

## The Horizontal Field of Improvised Musical Performance

### Abstract

When we think of improvised musical performance, we commonly think of musicians engaged in an activity that brings forth a musical event of some kind. This activity is both situated and situating – it occurs in a particular locale and the event itself situates the players who are literally located *within* that event. This paper explores how we might understand the spatio-temporal field in which improvising musicians are situated when they perform. To present an understanding of what I refer to as the ‘horizontal field’ of improvised musical performance requires understanding the nature of listening and hearing, the materiality of sound, and the spatio-temporal qualities of the auditory event itself. Considering each of these topics, this paper presents the ‘horizontal field’ of improvised musical performance as a particular region bounded by silence.

### Introduction

The following quotes are two (non-successive) lines from one of Pauline Oliveros’ deep listening meditations: Egypt (1999):

‘Sounds are coming and going and yet creating a field of sound;’

‘As you listen, the environment is enlivened. This is the listening effect.’<sup>1</sup>

What we notice when we consider these lines from Oliveros’ work, is an understanding of the relationship between subject and space. For Oliveros, it seems listening is a mode of attunement, listening is about being aware one’s orientation in space and the sounds that are operating in that space.

Oliveros’s ‘deep listening’ practice is increasingly finding its way into discourses on music education, as we notice in Campbell’s advocacy of Oliveros’ practice with respect to education: ‘music educators may accept and even proclaim the merits of careful listening, but without focused attention on approaches to deep-listening experiences, the musical ears and minds of their students may never fully develop past their surround-sound selves.’<sup>2</sup> Further, Gershon writes, ‘educators could learn a great deal from engaging Oliveros’ deep listening practices.’<sup>3</sup> That Oliveros’ deep listening is finding its way into music education is both interesting and relevant for the emphasis it places on a consideration of spatiality with respect to music, because the dominant mode of theorising improvised musical performance, such that Oliveros is known for, is to consider them from an almost exclusively temporal perspective.

Indeed, there is a prevalence to consider music as the temporal art *par excellence*. In contemporary music scholarship we commonly find statements such as: ‘Music is a temporal art which, unlike the visual arts, exists by necessity in time;’<sup>4</sup> ‘Music unfolds in time; in other words, one thing happens after another;’<sup>5</sup> and, ‘when it comes to understanding music performance as a social interaction, it is more important how we *create* time together.’<sup>6</sup> We notice a preoccupation with temporality at the expense of any detailed or rigorous account of place and space. And while in recent years there have been a proliferation of texts on the topic of music and space/place from an ethnographic perspective, rarely are the topics of space and place taken up at a conceptual or ontological level, such that can be found with respect to music and temporality. Yet we notice, particularly with respect to the work of Oliveros, a distinct correlation between music, space and place, ideas no less important than temporality

(which is not to suggest that Oliveros was ignorant to the temporal implications of music and listening).

The temporo-centrism that dominates music and performance scholarship is not exclusive to such fields. Malpas writes,

There is a longstanding history that gives priority to time over space, and that remain within contemporary thinking in spite of the apparent reduction of time to a single mode of dimensionality within contemporary physics... Within the Western philosophical tradition, the prioritisation of the temporal is already evident in the work of Christian thinkers such as Plotinus and Augustine. The idea is also a clear element in the German Idealist tradition, perhaps most notably in the work of Friedrich Schelling.<sup>7</sup>

The idea that time should not be considered as separate to space but rather in unity – timespace – is central to Heidegger's later thinking. Indeed, it is in the mid-1930s, in *Contributions to Philosophy*,<sup>8</sup> that Heidegger first presents the idea of 'timespace' (although there are hints toward this idea that appear much earlier).<sup>9</sup> In Heidegger's account, Malpas notes, 'there is no temporality that does not bring spatiality along with it, and no spatiality that does not bring temporality also'.<sup>10</sup> From a Heideggerian perspective, then, any engagement with human experience must necessarily account for timespace; an account largely absent in the current literature on music and improvisation.

In this paper I am interested in the way in which music is a situated or spatial practice just as much as it is a temporal practice. Relegating music to the temporal alone denies us the opportunity to properly understand improvised musical performance; a phenomenon that, as I intend to elucidate, relies on both temporality *and* spatiality. Indeed, the spatiality of performance, insofar as spatiality and temporality relate to our framework of experience, is rarely acknowledged. Thus, it is the spatial character of improvised musical performance that is my focus here. Although, as will become clear, any accurate discussion of the improvisational situation, must necessarily consider both space *and* time. My intention is to highlight the *situated* character of improvisation by considering the way in which performers are literally located *within* the situation.

My intention, in this paper, is to provide an additional basis on which music pedagogy that accounts for the spatial character of music and listening, such that arises in Oliveros' deep listening practice, can be given a stronger ground. While I have suggested that the implications of conceptualising music and performance with respect to spatiality has ramifications music practice and scholarship more broadly, my focus here is improvised musical performance, for this provides a clear case study on which to understand the spatial character of performance. To outline what I shall refer to as 'the horizontal field' of improvised musical performance this paper will progress in the follow manner: first, I will consider the nature of hearing and listening. Because the central argument in this paper is that it is the situation itself, which in our case is a largely auditory phenomenon, that establishes the boundary of improvised musical performance, understanding the ways in which the region within which performers are situated is perceived provides the foundation on which to establish my argument. Second, I consider what type of thing the music event is. That is, I consider the materiality of sound, establishing it as something external to the subject, i.e., sound does not merely exist in the mind of those who perceive it, that musicians can be situated *in*.

