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The Significance of Improvisation in the Age of Technology

While there is a sense in which technological advancements enhance our experience of the world, there is also a sense in which technology obscures the world. One such instance of technology's ability to (potentially) obscure the world is the way in which it makes works of art (I focus on music) so readily accessible. While in many ways the accessibility and democratisation of music offered by digital streaming, for example, is seen to be convenient, we may also notice how this accessibility can efface the *significance* of the musical work – works that were once only encountered in the concert hall as 'works of *art*' now also function as background music while we drive our cars, or do the dishes, for instance. In this paper, I argue that improvisation, such as that which is demonstrated by improvising musicians, offers us a 'way in' to (re)experience music as *works of art, qua art*, in the age of technology.

Keywords: improvisation, music, technology, artwork

Introduction

The significance of the work of art is that it illuminates an aspect of the world for those who encounter it.¹ With respect to music, perhaps artworks illuminate the sounding potential of certain instruments, evoke memories of past places, or spur us into a contemplative state on the goings-on of the world. But music, regardless of the intentions of those who create it and the broader community that appreciates it, does not

¹ Jeff Malpas, "Timing Space – Spacing Time," in *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, eds. Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly, and Maeva Veerapen, 25-36, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

always function as art² – the work of art that once illuminated the world to us rarely functions in this way when it is played as background sound at the shopping mall, for instance. Thus, it would seem that music’s ability to function as a *work of art* is dependent on *how* it is encountered. That is, the significance of the work only comes to the fore when we find ourselves placed in a particular relationship with the work so that we are able to receive what we may refer to as its ‘gift’ of illumination.

It is technology’s ability to put music anywhere and everywhere that seems to efface the significance of particular works of music. This view of the nature of technology echoes the thought of German philosopher Martin Heidegger.³ On the topic of technology, from a particularly Heideggerian perspective, Malpas writes, ‘what is at issue ... is the way in which technology changes our relation to things through its effect in the transformation of nearness and distance’.⁴ For example, technology allows us to experience the musical event away from the event itself at a time and place of our choosing via a particular medium (cassette, compact disc, digital streaming, and so forth). Of course, in some respects, technological advancements offer convenience and

² What does and does not constitute art with respect to music is not a debate I intend to address here. For the purposes of this paper it is enough to state that I work from the assumption music can be art. And it is music that is art, broadly construed, that is the focus of this paper.

³ See, Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans, William Lovitt, New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1977; Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper Perennial, 2013.

⁴ Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006), 293.

new possibilities. But we must also remember, as Malpas writes, ‘technological changes are not changes in something separate from us, but instead constitute changes in the modes by which our own being is disclosed – changes in the ways in which we encounter ourselves and others, and in the character of such encounter’.⁵ There are ramifications, then, if we acknowledge that technological ‘advancements’ are often intended to simplify (in the sense of making more convenient) the world – music events are brought to us via digital streaming and television, foreign lands are viewed on our computer screens, management strategies alleviate workers from needing to think, and so forth. Thus, by simplifying the world we risk simplifying our engagement with and understanding of the world, and therefore our sense of place within it.⁶ The way in which technology simplifies the world by putting things at our fingertips results in, according to Heidegger, ‘uniform distancelessness’,⁷ and according to Malpas, ‘a disruption in our sense of location – “our sense of place”’.⁸ In this paper we will consider how improvisation may assist us in overcoming these issues voiced by Heidegger and Malpas.

While I view technology’s ability to obscure the significance of the musical work as deeply problematic, I do believe there is at least one way in which we may still gain access to what Heidegger refers to as the ‘workly’⁹ character of works of art. That is by

⁵ Ibid., 296.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 164.

⁸ Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 296.

⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 27.

encountering them in a particular way. The way that I am suggesting has to do with improvisation. For improvisation, simply put, involves a particular degree of attunement and responsiveness on behalf of the person improvising. When improvising, we must engage with that which we encounter in a certain way, a way that demands that we attend to the peculiarities of the encounter with a high degree of focus, as demonstrated by musicians who engage in improvisation while they perform. Thus, in this paper I argue that improvising musicians provide an exemplar for the way in which we might encounter the significance of the musical work in the age of technology.

