Improvisation and Social Aesthetics

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CHAPTER 2

SCRIPTING SOCIAL INTERACTION

Improvisation, Performance, and Western “Art” Music

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There is a long-standing tradition of seeing jazz, particularly free and avant-garde jazz, as the expression of an ideal society. This has gone along with a corresponding tradition of seeing Western “art” music (WAM) in precisely the opposite terms. For example, in a contribution to the Cambridge Companion to Jazz, Bruce Johnson (2002, 102) characterizes jazz as the opposite of WAM along a series of dimensions. In line with today’s official, institutionalized culture, Johnson says, WAM is “ocularcentric”; centered on the notated text, it is “a spectacle of scopic hegemony, the eye engaging with a ‘product.’” Jazz, by contrast, is “distinguished from art-music models in the priority of the ear, in collective improvisational performance” (104). In this way it is “a vehicle for a form of musical socialization, that is peripheral to the tradition of the artist-as-individual, as ‘soloist’” (106). The approach is riddled with binaries: the eye is opposed to the ear, compositional product is opposed to improvisational performance, individual is opposed to community. And it does not take much knowledge of the role of jazz within the history of American racial politics to understand why this might be the case. Johnson’s binaries map directly onto Ben Sidran’s opposition of “literate” and “oral man,” where “the peculiarly ‘black’ approach to rhythm” is linked to “the greater oral approach to time” and the “inherently communal nature of oral improvisation” (Walser 1999, 299). It is also worth observing that ocular-centricity, an ontology based on the musical product, and the individual author together represent the foundational premises of copy-
right law, which Eric Lewis (2007, 182) has described as “a racist and classist practice” that “attempts to hide its exclusionary nature behind a metaphysics of the musical work which purports to be objective and universal, but in fact is not.”

In this context, a positive mythologization of jazz has gone hand in hand with a negative mythologization of WAM. This goes beyond its characterization by commentators from jazz and the skewed representation of music as an element of the capitalist economy within the courts. It is also reflected in the manner in which WAM is invoked, again often in opposition to jazz, within the context of broader cultural commentary. This can be illustrated from the field of urban planning, investigated by Dean Rowan in an article published in Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation. Rowan quotes Rutherford Platt and Jon Moloney-Merkle’s characterization of the uniform, statewide procedures that at one time governed the planning of open space in Illinois as “a classical score from which the individual cities once uniformly played,” whereas following the removal of the legal basis for these procedures “the cities’ solutions were improvised, albeit not purely spontaneous, deviations” (2004, 16). He also writes that Leonie Sandercock’s approaches to planning “vibrantly accord with improvisational methods, employing practices of active listening, alleviation of oppressive hierarchy, and invitation and acceptance of differences”; by comparison, traditional, rational planning “has musical analogs in strict allegiance to the composer’s score and obeisance to the hierarchical command of the conductor” (Rowan 2004). The very vocabulary adopted here (vibrant, active, alleviation of oppression, acceptance of difference versus strict allegiance, obeisance, and hierarchical command) testifies to the dense network of ideology within which WAM has become enmeshed.

In “Averroes’s Search,” Jorge Luis Borges (1964, 150) recounts that the traveler Abulcasim al-Ashari claimed to have been to China but that his enemies, “with that peculiar logic of hatred, swore that he had never set foot in China and that in the temples of that land he had blasphemed the name of Allah.” In the same way, WAM is on the one hand condemned for the undesirability of its social content, and on the other for lacking social content altogether. In this chapter I aim to answer both charges, thereby opening up the potential for thinking of WAM in terms of social action (and of social action in terms of WAM). My argument is based on the assumption that music’s primary mode of existence lies in the act of performing it, an act that is inherently social. But it goes further than that. I hope to show how the written notations that play so conspicuous a role in WAM function
as vehicles for social action and interaction. And I approach this by interro-
gating the distinction between improvisation and the performance of pre-
composed scores that, in musicological terms, forms the hub of the various
binary oppositions I have invoked. This is an issue I have explored in a previ-
ous paper, “Making Music Together, or Improvisation and Its Others.” There
I set out a series of musical examples beginning with improvisation and ending
with performance. This second pass over the terrain can accordingly be
brief and will focus on the question of the point at which we can identify a
category shift from one to the other. No prizes will be awarded for guessing
that no such point will be found.