The third section, developing on the second, is a working out of how players are *situated within* the horizontal field. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks regarding the nature of the musical event conceived in terms of space and place.

## 1. Hearing and Listening

To uncover the horizontal field of improvised musical performance, we should consider the primary way in which players attend to the event. Which is to ask, via what perceptual faculty does the player attend to the situation? While I do not want to undermine the multimodal nature of perception – musicians inevitably employ a range of senses during performance – for the purposes of elucidating the issue at stake, little will be lost by focussing our attention on auditory perception, the dominant mode of perception employed by performing musicians. Understanding the way in which the player perceives the situation is important for our discussion. This is because we must understand the way in which the player attends to the situation in order to understand the way in which the situation itself comes to situate the player, how the situation comes to be the horizontal field of improvised musical performance.

In his forward to Szendy's *Listen: A History of Our Ears*,<sup>11</sup> Nancy discusses the term '*ascoltando*', which, he writes, 'directs us to play while listening'.<sup>12</sup> He continues, 'while listening to what? – What else but the music that one is playing? ... What is playing, if not listening right through from beginning to end'.<sup>13</sup> It is this idea of listening, captured in the term *ascoltando*, that I too am interested in, as distinct from, yet not entirely different to, the listening undertaken by the spectator of music.<sup>14</sup> To begin our investigation into the nature of hearing and listening during improvisation, we should define these two terms, 'hearing' and 'listening'. On the differentiation and relationship between these two terms I am in agreement with Nancy, who writes,

in all saying (and I mean in all discourse, in the whole chain of meaning) there is hearing, and in hearing itself, at the very bottom of it, a listening. ... If 'to hear' is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.<sup>15</sup>

We notice in Nancy's account an interconnection between hearing and listening. There is always a hearing of *something* – *some-thing* – one hears the *saxophone*, the *guitar*, the *piano*. Or, as it relates to more experimental or abstract music, perhaps one hears 'the *other player*'. This is what Nancy refers to as perceiving the 'rough outline of a situation'. But, within this hearing, there is, or at least can be, a listening – a 'straining toward a possible meaning'.

To speak of 'listening' in the manner discussed above in relation to music one may find similarities between Nancy's conception of 'listening' and Schaeffer's *acousmatic* listening to sonorous objects – a listening to 'bare' sounds. That is, the sound is perceived as a phenomenon in its own right, distinct from its object(s) of generation (an instrument, for example), the medium in or on which it exists (a cassette tape or CD, for example), and the mind of the perceiver.<sup>16</sup> Thus, in *acousmatic* listening sounds are not secondary objects or qualities, but rather ontological particulars. Schaeffer's key contribution, it seems to me, is that he asserts the sonorous object exists externally to both its source and the person who perceives it. And what is more, he asserts that the

mode of listening required to perceive sound in such a way is one that requires a degree of abstraction; one must seek what is not immediately accessible, which is consistent with Nancy's account.

Let us return to Nancy's conception of hearing and listening; hearing as understanding the rough outline of a situation and listening as a straining toward what is not immediately accessible. The topic of listening has become central to much contemporary literature on music, improvisation, and especially sound art. For example, Cox and Warner's *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*,<sup>17</sup> and Caines and Heble's *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*,<sup>18</sup> both feature entire sections dedicated to listening. And as the title suggests, Voegelin's *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*,<sup>19</sup> is focussed entirely on listening. What is largely absent from discussions on improvisation and music more broadly, however, is any significant discussion of the role of hearing; presumably because hearing is considered a more 'basic' form of perceiving sound, whereas listening requires a degree of abstraction – to listen requires practice and is largely considered the realm of musicians and music specialists and enthusiasts. However, following the definitions provided by Nancy, it seems inconceivable that improvising musicians are *only* listening – to varying degrees, they must also be hearing.

Take, for example, the track 'Let's Get 'Em', from Weasel Walter's album *Ominous Telepathic Mayhem*.<sup>20</sup> The track features Walter on percussion and Mary Halvorson on guitar. It is obvious to mention that Walter and Halvorson both *hear* the contributions of the other as generated by their respective instruments, percussion and guitar. But we cannot deny the significance of one's ability to immediately hear the other as such to gain a rough outline of the situation. Musical improvisation necessarily relies one's ability to immediately grasp and contextualise the broader situation as it presents itself, that is, improvisation relies on hearing. At approximately 2:20 on 'Let's Get 'Em', Halvorson begins tremolo picking a D note. She maintains this for almost 15-seconds, until approximately 2:34. Throughout this section, Walter contributes frenetic bursts of percussion, interspersed with silence – his stopping and starting creates a jarring effect against the continuity of Halvorson's tremolo picking. Now, with Halvorson maintaining a consistent role, Walter is at liberty to 'hear' Halvorson, rather than necessarily listen to her (which is not to imply there is nothing to be gained from listening to such contributions, just that, in this instance it appears that hearing takes precedence). For hearing allows him to immediately derive the necessary information – that Halvorson is maintaining a consistent role.