This paper will progress in the following manner: I begin by discussing how technology can alter our encounter with music. I then discuss the relationship between those who improvise and the event in which they are situated as improvisers encountering and responding to particular phenomena. This leads me to (re)consider the notion of being ‘in the moment’, a phrase readily employed by both practitioners and theorists when describing the focus required of those who improvise. I find this phrase, ‘in the moment’, problematic for reasons outlined below and opt to replace the phrase with what I call, ‘belonging to the event’. Considering the significance of works of art, particularly in the context of Heidegger’s later thinking, I then consider how musical works embody place, which is to suggest that in our encounter with the work of art we are placed in a particular relationship with things around us by virtue of the presence of the artwork itself, which enables us to receive of the gift of illumination from the work. Finally, I conclude by highlighting the significance of improvisation: it affords us access to receive the work’s gift.

Encountering the Work of Musical Art

Technology has undoubtedly altered the way we create and consume music. For example, the printing press reconfigured not only the way music is documented, but also played a significant role in re-shaping both compositional and performance methods, copyright law, and our understanding of the musical work, among other things;¹⁰ audio recording and playback equally altered the music landscape. In recent years, the way we consume music has drastically changed with the rise of digital streaming. A rich selection of music now accompanies us in a great many places, from our kitchens to public transport. It is not within the scope of this thesis to dissect the implications of these technological advancements with respect to the health of the music industry, nor is this an economic or political discussion. Rather, as will become clear, I am interested primarily in the role of improvisation with respect to our ability to receive the gift of the work in the age of technology.

With respect to the rise of technology Heidegger writes, ‘all distances in time and space are shrinking’.¹¹ This becomes particularly clear to us with respect to digital streaming, mentioned above; although one might say this trajectory was established much earlier with the advent of the printing press, such that it put musical works in multiple places at once, and the radio, where performers became disembodied from the work, that transmitted professionally performed works to the masses. Whereas once upon a time we had to be *there* at the live event to experience a particular musical work, we now access that work from wherever we please. The distance between us and the work has

¹⁰ See, Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

lessened, in the sense that the work is no longer ‘out there’, at the opera house for example, but ‘right here’ accessible from our mobile phones, tablets, or computers. We can overcome spatial distances by live streaming events from our computers, and temporal distances by listening to live recordings of deceased musicians. This is what, in the current musical context, we can derive from the above quotation from Heidegger that distances in time and space are shrinking. Heidegger later writes that ‘the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance’.¹² Which is to say, simply because the work of music has been brought proximally close to us, this does not necessarily mean we are ‘near’ to it, in the sense that we may receive its gift of illumination.

The essential issue here is one of differentiation. That is, if everything is of equal distance, i.e., distance is abolished resulting in ‘uniform distancelessness’, things lose their orientation in space – everything becomes homogenised and it becomes difficult to differentiate one thing from another. We notice this homogenisation with respect to digital streaming platforms; everything is equally accessible, good music, bad music, country music, punk music, and so forth. Technology situates everything equally near. And while in some respects this may be seen as convenient and even a positive democratisation of music, this homogenisation renders all music equally salient – there are no diamonds in the rough, only the rough.

It must be noted, the argument presented below takes for granted that the reproduction of musical art *does* provides us with access to the work itself (this is not the place to

¹² Ibid., 163.

argue that the musical work is indeed present in its reproductions with respect to audio recording – such an argument requires a paper unto itself). However, it would seem the reproduction, as I have characterised it above with respect to digital streaming, constitutes this ‘shrinking distance’ described by Heidegger that ‘brings no nearness’. The reproduction, perhaps streamed via Bluetooth from our mobile phone to our car’s audio system while we drive, provides us with a certain degree of access – it permits us to experience the musical work without traveling to witness the originary event of its creation. If the reproduction *does* provide access to the work of art however, why does Heidegger insist that the distance overcome by the reproduction brings us no nearness with respect to the musical work? While Heidegger does not discuss the reproduction of musical works (although in *Being and Time*¹³ he does briefly discuss the radio in a manner not entirely dissimilar to how we are here discussing digital streaming), one can infer that he would suggest digital streaming, for example, in its ability to overcome distances, fosters a lack of engagement with musical works. By bringing such a vast array of music equally close, we tend to overlook the ‘workly’ character of music. By overlooking this character of music, we overlook the real emergency faced by musicians and lovers of musical art, not the challenges posed by streaming services with respect to royalty payments, for example, although this is of course a significant issue, but the emergency that music risks losing its status as art.

