelling in the quiet carriage of a train. As Ihde writes of listening to speech,

"when I listen to an other I hear him speaking. It is not a series of phonemes or

morphemes which I hear, because to 'hear' these I must break up his speech, I must

listen 'away' from what he is saying."[18] What one attends to during a conversation is,

for the most part, what the other person is saying. This is consistent with the way

musicians converse with the work.

A player's actions cannot be wholly attributed to any prior theory of action or

interpretation any more than the outcomes of a conversation can be wholly attributed to

prior theories of language. Players need not share common prior theories of

interpretation or action – music is *not* a universal language as is sometimes claimed, at

least not if language refers to sharing a system of syntactic and semantic rules. Indeed,

Davidson goes so far as to say "there is no such thing as language,"[19] if by "language"

one refers to a rule-based understanding of language. Just as language is inherently

indeterminate and understanding arises only the basis of conversation (Gadamer) or

triangulation (Davidson), so too is improvised musical performance inherently

indeterminate and conversational. While players possess prior understanding of music,

their meaningful engagement with the work arises in virtue of passing theories that are

particular to the singular performance. Players converse with the work by attending and

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[18] Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd ed. (Albany: State University
   of New York Press, 2007), 151.

[19] Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," 107.

responding to the possibilities offered by the work itself, which will be highlighted with a musical example, below.

The Play of Improvisation

To conceptualise the way in which the conversation of improvised musical performance always goes beyond the subjectivities of the players we can appeal to the concept of *Spiel* as it appears in Gadamer's work. The idea of *Spiel*, as Gadamer employs it, is used to describe aesthetic experience.[20] While Gadamer does not predominately employ the concept with respect to creating art, focussing more on experiencing art, his thinking on this topic is nonetheless insightful. It is important to note that the German word *Spiel* can be translated as either "play" or "game," and in many ways they should be thought together. What is important for Gadamer is the way in which, for those who play, as in playing a game, play contains "its own, even sacred, seriousness."[21] Even a game that from the outside may seem inconsequential, such as children playing with a ball, bears within it this seriousness. Indeed, while players may know that what they are engaged in is "only a game," it is precisely the inherent seriousness of play that draws them into play; Gadamer notes, "someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport."[22]

But Gadamer's concern is less the players and more the concept of "play" itself. Considering the actions of the player leads to the subjectivity of the player, the concept of play itself on the other hand implicates the player while also indicating the way in

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[20] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 106-134.

[21] Ibid., 107.

[22] Ibid., 107.

which play goes beyond the purposiveness and subjectivity of the individual. What is important with respect to improvised musical performance is Gadamer's assertion that "the mode of being of play does not allow the player to behave toward play as if toward an object."[23] A great deal of scholarship on improvised musical performance, particularly that which separates players from the work, presents improvisation as an activity where performers engage with objects. Performers are presented as autonomously and selectively engaging with "x" idea here and "y" idea there, as if the performance itself were a collection of divisible objects toward which players subjectively direct their purposiveness. Gadamer suggests we have become so accustomed to understanding activities such as the playing of games from the perspective of subjectivity that we "remain closed" to the idea that "the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who, among other activities, also plays but is instead the play itself."[24] It is from this perspective I contend we should approach the conversation of improvised musical performance; not from the subjectivities of the performers, but from the play of improvisation itself.

Much in the same way that Gadamer contends interlocutors attend not to one another directly but to the subject matter that exists between them, players do not primarily attend to one another but rather they attend to the work – the common matter of concern. The work does not exist solely in the minds of the players but materially exists as that toward which players comport themselves and attend to; it is the work that offers certain possibilities to players and calls for action. Take the song "Stagger" from Julien

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[23] Ibid., 107.

[24] Ibid., 108.