This is not to downplay the significance of listening. The practice of listening abstractly can perhaps be noticed on Rosalind Hall and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang's album, *From my winter snow your summer fire until my autumn rain your spring sunshine*.<sup>21</sup> Let us consider the final track on the album, entitled 'Roots so we can fly'. While hearing provides the immediacy to notice that the other player is either contributing or not, the rapid and stark changes in timbre, texture, and volume demand a particular degree of attentiveness from both players. While there are sections of music where Hall and Hui-Sheng Chang contrast one another, for the most part their performance is one where both players occupy a similar frequency range, creating tense drones of varying timbres, where the pitch is sometimes only microtones apart – one can notice the phasing of frequencies as they interfere with one another. This interplay can be heard

quite clearly from approximately 3:12 until the end. To achieve such an effect requires more than hearing. It is not enough for one player to merely identify the presence of the other's contributions. Rather, once one has gained a sense of the broader situation that is unfolding through hearing, both players must listen with a particular degree of attentiveness to create the desired effect.

Thus, we become aware of the importance of both hearing and listening for the improvising musician. There is necessarily a back and forth between the two during any performance. In some ways, hearing is a given, and perhaps this is why Nancy's *ascoltando* directs the performer to play while listening with no mention of hearing. For while it is expected that, under standard circumstances, one always hears, the same cannot be said for listening, for listening is practiced and intentional. I believe it important, however, to acknowledge the importance and presence of both in improvised musical performance. Despite its 'given-ness', we should not underestimate the importance of hearing – it provides sense and context to one's more attuned listening. Hearing provides a foundation for one's auditory perception during performance.

Further, we should remember that improvising bears little correlation with what may be considered an aesthetically pleasing performance. While we may be inclined to suggest that more experienced improvisers have a better success rate of producing 'good' performances, we cannot not say, at least not by default, that they are improvising any more or less than the inexperienced player whose performance was deemed to be less successful. There may, however, be a considerable difference in one's hearing and listening abilities. Take an auto mechanic for example. An experienced auto mechanic, through practiced listening, may subsequently be able to hear, in the same way we typically hear a car or trumpet, particular difficulties in a car engine. Someone less familiar with the inner workings of cars may have to be directed as to what to listen for, and they may have to strain – listening abstractly – to identify what the auto mechanic, through experience, is subsequently able to identify simply through hearing (the result of a practiced listening).

The significance of listening is twofold. Firstly, by familiarising oneself with the general 'language' of music and by practicing listening, the improviser adds to their arsenal things that, through education and practice, they become able to identify immediately through hearing. Indeed, this is the focus of much aural training in undergraduate music courses – the immediate identification of intervals, chords, rhythms, and so forth. Ihde provides a salient example with regard to language when he writes, 'if I begin to speak to the other in terms of *halyards, sheets, gybing, or bending on a line*, the listener who has not yet heard the "language" of sailing may return a blank, puzzled stare. I have said something to him, but he has not heard in my saying all that is to be heard'.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, hearing has to do with one's broader familiarity with and understanding of what is heard. One may listen abstractly, but they will not comprehend the intended meaning of what is spoken without a base understanding, something that must be acquired through education and practice.

Secondly, practicing listening also trains one to be a better listener, that is, one becomes better at attuning oneself to their environment – one becomes better at, and more comfortable with, listening abstractly. Indeed, this is arguably what Cage sought in his

music and writing around the time of *4'33"* – his work offered ‘lessons’ on how to listen. In *Silence*, Cage writes, ‘all you can/do is/suddenly listen/in the same way/that, when you catch a cold/all you can do is/suddenly/sneeze’.<sup>23</sup> And while Cage, here, discusses listening in a way that bears more similarities with Nancy’s definition of hearing, we can appreciate that works such as *4'33"* may provide a foundation on which to develop a certain type of listening *into* hearing. But more importantly, Cage’s work from this period, along with works from the likes of La Monte Young, Max Neuhaus, R. Murray Schafer, and Pauline Oliveros, offer insights into *how to listen*, a skill that one can draw upon in variable situations. Which, of course, is invaluable to the improvising musician who seeks to find something strange in the familiar; something that piques their interest and draws them into the situation.

It is clear that both hearing and listening are integral to the player’s ability to be attentive and responsive to the situation in which they find themselves. It is the player’s perceptual awareness of the situation – in our case auditory perception; hearing and listening – that affords them the ability to attend to the musical situation. Thus, we notice that auditory perception, for the improvising musician, is not merely important with respect to producing an aesthetically pleasing work. It is also ontologically significant; it provides the player the means to attend to and respond to the emergent work. Further, we notice the significance of both hearing *and* listening. It is not enough to simply hear, for this means the player only ever engages with what is immediately accessible and familiar to them – they become incapable of following the twists and turns of the improvisation as it leads them to particular outcomes. Equally, however, as we noted above, hearing is important for the player to immediately gain a rough outline of the situation, affording them the ability to act with spontaneity. Thus, it is essential to acknowledge that players rely on both hearing *and* listening. What we will establish now, with respect to auditory perception, is how it is that the situation that the player attends to is something that can situate the performer. I will argue that what the player *encounters* – the emergent work – situates the player within a particular ‘horizontal field’ that is both external to the subjectivity of the player and constitutes a particular region that situates the player.