Music readily consumed from devices in our pockets while we engage in other everyday activities such as cleaning, driving, exercising, and so forth alters the music we

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers Incorporated, 2008), 140.

consume to something closer to Muzak, than works of art, in the sense that Muzak was designed to reduce the sense of monotony in everyday situations without demanding anything of those who experience it.¹⁴ While we often think of such technological advancements as convenient, we must not lose sight of the warning offered by Malpas, referenced above – technological changes alter not only the way in which we encounter things and ourselves, but also the nature of the encounter itself. What technological advancements such as audio recording and distribution alter is in fact our encounter with the work of art. Indeed, technological advancements make it easier for us *not* to encounter the work itself and rather experience music as something devoid of possessing the status of art. The proliferation of music into our everyday lives, at the supermarket, at sporting events, in cafes, and so forth makes music available, but not necessarily as something to be listened to or experienced as *art*. The ‘workly’ character of music is effaced in situations such as these, and music becomes mere background sound, perhaps karaoke as people hum excerpts of melodies to themselves as they do their grocery shopping.

If the work of art is present in its reproductions, however, then clearly it is there to be encountered regardless of where we experience it, so long as we encounter it in an appropriate way. That is, we must, I contend, improvise. For to improvise is to actively engage with and respond to that which we encounter. Through our responsiveness to the work we encounter the ‘workly’ character of the work of art. Improvisation demands a state of nearness; improvisation relies on our ability to differentiate one thing from

¹⁴ See, Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2010.

another. When improvising music, musicians must differentiate between an array of sounds and possibilities as they occur and are oriented within the horizon of their sounding. Thus, one's responses to those possibilities are intimately bound up with the space they are attending to – the space of nearness. Through improvisation we allow the work of art to address and affect us, relating us back to the whole of our existence, as Gadamer suggests with respect to artworks in general.¹⁵ It is through an improvisatory mode of engagement that we encounter the musical work as it illuminates the world.

It is the work's ability to illuminate the world that is its gift. And it is only through our improvisational engagement with the work that we receive this gift. Indeed, the gift of the work remains inaccessible to us if we do not partake in an improvisatory engagement. That is, while we do not receive the gift of musical works if we relegate music to a Muzak-like existence, we are equally barred from receiving the gift of the work when we study it as a mere object. Thus, while activities such as transcribing a jazz musician's solo, analysing notation using Schenkerian analysis, or studying the sonic spectrum of a recording may provide certain insights into the *objecthood* of the work, they provide little access to the *gift* of the work itself. For studying the objecthood of a work is a mode of what Heidegger refers to as calculative or representational thinking¹⁶ – modes of thinking that perpetuate 'uniform distancelessness.'

¹⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishers Plc., 2013.

¹⁶ See, Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966; Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Heidegger demonstrates how representational thinking does not give us access to the gift of a thing in his discussion of a jug. He writes,

Considered scientifically, to fill a jug means to exchange one filling for another [air for liquid]. These statements of physics are correct. By means of them, science represents something real, by which it is objectively controlled. But – is this reality the jug? No. Science always encounters only what *its* kind of representation has admitted beforehand as an object possible for science.¹⁷

We notice the importance of this insight offered by Heidegger particularly clearly with respect to music analysis, for example, when we consider the way chord progressions are commonly written in roman numeral analysis; where the chord progression Dm G C is written ii V I (each roman numeral corresponds to a particular scale degree). While this sort of analysis is correct, it offers little insight into the gift of the work from which the chord progression is derived. Representational thinking of this sort provides insight only insofar as it demonstrates how the objecthood of the work can be understood within the confines imposed upon it by the analytical method applied – it offers nothing with respect to the reality of the work of art. Thus, while there is a degree of correctness associated with representational thinking, it brings us no nearer to the ‘workly’ character of the musical work itself.

If we are to overcome ‘uniform distancelessness’ with respect to musical works, we must not only engage with musical works but engage with them by improvising. The music student, then, who listens to a particular performance with the goal of dissecting

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 167-168.

and transcribing the performance misses the gift of the work just as much as the person who has music playing in the background as they drive their car. In each case, while music is proximally close, it is not 'near' in the Heideggerian sense. They do not receive the gift of the musical work. Thus, one must engage with music as a spectator in the same way that musicians engage with the emergent work while they perform; through interpretation and response, i.e. improvisation. Only then do we gain access to the workly character of musical art.

What, then, is the relationship between the event in which the musical work emerges and the improviser? We must understand the difference between the improviser who attends to the work, and the person who attends to the work through representational thinking, perhaps to transcribe or analyse it. For while in each situation the person attends to the same thing, one of them gains access to the gift of the work, while the other does not. Below, I argue that one must 'belong to the event' to gain access to the gift of the work.