Improvisation and Performance

At the furthest remove from the performance of precomposed scores is free
improvisation, a term that is used in the contexts of both jazz and WAM. There is some variability in the practices referred to by this term, particu-
larly in terms of how far they work within or seek to transcend established
styles or idioms, but certain features remain constant. Jared Burrows (2004,
10), whose background as an improvising musician is in jazz, writes that
the process of improvisation creates “its own time-dependent meanings—
let’s call them short-term archetypes—specific to each improvisation,” while
groups that frequently perform together develop “archetypes” that persist
from one improvisation to another. In other words, specific patterns of inter-
action between performers develop as they play together, both within an
individual performance and across repeated performances, and these inter-
actions are as much social as musical. At the opposite end of the aesthetic
spectrum from Burrows is Pierre Boulez, the archetypal postwar modernist
for whom improvisation was an evasion of the real challenges of creative
innovation in music, but his lampooning of the avant-garde improvisations
of the 1950s reflects the same features: at first there would be some excite-
ment, he says, “and so everybody just made more activity, more activity,
louder, louder, louder. Then they were tired so for two minutes you had
calm, calm, calm, calm, calm. And then somebody was waking up so they
began again, and then they were tired, sooner this time, and so the rest was
longer. You cannot call that improvisation” (quoted in Oliver 1999, 147).
Boulez’s basic point is that the freer the music is, in the sense of avoiding
overt references to established idioms or predefined musical materials, the
more it reverts to banal patterns of behavior that are not specifically musi-
cal at all. However skewed by his own compositional agenda and the larger
aesthetic ideology of postwar modernism, Boulez’s claim is one also found in the discourses around jazz. Charlie Mingus is supposed to have told Tim Leary, “You can’t improvise on nothin’, man. . . . You gotta improvise on somethin’” (quoted in Kernfeld 1995, 11). In improvisation as in other areas of life, freedom is relative.

Classic jazz improvisation based on jazz standards illustrates Mingus’s claim. The role of such standards is relatively minimal, in essence comprising a series of chord changes (which, however, can be voiced very flexibly) that define a sectional structure (but not its repetitions, so that the structure remains open); solo improvisation may or may not reference the song melody, and in either case it may also reference other well-known solos, as well as the “ideas, licks, tricks, pet patterns, crips, clichés, and, in the most functional language, things you can do” that make up the fabric of jazz improvisation (Berliner 1994, 102). Although one speaks of, say, the Clifford Brown Quintet “performing” Billy Strayhorn’s “Take the ‘A’ Train,” audiences do not come to hear Strayhorn’s composition (they are unlikely to know in advance that it will be played). They come rather to hear the solo and collective improvisation that the song structure affords. And this focus is reflected in the difference between a jazz lead sheet and a classical score. As José Bowen (1993, 148) observes, lead sheets attempt to provide an exhaustive list of the typical attributes of the work in performance, a consequence being that a literal performance of the lead sheet, including all of these attributes, “would barely be considered a performance of the tune at all. It would be a caricature of the tune.” In that sense, lead sheets both underdetermine and overdetermine the performances they afford. They signify them, but in a complex and highly mediated way.

Yet on consideration, the difference between a lead sheet and a classical score may prove elusive. Corelli’s original notations of the slow movements from his Violin Sonatas, Op. 5, look equally unlike the performances they signify. In fact, they hardly look like violin music at all: they resemble nothing so much as the Renaissance-style counterpoint exercises used in the eighteenth century to teach basic principles of composition. However, these slow movements have also been transmitted in a multitude of contemporary notations prepared by players and pedagogues, which show how Corelli’s skeletal melodies were embellished through violinistic ornamentation that could vary from the restrained to the wildly flamboyant. Terms such as “embellished” and “ornamentation” are misleading, however, because what Corelli wrote sometimes disappears completely behind the new violin part, and although the violone (cello) part is nowadays performed as
written, there is evidence that in the eighteenth century it was extempo-
rized, too (Watkin 1996). Under such circumstances, what Corelli wrote and what was played might have little more in common than the chord changes, and the similarity to jazz standards is further enhanced by striking affini-
ties between baroque continuo realization and the voicing practices of jazz pianists. It might, of course, be objected that these supposedly improvised embellishments or alternative versions of Corelli’s music may in reality have consisted largely of the performance of precomposed scores, as the multi-
tude of surviving notations might suggest and as is predominantly the case today. But then, the same is sometimes the case of jazz: witness the copy-
right deposit versions of Louis Armstrong’s music from the mid-1920s, pro-
duced to comply with the law’s ocular-centric conception of the musical ob-
ject, which are remarkably close to the improvisations Armstrong recorded two or three years later with the Hot Five (Gushee 1998, 297–98). All this
fits uneasily with Sidran’s distinction between literate and oral man: written and oral transmission are inextricably linked in the performance cultures of both jazz and WAM.