## 2. The Materiality of the Event

The idea that the event exists externally to the players – that it is a *public* event to be perceived by those within a distinct proximity – relies on a certain *sonic realism*. On this topic O’Callaghan writes,

Realism about sounds – *sonic realism* – is the view that the world contains sounds whose existence is not entirely dependent upon the auditory experiences of subjects. ... Sounds are in the world. Sounds are the entities that, in the first instance, we auditorily perceive.<sup>24</sup>

This view holds that sounds are not secondary qualities, they are not merely the auditory properties of objects we see or feel, nor are sounds dependent on our perception of them. Just as we maintain the tree stands in the woods irrespective of whether or not we are there to see it, so too does it make a sound when it falls, irrespective of whether or not we are there to hear it. Sounds are ontological particulars that occur in space and time.

The idea that the emergent work exists between players then, or at least externally to them within a particular proximity is not metaphorical. The event quite literally exists at the performance site and occurs at the time of performance as its own spatio-temporal entity. The event, then, is not a sonic object but something dynamic, something non-repeatable. Considering the sonic event in this way is useful on several counts. Firstly, it is consistent with contemporary theory/philosophy of sound;<sup>25</sup> secondly, it accounts for sound's unique temporal horizon whilst still calling for a consideration of spatiality; and thirdly, it is phenomenologically accurate.

Before we begin our discussion of the event-like nature of the situation in which improvisers find themselves, it is important to mention what this section will not address. I have no intention of describing in any great detail how sounds are generated, the circumstances under which sounds are able to be perceived as such, or how they are located at or near the site of their generation despite the fact that we can often hear sonic events from great distances and across time, such as in the case of echoes. Nor will I discuss recording improvisations and then listening to them after the fact. As it relates to the event-like nature of sound, O'Callaghan addresses each of these topics systematically and in great detail.<sup>26</sup>

### *Temporality and the Material Event*

To begin our discussion of the event's temporal character it is important to understand the terms 'work' and 'event'. What I suggest is that the two, insofar as we are discussing improvised musical performance, are inseparable – the 'event' *is* the 'work'. The 'work', as it relates to improvised musical performance, is that which is created in and *as* the event. Understanding the event in this way brings its temporal character to the fore. The temporality of the work of musical art constitutes its emergence or 'unfolding' over time. It is the temporality of the *encounter* – the listener's encounter with the event. It is in one's durational experience of the event that the temporal character of the work comes forth. Without the event, the work merely refers to an abstract conception of time; the work's listed duration on the liner notes of an album is an example of such an abstract conception. Temporality *as* temporality emerges only when one encounters the durational aspect of the work in concrete experience.

That music and performances in general are so clearly durational has resulted in the temporo-centrism that has dominated much of the conversation around the metaphysics of sound and music. In modern philosophy we notice this preoccupation with the temporal aspects of music in the works of Hegel and Schopenhauer, where music is denied a spatial existence due to its apparent immateriality, its dissipating nature, and consequently, its representation not of external objects (it was the norm at the time to consider art as representing external objects – a painting of a tree, a sculpture of a person, and so forth) but of the 'heart' (Hegel) and 'will' (Schopenhauer).<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to assert that music is independent of the phenomenal world.<sup>28</sup> While nowadays sound and music are more commonly thought to exist as entities in the world, it is not altogether uncommon for philosophers and sound theorists still, to prioritise the temporal over the spatial.

Cox is one such philosopher of the sonic arts to uphold such a preference for understanding sound and music from a predominately temporal perspective. For example, when sound artist Max Neuhaus writes, 'traditionally composers have located

the elements of a composition in time. One idea which I am interested in is locating them, instead, in space, and letting the listener place them in his own time',<sup>29</sup> Cox denies him his intention to locate sound in space. In response to Neuhaus, Cox, drawing from Bergson, writes, 'the time/space distinction is a red herring. The real distinction is between two kinds of time: *pulsed time* (the time of music and meaning) and *non-pulsed time* or *duration* (the time of sound matter itself)'.<sup>30</sup> That space is such an issue here, it would seem, relates to the implications of conceiving of the spatial as exclusively static. Indeed, Bergson's objection to the notion of 'time', as distinct from 'duration', is that it is divisible and therefore spatialised, which, for Bergson, implicates stasis. Time, for Bergson, represents an understanding of the world as a series of static snapshots – divisible units – plotted against the pulsed time of the clock. In contrast, Bergson asserts that 'duration' refers to a primordial conception of temporality where past, present, and future form a genuine continuum; a flow that produces beings and events.<sup>31</sup> It is within this durational continuum that Cox locates sounds.