The Relationship Between Improviser and Event

When one improvises, they attend to their immediate situation, they respond to the event in which they find themselves. Improvising musicians do this, but so too does the spectator. It is one's attending to music in the right way, I have argued, that offers them access to the work's gift. This attending, then, puts us in a particular relationship with the event. This relationship is commonly referred to as being 'in the moment'. I want to begin this section by (re)considering the phrase being 'in the moment', a phrase that appears regularly in both anecdotal descriptions of process by musicians and in the academic literature. For example, Waterman writes of improvising musicians, 'all their

decisions are made in the moment’;¹⁸ of his performance practice Burke writes, ‘I am not thinking about roles or genres [during improvisation], I am making choices in-the-moment’;¹⁹ and Lewis offers, ‘you can justify it after the fact or you can try to rationalise it before the fact, but in the moment you are just there and you commit’.²⁰ There are no shortage of quotations that link improvisation in music with being ‘in the moment’. Less common however, are explicit explanations regarding what being ‘in the moment’ actually means.

Being ‘in the moment’

From the perspective of cognitive psychology, Onsman and Burke offer the following explanation of being ‘in the moment’,

The sublimation of the cognitive processing to ignore input that does not have direct impact on the decision-making equates to a state of heightened awareness of and exclusive focus on the task at hand. It is this that musicians refer to as ‘being in the moment’.²¹

Here Onsman and Burke make explicit what is often only implicit when the phrase ‘in the moment’ is invoked. Their definition is one that suggests a mode of focus, where

¹⁸ Ellen Waterman, “Improvised Trust: Opening Statements,” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, eds. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 59.

¹⁹ Andrys Onsman and Robert Burke, *Experimentation in Improvised Jazz: Chasing Ideas* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 95.

²⁰ George Lewis, quoted in, Onsman and Burke, *Experimentation in Improvised Jazz*, 106.

²¹ Onsman and Burke, *Experimentation in Improvised Jazz*, 129.

musicians attune themselves to the ‘task at hand’, while blocking out any thoughts unrelated to performing that particular task. This definition, it seems to me, is an adequate summation of how the phrase ‘in the moment’ is readily employed. What is left unsaid, however, is what the word ‘moment’, in the phrase ‘in the moment’, refers to.

We can infer from Fischlin’s invocation of the phrase ‘in the moment’ that it has a strong connection with temporality:

Being ‘in time’ necessitates a response to time, expresses a relationship to time that is at once intensely ludic in the moment but also memorialisation of all past times, and a salute to times that could be. Histories flow from these improvisatory acts in time. Improvisation responds to time, is responsible to the potential always found in time.²²

While we could have arrived at the conclusion etymologically that the term ‘moment’ refers to ‘time’, it is interesting to see how the concept of time is invoked. For Fischlin employs it in two different ways. Firstly, he refers to improvising ‘in the moment’ as ‘intensely ludic’ – suggesting an understanding of the ‘moment’ as spontaneous, or in temporal terms, as occurring ‘now’. But he also suggests that improvisation, broadly speaking, not only involves the ‘now’, or the present, but also past and future.

²² Daniel Fischlin, “(Call and) Responsibility: Improvisation, Ethics, Co-creation,” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, eds. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 290.

Fischlin's conception of time, here, seems to bear within it a similarity to Husserl's notion of 'internal time consciousness',²³ with respect to his tri-partite view of the composition of the 'now'. Husserl suggests the 'now' is comprised of three components: primal impressions (live experiences, the 'now'), retentions (as primal impressions transition into the past, they remain in our consciousness as 'retentions' before they gradually fade from consciousness and become memories), and protentions (the expectation that the future, or something, will come).²⁴ Thought of in this way, being 'in the moment' is always more than a mere instant – there is a depth to the 'now'. Indeed, drawing directly from Husserl's conception of internal time consciousness Peters writes on the topic of being 'in the moment', 'the moment is no longer identical to the instant but, through the temporal reach of intentionality, becomes an *event* that is sustained as long as attention, retention, and protention hold together and flow into each other'.²⁵ Thought of in this way, the term 'moment', as we may regularly conceive it – as a brief period of time, or an 'instant' – does not seem particularly well suited to describing what one is 'in' while they improvise.

²³ Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchill, ed. Martin Heidegger, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964.