And it does not stop there. Any string quartet by Haydn, Mozart, or Bee-
thoven will suffice to make the point. Here, unlike in the previous instances, the musicians play the notes as written—except that, of course, they do not play the notes as written. The notes are represented as fixed pitches with proportionate durations (a quarter-note lasts twice as long as an eighth), with dynamics being indicated only schematically and without any speci-
fication of timbral quality. But in performance every one of these is negoti-
ted between the players, both in the course of rehearsal and in the real
time of performance. Each player accommodates his or her intonation to the others’; rhythms are nuanced in the service of structural articulation or emotional expression and accommodated within the overall ensemble; dyna-
mic and timbral values are adjusted between the players. In other words, the players do not do some things that are specified in the score and do others that are not. The way in which classical scores, like lead sheets, may overdetermine as well as underdetermine performances becomes particu-
larly clear when composers, such as Beethoven on occasion, include finger-
ing in their piano music. Modern orthodoxy has it that players should seek to understand the musical point that Beethoven is conveying through fin-
gering and then try to express that understanding using whatever fingering best suits them. Just as in the case of jazz lead sheets, then, the relationship between WAM notation and performance is highly mediated, with many decisions being delegated to performers and with at least some of these
needing to be negotiated in real time. Playing the notes is nowhere near as straightforward as it sounds.

In saying all of this, I have been trying to make two points. The first and more obvious one is that there is improvisation in WAM and performance of precomposed materials in jazz. The second and less obvious point is that there is no categorical distinction between improvisation and performance; rather, there is a continuum of practices. Of course, a different attitude toward the text informs the performance of Mozart and Strayhorn, as well as the way it is experienced by listeners (who, in the case of the Mozart, are likely to know in advance which quartet will be played and may have come specifically to hear it). Such obvious differences may disguise but do not eliminate the irreducible core of real-time determination that is shared between WAM performance and jazz improvisation, and it is this irreducible core that I see as grounding the social dimension of all music, WAM included. Regarded as a lead sheet, Mozart’s score functions as a framework within which the players negotiate specific values in real time, and they do so by ear, through processes of continuous accommodation between self and other. To this extent, playing a Mozart quartet might be described as an act of “collective improvisational performance,” to repeat Johnson’s (2002, 104) words, and another of his characterizations of jazz becomes even more telling when applied to WAM: it is “an earsite in an epistemology dominated by eyesight.” Similarly, Ingrid Monson’s (1996, 84) observation that in jazz, “To say that a player ‘doesn’t listen’ . . . is a grave insult,” applies with no less force to classical quartet performance. Small wonder then that Richard Cochrane (2000, 140) concludes that “the practice of improvisation in fact exists in all musical performances except those carried out solely by machines”; and when George Lewis (2009, 4) claims that “improvisation’s ubiquity becomes the modality through which performance is articulated,” he intends this to apply not just to music but to social action in general.

In putting forward these arguments I do not claim that Johnson’s distinctions between eye and ear, product and process, or individual and community are illusory. They are real and deeply embedded in musical culture, but they have been drawn in the wrong place. The crucial distinction lies not within the practices of performance, which are aurally mediated and public (because you can hear me as well as I can hear myself), but between the practices of performance and the discourses around music that are predicated on the ontology of eye, product, and individual. I can illustrate this by going back to the string quartet, which I now declare to be the first page of Mozart’s String Quartet No. 14 in G major, K. 387. A traditional musicologi-
cal description (what is often, and tellingly, referred to as a “reading”) of the first ten bars might go something like this:

A two-bar opening phrase moves from the tonic to the supertonic and is balanced by another two-bar phrase that returns through the dominant to the tonic; this pair of matched two-bar phrases leads in turn to a four-bar phrase in which a distinctive motif ascends from the viola through the second violin to the first violin. This culminates in a homophonic but deceptive cadence on the submediant, which is immediately rectified through the addition of a two-bar closing phrase that cadences in the tonic, resulting in an extension of the normative 8-bar sentence to 10 bars.