We notice however, that despite Bergson's assertion that spatiality infers stasis, 'duration' for Bergson and Cox may be considered a conception of temporality that is indeed 'spatialised'; that is, it has a certain depth that affords human experience. Thus, despite Cox's apparent desire to prioritise the temporal over the spatial, his account of duration still assumes the presence of space. On the prioritisation of temporality and/or duration over spatiality, Malpas writes,

One of the problematic features of the prioritisation of temporality alone is ... it prevents any adequate thinking of world – of that prior mode of engagement in which we are already implicated – and in this sense it prevents us from any adequate thinking of *transcendence*, understood as an opening up of that which goes beyond the immediately present or presented (and which is surely at the heart of any creative engagement with the world, whether through thinking, making, or acting).<sup>32</sup>

Malpas suggests that the unity of time and space – timespace – is found in place, which for Malpas, is understood as 'an active opening'.<sup>33</sup> Thus time constitutes the dynamicity of place and space the extendedness of place – they emerge *together* in the happening of place. Indeed, one can only think of time and/or space separately, if they do so abstractly.<sup>34</sup> It is only through the unity of space and time that we can properly understand sound and music, and particularly, as is our focus here, the improvisational performance of music.

What is significant is the way in which accounting for the spatiality of the event draws our thinking about music and performance into the world. As Malpas writes,

One of the problems associated with the prioritisation of temporality is precisely the way in which it seems to be tied to the self and to the internal life of the mind. One of the problematic features of the prioritisation of temporality alone is thus an inevitable tendency towards subjectivism.<sup>35</sup>

By accounting for the spatiality of music and performance, then, we acknowledge the externality of the event, something that is not merely subjective, but a phenomenon that exists in the world that effectively situates the player. The truth of the work of art, as Heidegger outlines in *The Origin of the Work of Art*,<sup>36</sup> is tied to its being in the world. Understanding the musical work in exclusively temporal terms denies us access to such a truth, for it precludes us from properly understanding the way in which the work exists in, and illuminates, the world.<sup>37</sup> Thus, below we consider the spatiality of

improvised musical performance, so that we may begin to understand the way in which it *is* in the world.

### *Spatiality and the Material Event*

As mentioned above, understanding the musical work as an event suggests the work occurs in time, but also in space – an event must occur somewhere and occupy a particular region in space. Thus, the emergent musical work exists in space just as any real entity does. O’Callaghan, challenging the theory that sounds are waves, asserts that ‘sounds ... are located roughly where we hear them to be: at or near their sources’.<sup>38</sup> Thus, when a percussionist strikes a snare drum, the sound itself is located at or near the site of collision between the stick and the drum. Other ensemble members who may not be in immediate proximity to the drum hear the sound by virtue of the sound’s displacement of a medium, in this case the medium is air. O’Callaghan’s argument is that sounds do not travel,<sup>39</sup> but we perceive them at a distance from their sounding by virtue of a medium, i.e., air, water, metal, helium, and so forth. Just as a splash occurs at a particular locality but also creates a ripple effect in the medium (water) that travels outwards, sounds similarly displace the medium, creating what we typically think of as sound waves. Unlike a splash, however, which requires the medium in order to exist, O’Callaghan posits that sounds do occur without the presence of a medium, such as in a vacuum.<sup>40</sup> However, since there is no medium to displace in a vacuum, and therefore no sound waves can be generated for us to auditorily perceive, our perception of sound relies on a medium.

What this means for our understanding of the sonic work is that it is indeed situated in a particular locality and is inherently spatial. In instances where sounds seem to engulf the players and perhaps ‘fill the room’, indicates, according to O’Callaghan, not that sounds lack location, but ‘the sound auditorily appears to occupy some larger portion of the surrounding space or to be “all around”’.<sup>41</sup> In many instances, particularly where amplification is involved, it would seem players might regularly experience the work as literally surrounding them in this way – Cat Hope’s use of several large bass amplifiers during solo electric bass performances being one such example of this. On her personal blog she writes of the experience of performing with such amplification,

it sounds and feels good in front of those things [amplifiers]. It’s warm, they have a smell; at volume they are reactive to the slightest movements you and your instrument will make. There is a part of this process that is the paying of respect at [the] feet of these machines: to their power, their strange delicacy, the fragility of the hot glass [valves], metal filaments and paper cones, the enlivening of our ideas, to their control of the very air we breathe.<sup>42</sup>

Within this immersive and sometimes overwhelming experience, however, players are often able to recognise distinct contributions as coming from particular directions. While the broader work seems to engulf them, they still experience particular sounds – the guitar, the vocalist, the synthesizer, and so forth – as coming from either side, front, or back. Thus, not only are sounds spatial, but they also convey spatial information, such as distance and direction.

During a soundcheck, for example, players may organise (and reorganise) themselves to satisfy their needs with regard to the orientation of the ensemble. It is not uncommon, for example, for particular players to routinely position themselves together – drums and bass in a jazz ensemble is one such common example – so as to achieve an

appropriate spatial and subsequently auditory distance. The player's desire to be 'locked in' or 'tuned in' to one another seems to correlate to their sounds being located within a particular spatial proximity to one another. It would make little sense as to why players would do this, if sounds were not, as O'Callaghan suggests, located near or at their sources.<sup>43</sup>

In opposition to the likes of Hegel and Schopenhauer, then, music does exist in the phenomenal world and occupy space. And in opposition to Cox, I posit that despite music's unique temporal qualities, we should not prioritise music's temporal characteristics over its spatial. Rather, as I suggest in the following section, it is only through the *unity* of space and time that we can properly understand sound and music.