²⁴ Barry Dainton, "Temporal Consciousness," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed June 27, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-temporal/>.

²⁵ Gary Peters, "Improvisation and Time-Consciousness," in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies, Volume 1*, eds. George E. Lewis and Benjamin Pickut (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195370935.013.002.

One can still attend to the *event*, as described by Peters above, in the manner Onsman and Burke describe being ‘in the moment’. However, whereas Onsman and Burke assert that one moment springs into the next, which suggests understanding a performance as a sequence of moments, Peters argues the *event* constitutes the performance as a whole.²⁶ He suggests there is a continuum between attention, retention, and protention that improvisers must ‘hold together’ for the duration the event.²⁷ He writes,

The beginning and the end of a written/composed work coexist within the simultaneity of the originary document, but in a completely improvised work they do not and, thus, the improviser has to both begin the improvisation and then retain this beginning as a (the) moment of the work’s unfolding and its ultimate end. In other words, the beginning is not just the commencement of the work (the instant) but also an originary phase of the moment of the work as a whole; once this beginning phase expires, through insufficient attention, the work expires with it.²⁸

Thus, what the player attends to, in Peters’s account, is the event as a whole – an idea that I endorse. There is no ‘moment to moment’, but rather a single event that players attend to.

What is missing, however, in discussions of the relationship between music, improvisation, and the *event* is an understanding of the event that accounts for both its temporal *and* spatial qualities. Thus, while Peters, for example, offers an in-depth

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 7.

discussion on the temporal character of the event with regard to improvisation, my account offers an understanding of the topographical nature of the event, for any understanding of the event in purely temporal terms does little to address the issue at stake. That is, a temporal understanding of improvisation offers us little with respect to how improvising allows us to overcome ‘uniform distancelessness’ and encounter works of art – notions that are as much spatial as they are temporal. Thus, due to the temporal implications of the term ‘moment’ as it occurs in the phrase ‘in the moment’, and its therefore implicit lack of nuance around concepts of space and place, I would like to re-think, or better replace, the common phrase, ‘in the moment’. Rather than say improvisers act ‘in the moment’, we might say they ‘*belong* to the event’. It is in one’s belonging to the event, I contend, that they become near to the work and gain access to its gift.

Belonging to the Event

What does it mean to *belong* in the context of the musical event? We should think of the term ‘belonging’, here, in a manner similar to how Heidegger characterises ‘*belonging together*’ in his essay *The Principle of Identity*.²⁹ While Heidegger employs ‘*belonging together*’ to characterise the relationship between being and identity, we might derive insight from his characterisation of belonging to better understand the relationship between player and event. The insight to be gained from Heidegger’s thinking is one of emphasis: ‘*belonging together*’ versus ‘*belonging together*’, although it is more than merely a play on words. Conceived in the first iteration of this statement, Heidegger

²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1969.

writes that ‘belonging is determined by the word together’.³⁰ Which is to suggest that things belong simply because they are represented in a unity with that which they are in relation to. The second iteration, however, suggests that things are ‘together’ because they belong; things are *already* placed in relation to one another.

It is the latter idea of ‘belonging’ I have in mind when I state that improvisers *belong* to the event. Improvisers do not merely stand in relation to the event – they are not simply together with the event because they have been placed into a unity with that system of togetherness. Which is to say, we cannot understand *improvisation, qua* improvisation, by representing improvisation as a coordination between improvisers and event. Rather, we should understand improvisation as the *belonging* together of improviser(s) *and* event as each is *appropriated* to the other. ‘Appropriation’, here, refers to the way in which both improviser and event ‘take from’, ‘relate to’, and ‘differ from’ one another. A relationship that results in their *belonging* together, so that we cannot say there are two separate entities merely in relation to one another, but instead we must acknowledge that improviser and event are inseparable. The improvisation, then, is an event of appropriation – a *belonging* together that is both a giving and a taking, unifying and differentiating, a gathering and a being-gathered.³¹

To say that improvisers ‘belong to the event’, then, is to present a significant challenge to the more common phrase, being ‘in the moment’. Firstly, whereas ‘in the moment’ is

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ Jeff Malpas, “Rethinking Dwelling: Heidegger and the Question of Place,” *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology* 25, no. 1 (2014): 15-23.

suggestive of a certain temporal focus, 'belonging to the event', as I intend to present it, acknowledges both time *and* space. Secondly, improvising 'in the moment' implicitly seems to suggest two things: the 'moment', and the 'improvisers' that are somehow located *in* that moment. Indeed, this bears a resemblance to what Heidegger's calls 'belonging *together*', mentioned above, where the 'improviser' and the 'moment' are autonomous and simply belong because they have come into relation with one another. 'Belonging to the event', however, as I have described it above, understands improvisation as a unity between improviser and event – they *belong* together.