Wilson and Stephen Magnusson's album *Kaleidoscopic*,[25] as a musical example. Immediately, when the track begins, one is greeted with a particular sense of rhythmic fluidity; ensemble members push and pull against one another, creating what one reviewer equates with "a drunk's night out."[26] This rhythmic "looseness" establishes a context not only for that which is pre-composed, but also for the broader ensuing performance. In many ways, it is this sense of rhythmic "drunkenness," if you will, that broadly characterises the track. In this way, it is both the rhythm and the pre-composed material that might be considered an underlying "subject matter" that underpins the broader conversation.

As the work increasingly becomes more established as a work the possibilities for action become both narrower and increasingly demanding such that, as Benson notes, "what was the play of experimentation starts to become more 'stable' as a structure," for instance, "a piece of stone moves from being a square block to an increasingly defined shape."[27] Or, as can be seen particularly clearly with respect to free improvisation, players work toward bringing what were at first merely traces of a structure into fuller being until it is fully formed as a work. The work itself cannot come forth without the

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[25] Julien Wilson and Stephen Magnusson, *Kaleidoscopic* (online recording, September 17, 2019), https://julienwilson.bandcamp.com/album/kaleidoscopic.

[26] Wilson and Magnusson, *Kaleidoscopic*.

[27] Bruce Ellis Benson, "In the Beginning, There Was Improvisation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies.* Vol. 2, edited by George E. Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 159, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199892921.013.004.

players, but neither can the players "play" – improvise – without attending and responding to the work itself.

One notices the way in which the work exists *between* players when, on the track "Stagger," mentioned above, having stated the pre-composed melody, the improvisation proper begins. For example, Magnusson (guitar) is the player at the forefront of the improvisation, at least in its early stages. Clearly, as we hear from the continuous nature of his contributions, he has little interest in "taking turns" with other players in the sense of an intersubjective call and response. Yet we do get the sense that there is a call and response between each player and work. Notice for example at approximately 2'09" pianist Barney McAll interjects with a low frequency contribution that contrasts the high frequency contributions of Magnusson. The fleeting contribution from McAll – it lasts only two or three seconds – offers a welcome contrast in the broader context of the work. One may say that McAll is not so much responding to Magnusson, nor Magnusson to McAll, but, consistent with the tripartite structure discussed above, they are both responding to the demands of the work that exist *between* them. McAll's contribution is what the *work* called for – he attends to the work as it emerges using a "passing theory" and he is drawn to respond – he is "played by" the work.

Conclusion

In this paper I have defended the "improvisation as conversation" model as a means of understanding and explaining improvised musical performance. Commonly, however, this model of improvisation has relied upon a rule-based understanding of language, where, it has been suggested, musicians are able to meaningfully improvise with one another because they understand and share the same musical "grammar" and "syntax."

While this model somewhat lends itself to understanding interaction within a particular genre or even a long-standing ensemble, as Wilson and MacDonald indicate, the model is not appropriate for understanding musical improvisation more broadly. In agreement with Wilson and MacDonald, I believe the rule-based language model of understanding musical improvisation is inadequate.

I suggested that rather than understand conversation and language as being rule-based and reliant on rules or "prior theories," a more accurate way to understand language and conversation is through what Davidson refers to as "passing theories," where interlocuters adjust their understanding of the situation as it presents itself by virtue of their prejudice. This "dynamic," or, better, "improvisational" understanding of language seems to me to be a much more appropriate foundation on which to ground the "improvisation as conversation" model of improvised musical performance. For this explains both the call and response that is characteristic of musical improvisation but also why musicians with different skillsets and from different backgrounds are capable of meaningfully improvising together. Further, despite my (and Wilson and MacDonald's) assertion that the metaphor, as it was employed during the 90s onwards, is grounded on an inappropriate foundation, as Berliner, Monson, and Sawyer have already demonstrated, the metaphor provides unrivalled insight into the process of improvisation in jazz. Thus, I contend that we should uphold the "improvisation as conversation" model as a means to explain and understand musical improvisation, so long as it is coupled with a *conversational* understanding of language.