### *The Work and Performance*

We must keep in mind that the work, as it is conceived here, emerges as a result of performance. Thus, while we have so far focussed our attention on the sonic characteristics of the work, we must now situate that thinking within the broader idea of performance. Understanding the work in relation to performance not only attends to the phenomenological significance of the event for improvisation, it also underscores the importance of understanding the work as an event, something that requires both time *and* space.

The work, I have argued, is an event that occurs at a certain time within a particular locality. The work is a constellation of sounds that exist, according to O'Callaghan, at or near where the players perceive them to be.<sup>44</sup> Players experience those sounds via the soundwaves the sounds set in motion by disturbing a medium. As we know, those soundwaves are only perceptible within distinct temporal and spatial parameters. In order to respond to the emergent work and engage with it, players must be situated in such a way as to perceive it – within the right temporal and spatial frame, that is, in the right place.

The spatiality of a performance is created by the event itself, and thus it is a spatiality that is always dynamic. Take for instance Jim Denley's album *Through Fire, Crevice + the Hidden Valley*.<sup>45</sup> Of this album Denley writes,

From the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 2006, I spent 15 days armed with sax, camera, audio recorders, food and a solar recharger in the Budawang Mountains, a wilderness area in the Morton National Park, South West of Nowra on the east coast of Australia. These mountains are full of dramatic and rugged rock formations, caves, crevices and a hidden valley – it's a wonderland of natural acoustics. Presumably people have been making music in these spaces for thousands of years, but it's almost certain sax hasn't been heard there before.<sup>46</sup>

This album presents an interesting case study because, despite it otherwise being considered a 'solo' album, the emergent work that Denley engages with is only partly the result of his own soundings. Indeed, Denley did not simply record himself playing solo in the Budawang Mountains. Rather the recording documents Denley's engagement and interaction with those sounds that were naturally occurring while he was playing his saxophone in that environment. In what we might consider 'standard' performance settings it is not uncommon for natural sounds to be relegated to the background while people focus on the 'music', not unlike how the surrounding architecture and scenery

may be 'backgrounded' when one looks upon Chicago's Picasso sculpture. Denley's improvisations on the other hand, draw these natural or 'scenic' sounds to the fore and they become an active part of the work.

What is interesting for our understanding of the dynamism of the event is that things that generate natural sounds, like animals and wind, move. Thus, unlike a traditional jazz trio comprised of piano, double bass, and drums, for example, where each musician is more or less stationary for the entire performance, meaning that the spatiality of the work is largely altered only with respect to variability in sonic dynamics, for Denley the spatiality of his performances are constantly mutating in quite a radical sense. Sounds may suddenly emerge from behind or above, be loud or soft, and animals, for example, may come and go, significantly altering the spatiality of the event. Further, as sounds intermittently come and go, we are likewise reminded of the temporal characteristics of the situation – the presence of certain sounds is dependent on when Denley's performance occurs. Indeed, in understanding the significance of spatiality and temporality, we notice their inseparability, and more importantly, their emergence in place. Through the somewhat extreme example of Denley's work we come to understand the dynamism of the work, which is also the dynamism of place.

*Through Fire, Crevice + the Hidden Valley* is also an excellent example of the event-like nature of the work. When we think of the work as a constellation of sounds by both nature and musician we come to more readily acknowledge the singularity of the work – it is an event that occurs at a particular time in a particular space that cannot be repeated. More traditional ensemble settings, where the work is more or less exclusively generated by musicians, does not alter this event-like quality. The work is still a distinct entity that exists between or around the players, it can never be repeated exactly as it emerges in that particular event, and it is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, as I have argued, the work is not reducible to either temporality or spatiality alone. Rather, its event-like character demands that we attend to the unity of both time and space – as an event in place.

### **3. The Horizon of the Material Event**

It is in the *event* – the performance of the work within a particular bounded region – that we encounter what Malpas refers to as *transcendence*. What this suggests is that the work is not merely what is immediately present, it is not merely a 'now'. Rather the event emerges in the midst of things and acts as a bounded opening within which things emerge. As entwined with performance, the work emerges in the world in this event-like opening. But as something that emerges in the world, and not merely in *the present*, the work brings forth the world. Malpas writes, 'it is not the transcendence that brings about world transformation, but rather the small flicker of light which suddenly shows us who and what we are, which illuminates what is around us and then dies out'.<sup>47</sup> This is the character of the work as an event. It emerges in the world not as a distinct thing somehow unrelated to everything around it, but in a complex relationship with that which it emerges in the midst of. The work, as an event, gathers space and time around it in the single unity of place.<sup>48</sup> In this sense we cannot think of the work as merely temporal – it is more than a 'now' – but so too is it more than just spatiality – it is more than physical extendedness. The event is dynamic and is better thought of as an opening, within which the work becomes present. The work as event, then, is placed – that is, it is bounded, yet open. To fully appreciate the 'placed' character of the work as

an event, we must come to understand this boundary or horizon that is the opening and emergence of the work itself. It is that which exists *within* that horizon that constitutes the *situation* that players must attend to and be responsive to.