The Place *of* Improvisation

What I want to argue is that the appropriation that occurs between improviser and event in their *belonging* together brings forth place, in the sense that the nearness required to improvise provides a means of differentiation and therefore spatial orientation in which improvisers not only encounter particular things that they stand in relation to, they also encounter themselves as standing in a particular relation within that place. Which is to say, in 'uniform distancelessness', where everything is equally available, the self is reduced to something that merely chooses something, or not – the identity of the self is lost in the homogenisation of 'uniform distancelessness'. It is only when we experience true nearness, such that we attain when we engage with the world in an improvisatory manner, that we are able to orient ourselves within a differentially structured place. Thus, I am not concerned so much with the idea that the event is *in* a particular place, that is, a position in space, but rather I am interested in how improvisation itself opens up place and brings forth the world. This, I contend, is the nature of improvisation missed when we characterise it solely as an acting 'in the moment' – we overlook the unity of the *belonging* and thus the *place* that is characteristic of improvisation itself.

The subheading of this section, then, is not referring to the place in which improvisation is located but refers to the place *of* improvisation – the place that is opened up by the happening of improvisation.

Heidegger writes, ‘the work belongs, as work, uniquely within the realm that is opened up by itself’.³² It is this ‘realm’, understood here as ‘place’, that Heidegger refers to that is our concern. (We must remember that we are working from the premise that the work can come forth as an event even in its reproductions.) Thus, despite technology’s displacement of the work of art, it can still come forth as a work, for if we encounter it through improvisation, the work opens up its own place. To understand properly the nature of this place opened up by the musical work of art, we might first consider the alternative – the loss of place.

The Loss of Place

While we cannot simply ‘lose’ place – we must always be situated *somewhere* – we can *feel* ‘lost’ or ‘homeless’ in place. Indeed, as Malpas points out, this is a common symptom of modernity.³³ Malpas provides an example of this ‘loss of place’ with respect to social media. He writes,

The embedding of individual posts within the larger network of posts ... has the effect of making the details of personal life open to all, and, in a certain sense, depersonalizing them. The narratives that appear become everyone’s

³² Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 40.

³³ Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, 2nd ed., New York: Routledge, 2018.

narratives, often replicating other narratives ... Social media has the effect of a radical externalization of personal life – the self being articulated through online communication and interaction – that is also an obscuring of the internality of the self. Such an obscuring is directly connected to the obscuring or effacing of place. The loss of a sense of place is a loss of a sense of the distinctiveness of place, and that loss of distinctiveness is closely tied up with a loss of the sense of the internality of places – such internality being bound to the singular identity of places. Without a sense of internality, there is neither a strong sense of place nor a clear sense of self, but since self and place remain, their character becomes confused and uncertain.³⁴

By bringing places close to us proximally, as described earlier with respect to ‘uniform distancelessness’, we risk losing the distinctiveness of place. Perhaps this comes through most clearly with respect to music when people watch live performances through the screens of their phones as they record the performance to re-watch at a later date or share with their friends, externalising the internal experience of place. The distinctiveness of the event, and consequently the gift of the work of art, cannot be grasped, at least not fully, in this effacement of place. Rather than ‘belong to the event’, the spectator appropriates the event, but fails to let the event appropriate them – and thus the dialogic character of aesthetic experience is lost. In this example, the spectator obscures the significance of the internal place, confusing it with the external; consequently, their sense of place, in this situation, becomes a trivial one.

³⁴ Malpas, *Place and Experience*, 206.