Players experience the work. Whatever the constellation of sounds may be that culminate to be the work – naturally occurring or generated by musicians, for example – by virtue of the work’s work-like character, as opposed to being merely a collection of individual sounds, suggests the player is experiencing the work *as a work*. Thus, players are always *within* the bounded region of the work’s occurrence. While the players do not experience the ‘outside’ of the work, as it were, there is nonetheless a horizon or boundary. This, we may refer to as the *horizon* of the work – the limit as it expands outwards from the centre of the player’s focal awareness. Horizons are easy to conceptualise in visual terms; the horizon constitutes the limit of our vision. Beyond the horizon, nothing is visible. Indeed, that area which lies outside our field of vision is the realm of the invisible, but it also constitutes the boundary within which what we do experience emerges. In auditory terms, what lies beyond the horizon of our hearing is silence, where silence literally refers to that which is inaudible, i.e., the cymbal is inaudible until someone or something strikes it, and something very far away from us is inaudible if the soundwaves created by the sound’s displacement of a medium fail to reach us. The significance of the horizon for our current inquiry can be gleaned from the following statement by Ihde, ‘the horizon situates the field which in turn situates the thing’.<sup>49</sup>

In light of our discussion in the previous section, where I argued that the work is an event-like entity that brings forth the world, acknowledging that the horizon or boundary ‘situates the thing’ brings to the fore the situatedness, or placed character, of improvised musical performance itself. We have begun to uncover the ‘where’ of performance. We can assert that improvised musical performance is located within the horizon of the work, the relative boundary of which is silence, as depicted below in Figure 1.

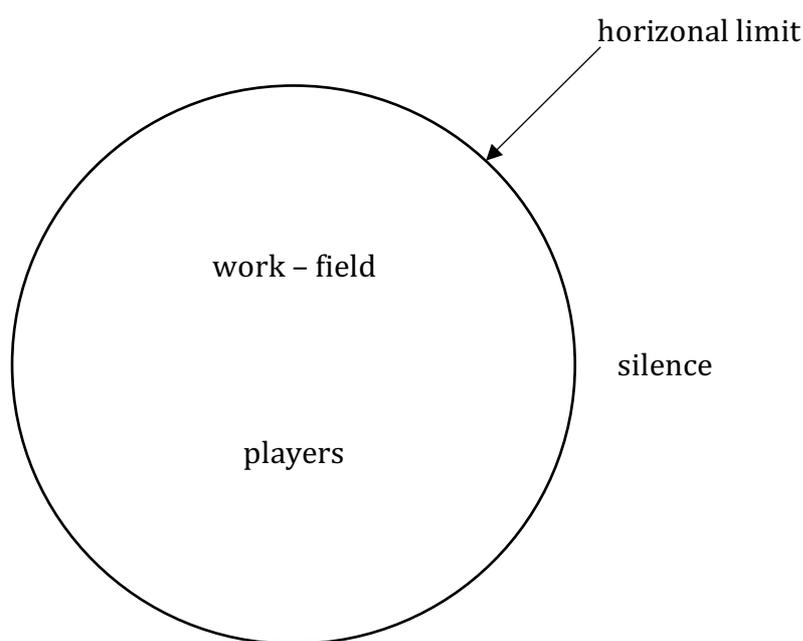


Figure 1. The region within which musical improvisation occurs

Of course, players can be situated in variable positions within the field so long as they are each within earshot of the emergent work; and as discussed above in relation to Denley, the horizon of the work fluctuates in shape and perimeter. The bounded region or field in which the work is perceptible to the players and the relative silence that exists beyond the horizontal limit might also be considered in terms of presence and absence – improvisation occurs in the *presence* of the work. The work as an event creates the opening within the horizontal limit or boundary within which the work emerges and becomes present.

There is, then, a spatio-temporal depth to the work as an event, surrounded by silence. And there is always a back and forth between these two seemingly oppositional forces – presence and absence. While the work and event as a whole remain present, aspects of the work are always receding toward silence. Each time a musician significantly alters something in performance results in making present something new at the expense of making absent something old (it remains present only in one’s memory). For example, at approximately 1:31 on the track ‘Morph My Logic’, off the album *Nature Stands Aside*,<sup>50</sup> guitarist David Brown creates a ‘whirring’ sound – presumably by employing a hand-held fan or something similar to strike his guitar. While this contribution stops and starts and is interspersed here and there with other occasional sounds, we would say the contribution remains present until approximately 3:14, when Brown ceases it completely, leaving the other member of the duo, Lukas Simonis, to perform unaccompanied for a period. When Brown re-enters at approximately 3:27, he does so with a contribution in stark contrast to his previous contribution. And it is thus there that one notices a particular aspect of the work (the whirring contribution) recedes into absence as another, different, contribution emerges. This is indicative of the dynamic nature of the place of improvisation – it engulfs the players in a spatial sense, while fluctuating in time. The work, then, is this gathering and emergence of space and time in

place, in the occurring event. We must acknowledge, however, that what makes what is present significant, or meaningful, is relative to absence; we need only recall the words of Debussy to understand this: 'music is the space between the notes'. Music, we may say, is a way of giving voice to silence. Indeed, this echoes Malpas's sentiment of *transcendence* – the presence of the theme brings forth a small flicker of light the illuminates not only what is around us, but also, it can make salient that which is absent.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have presented an understanding of improvised musical performance as situated within a particular horizontal field established by the work itself and bounded by silence. Conceiving of improvised musical performance in this way, and perhaps music more generally, leads us to (re)consider the temporo-centrism that has dominated our thinking, both as scholars and practitioners, on music and improvisation. Such a consideration of the spatiality of performance can serve to thematize education with respect to both aesthetic theory of music, listening, improvisation, and performance, as well as practice itself. For how are we to understand music's ability to affect us, to provide us with truth and insight into the nature of our own lives and our place in the world – as all great art does – if we characterise it only with respect to temporality? While the temporal moves us forward, we should not overlook the simple fact that performers (and spectators) engage with something in the world that occupies space. Indeed, it is only when we come to understand musical performance in terms of space *and* time that we can begin to understand how, as an event, music is capable of *transcendence*, of illuminating the world. For any experience of this magnitude must occur somewhere, and for us to have such an experience (and players experience works no less than spectators do) we must be situated in a particular relationship with that which affects us. That is, we must be situated within the horizontal field of the emergent musical work itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline Oliveros, "Deep Listening Meditations: Egypt (1999)," in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, eds. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 53.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Shehan Campbell, "Deep Listening to the Musical World," *Music Educators Journal* 92, no. 1 (2005), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Walter S. Gershon, *Sound Curriculum: Sonic Studies in Educational Theory, Method, and Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 196.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Campbell, *Music after Deleuze* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Sarath, *Music Theory Through Improvisation: A New Approach to Musicianship Training*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Ashley E. Walton, et al. "Creating Time: Social Collaboration in Music Improvisation," *Topics in Cognitive Science* 10 (2018), 114.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Malpas, "Timing Space-Spacing Time: On transcendence, performance, and place," in *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, eds. Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly, and Maeva Veerapen (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Malpas, "Timing Space-Spacing Time."

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Ascoltando," in *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, by Peter Szendy, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), ix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> Considering the role of the spectator goes beyond the purview of this paper.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 6.

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- <sup>16</sup> Pierre Schaeffer, "Acousmatics," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 76-81, New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup> Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2013.
- <sup>18</sup> Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble, *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, London and New York: Routledge, 2015.
- <sup>19</sup> Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2013.
- <sup>20</sup> Weasel Walter. *Ominous Telepathic Mayhem*. ugEXPLODE – ug51. 2011. CD.
- <sup>21</sup> Rosalind Hall and Alice Hui-Sheng Chang, *From my winter snow your summer fire until my autumn rain your spring sunshine* (online recording, June 14, 2019), <https://aliceandrosalind.bandcamp.com>.
- <sup>22</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 162.
- <sup>23</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 148.
- <sup>24</sup> Casey O'Callaghan, *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 9-10.
- <sup>25</sup> See, Roberto Casati and Jérôme Dokic, "Some Varieties of Spatial Hearing," in *Sounds and Perception: New Philosophical Essays*, eds. Matthew Nudds and Casey O'Callaghan, 97-110, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009; Roger Scruton, *Aesthetics of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997; O'Callaghan, *Sounds*.
- <sup>26</sup> O'Callaghan, *Sounds*.
- <sup>27</sup> See, G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, volume I, trans. T. M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume I, trans. E. F. J. Payne, New York: Dover Publications, 1958; and Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume II, trans. E. F. J. Payne, New York: Dover Publications, 1958.
- <sup>28</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, volume I.
- <sup>29</sup> Max Neuhaus, "Program Notes," *Sound Works, Volume I: Inscription* (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1994), 34.
- <sup>30</sup> Christoph Cox, "From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts," in *Sound: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. Caleb Kelly (London and Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2011), 84.
- <sup>31</sup> Cox, "From Music to Sound."
- <sup>32</sup> Malpas, "Timing Space – Spacing Time," 34.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>36</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Perennial, 2013.
- <sup>37</sup> Malpas, "Timing Space – Spacing Time."
- <sup>38</sup> O'Callaghan, *Sounds*, 46.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.
- <sup>42</sup> Cat Hope, *Cat Hope*, "At the Altar of the Amplifier," (blog), posted July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2019, accessed July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <https://www.cathope.com/news>.
- <sup>43</sup> O'Callaghan, *Sounds*.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> Denley, Jim. *Through Fire, Crevice + the Hidden Valley*. Splitrec. 2006. CD.
- <sup>46</sup> "Through Fire, Crevice + the Hidden Valley," splitrec.com, accessed June 25, 2019, <https://splitrec.com/through-fire-crevice-the-hidden-valley-jim-denley/>.
- <sup>47</sup> Malpas, "Timing Space – Spacing Time," 35.
- <sup>48</sup> Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2012.
- <sup>49</sup> Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 106.
- <sup>50</sup> Candlesnuffer and Lukas Simonis, *Nature Stands Aside*, hellosquare Recordings – cube049, 2011.