Thus, unlike the person who comes to belong to the event and through their aesthetic experience is related back to the whole of their existence,³⁵ the spectator who views the event through their phone whose primary concern is ‘sharing’ the event has no such aesthetic experience. In some sense they perceive the event but they do not have a true ‘aesthetic experience’ as Gadamer describes it: ‘in the experience of art is present a fullness of meaning that belongs not only to this particular content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life’.³⁶ Which is to say, in receiving the gift of the work of art we are brought closer to our own sense of self, to the distinctiveness of place in which are situated. By not allowing oneself to belong to the event, not only is the significance of the event obscured, but so too is our sense of self. Such a lack of specific and singular engagement with place is often the cause of what we refer to as the ‘loss of place’, or ‘homelessness’.³⁷ As mentioned above, this loss of place emerges from ‘uniform distancelessness’, where the self becomes an entity reduced to the capacity to choose something, or not. For the *work* of art to come forth the self must be part of the event, it must be appropriated by the event as the self equally appropriates the event. By improvising, both player and spectator find themselves oriented in space and capable of attending to the musical work in such a way as they have a true Gadamerian ‘aesthetic experience’. Let us now consider this place that emerges through our improvisatory engagement with musical art.

The Place Created by Art

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁷ Malpas, *Place and Experience*.

We will now consider what it means when Gadamer suggests that aesthetic experience relates one back to the whole of their existence,³⁸ and how this relates to the work of art's bringing forth place. Heidegger, writing on the topic of sculpture, argues the work of art does not operate *in* space but rather *as* space.³⁹ As Wright offers, 'the work of sculpture works not in or at a place, but takes place as a place. It is "in" the work of sculpture that place "takes place".⁴⁰ Which is to say that the work of art embodies place. Place, here, is to be understood as an oriented space in which things are near to us. Whereas physical theory, for example, treats space as something to be measured, calculated, understood, and conquered, the work of art, as Heidegger characterises it, enriches space by bringing it close to us, and creating place. He writes, 'sculpture would be the embodiment of places. Places, in preserving and opening a region, hold something free gathered around them which grants the tarrying of things under consideration and a dwelling for man in the midst of things'.⁴¹ The work of art, here, rather than conquer space, 'preserves' and 'opens' space as a region or place in which we find ourselves in relation to things both near and remote. Wright argues, 'given the danger of technology, the loss of the quality of the presence, the aura of being in the world, the place embodied in the work of sculpture grows into a saving power in the age

³⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*.

³⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum*, (St. Gallen: Erker-Verlag, 1969), trans. Charles H. Siebert in *Man and World IV*, 1973.

⁴⁰ Kathleen Wright, "The Place of the Work of Art in the Age of Technology," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 4 (1984): 576.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum*, 7.

of technology'.⁴² Whereas we have above argued that technology can create a 'uniform distancelessness', Wright, here, refers to this as, a 'loss of the quality of presence'.

Thus, it is the work of art, as it brings forth place, which is an orienting and situating in a differentiated space, which operates as a 'saving power' in its ability to allow us to experience things as truly near or remote.

It is not just sculpture that Heidegger suggests brings forth place in this way. Indeed, we find in his essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' that both painting and architecture embody and open up place.⁴³ And in "...Poetically Man Dwells...", he writes, 'Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling'.⁴⁴ Heidegger argues that poetry does not merely 'describe' the appearance of the world, but through their attending to the world the poet is able to make visible what was once alien – that is, the poet is able to illuminate the world. Poetry, and indeed all art insofar as it is experienced as art, has this capacity to bring forth place and illuminate the world.

Wright outlines how this experience of the place embodied by art relates us back to the whole of our existence in the manner described by Gadamer when she discusses the place embodied by a painting of Van Gogh's that depicts a pair of peasant shoes. She writes,

⁴² Wright, "The Place of the Work of Art in the Age of Technology," 576.

⁴³ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 216.

This place, a dwelling place between birth and death, is a place filled with anxiety and joy. Van Gogh's painting 'works' as a work of art in that it embodies a dwelling place. Its own place, the place which it embodies, is the world on earth as a dwelling place. It does not represent but rather opens up this place, our own dwelling place, as a place not to be conquered and occupied by us but instead as a place for us to dwell.⁴⁵

Wright's assertion that the place opened up by the work of art is one of 'anxiety and joy' is telling, particularly when considered alongside Gadamer's claim that, requoted here for convenience, 'the power of the work of art suddenly tears the person experiencing it out of the context of his life, yet relates him back to the whole of his existence'.⁴⁶ It is precisely the power of the work of art to open up a place in which we find ourselves oriented amidst other people, things, memories, and aspirations that offers us a place of anxiety and joy, as it relates to the existence of the individual who experiences the work of art.

Heidegger writes, 'the temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves.'⁴⁷ In the context of music, of course, we are less concerned with visual appearance than we are with auditory perception. Thus, we are interested in how a musical work makes the sonorous perceptible as art and gives to those who experience it their outlook on themselves. Let us consider a musical example,

⁴⁵ Wright, "The Place of the Work of Art in the Age of Technology," 578.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 64.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 42.

guitarist Norman Westberg's 'After Vacation', from the album of the same title.⁴⁸ The track begins with what may be considered a staple of Westberg's solo instrumental works: ambient, drone-like textures generated with a guitar, but electronically processed to the extent that the resulting sound bears little resemblance to the sounds commonly associated with the instrument. These initial 43 seconds or so envelope the listener as they gently crescendo. There is a depth and spatiality to the sound that seems to open up around us – there is no precise melody toward which we should direct our focus, rather we experience the sound as it covers us like a blanket. Approximately 44 seconds into the work Westberg introduces a somewhat repetitive yet constantly mutating acoustic guitar melody. This melody, in contrast to the enveloping nature of the electronic sounds, grasps our attention and directs us to the acoustic guitar. In the early stages of the acoustic guitar's introduction the acoustic guitar orients us within the ambiguous spatiality of the electronic texture – the acoustic guitar provides a distinct point of differentiation. The acoustic guitar draws us into the place embodied by the work and situates us within. Just as Heidegger asserts that the 'temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather cause it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world,'⁴⁹ 'After Vacation' brings forth the acoustic guitar as it is juxtaposed against the electronic textures.

Gradually, however, the electronic sounds rise in volume and challenge the acoustic guitar for our attention. The repetitive, meandering melody played on the acoustic guitar allows us access to the vast electronic textures. For if the melody played by the acoustic

⁴⁸ Norman Westberg, *After Vacation*, Room40, RM481, 2018, CD.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 44-45.

guitar was too complex or non-repetitive it would dominate our attention. The repetition of the acoustic melody allows us to transition back and forth between the un-structured textures and the structured acoustic melody – we can always find ourselves for there is a degree of familiarity in the melody of the acoustic guitar. Thus, we are always oriented and thus always situated within the place brought forth by the work's happening. But we are oriented within this work-place. Indeed, 'After Vacation' brings forth a certain time-space as we are appropriated by the event. As already mentioned, there is a depth and spatiality apparent in the electronic textures. The rubato, meandering acoustic guitar that is constantly repeating with variation seems to slow down time, as it relates us back to the vastness of the texture against which it is juxtaposed.

In this experience of the work it appropriates us – we too are brought forth in its happening; we are gathered by the event. We experience ourselves as we are confronted by the work of art. We are brought into relation with the electronic textures and the acoustic guitar, we engage with and interpret them. We understand how we feel about particular aspects of the work by engaging with them. We encounter particular sounds for the first time, and we come to appreciate the sounds that may exist in the world that lay concealed from us until they are brought forth in a work and situated in a particular relationship with us. The work perhaps situates us within a particular place that makes us comfortable, or not, and thus encourages us to question why, illuminating ourselves to ourselves. In this way, the work creates a place of anxiety and/or joy, for it brings us into a relationship with things in which to experience these traits. Indeed, as Heidegger suggests, it is our authentic experience of art that draws us out of representational of calculative thinking and we become nearer to the world which we are in. The work of art discloses this world to us and in our 'belonging to the event' we are oriented in such

a way that we not only encounter the work of art and the place opened up by the world, but in that place we too are oriented, thus we are brought into an encounter with ourselves.

Conclusion

Above we considered how technology, such as digital streaming, brings us no nearer to musical works, in the Heideggerian sense. But we are also working from the premise that the work of art is present in its reproductions and therefore accessible to us if we allow ourselves to belong to the event. Thus, the way in which one attends to works of musical art is paramount. If one is to experience the musical work, *qua* work, they must bring the work 'near' to them. That is, one must appreciate the significance of the work by being able to differentiate it precisely as a work, as opposed to relegating it to a position of 'uniform distancelessness'.

Improvisation, as it has been characterised throughout this paper, ensures nearness – it provides us with a means of differentiation, for it requires us to attend to and respond to the event in which we not only appropriate, but are also appropriated by. It was argued that this mode of engagement brought forth a musical work. This is, I contend, precisely how the work of musical art comes forth in every instance. Whether in a 'live' event at the Sydney Opera House, or streamed digitally in one's bedroom, the work itself only comes forth as *art* when one engages with the work by coming to belong to the event. Thus, the significance of improvisation is that it affords us access to the world-disclosing nature of musical art.

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