This musicological language is abstract and depersonalized: reference is made not to people making music together (the description is of “the music,” not a particular performance of it) but to instrumental agencies. These are conceived as timeless entities, which is why the whole description is expressed in the present tense. Then there is the “distinctive motif” that ascends through the instruments (the ascent is an ocular image): it is passed from one instrument to another, rather like handing over the baton in a relay race. It is in that sense an object and as such potentially can be owned (the fact that it is distinctive means that it could in principle be copyrighted). And if we ask what this object is made of, the answer will probably be “sound structures”—that is, specific configurations of pitch classes and rhythms—but since they can be usefully specified only in notational terms, this is tantamount to saying that the object is made of text. In any case, the object is something that exists independently of performance, with the performance accordingly being reduced to an optional extra or supplement, rather like reading a poem out loud.

The strange ontology of musical works draws on long traditions of textuality and Platonic idealism, elaborated through Romantic notions of individual creative vision and the correlative concept of art addressed to the experiencing subject. It is also linked to the aesthetic ideology of musical autonomy, according to which music’s value lies in its transcending of the social and its access to a higher plane of being. The New Musicology of the 1990s was defined by its opposition to this ideology. Susan McClary (1991), for example, argued that the canonic WAM repertory embodies hegemonic values such as misogyny and racism and does so in a particularly pernicious way because the apparent naturalness and self-evidence of musical meaning disguises its ideological constructedness. Influenced by Adorno, the New Musicologists sought to demonstrate the deep links between music
and social meaning, but they did so through textual analysis, aiming to identify and decode social articulations composed into the score. In this way they retained the depersonalizing discourse of traditional musicology even as they redirected it to new ends.

But again, this is not an issue restricted to WAM. Monson (1996, 26) observes, “In an improvisational situation, it is important to remember that there are always musical personalities interacting, not merely instruments or pitches or rhythms.” She also complains that the contribution of individuals has been overemphasized at the expense of the group contexts from which improvisation emerges. “The melodic vocabulary of the improvising jazz soloist,” she writes, “must always be seen as emerging in a complex dialogue between the soloist and the rhythm section” (Monson 2002, 114). In the same way, Wadada Leo Smith condemns the belief of those he wittingly refers to as “‘musical analysts’” that “the solo-line is the creation of a ‘soloist,’ and that the other improvisers involved are mere accompaniment,” adding “this is an invalid evaluation” (Walser 1999, 321). Daniel Fischlin (2009, 4) goes as far as to claim, “The individual does not in this sense really exist, except as a function of the community out of which s/he emerges.” And Monson (1996, 80) extends her attack on the persistent misunderstandings of jazz as far as that stronghold of ocular-centricity, the musical text. “At the moment of performance,” she says, “jazz improvisation quite simply has nothing in common with a text (or its musical equivalent, the score).” Almost half a century earlier, Alfred Schutz (1964, 169), for whom making music together was a paradigm case of intersubjective communication, made precisely the same comment about WAM. He went on to claim, “There is no difference in principle between the performance of a string quartet and the improvisations at a jam session of accomplished jazz players” (177). I maintain that all of Monson’s points apply as much to WAM as they do to jazz.

One implication of this is that the distinction between improvised and performed music cannot be established on empirical grounds—that is, in terms of the analysis of musical material. That, indeed, is the outcome of a recent study by Andreas Lehmann and Reinhard Kopiez (2010). Their subjects were quite consistent in rating how far various musical examples were “spontaneous/improvised” or “coherent/rehearsed,” but there was no significant correlation between these ratings and whether the example in question was in fact improvised or precomposed. This fits with Philip Auslander’s (2013, 54) argument that “the fact that music is improvised is not accessible or verifiable through the act of listening.” He sees improvisation as “a social
characteristic of jazz performance rather than an ontological characteristic of the music” (57), an agreement between players and listeners to treat the performance as if it is improvised. An expression of this is the elaborate gestural stage play through which both jazz and rock musicians create the impression of—or perform—spontaneity. (It is telling that this stage play is essentially identical to that through which WAM soloists perform the authenticity of their emotional engagement with the music they are playing.) In short, Auslander sees improvisation as constituted through a form of social contract, and there are a number of other musicological concepts of which the same has been argued. Jeffrey Kallberg (1996, chap. 1) has applied this approach to genre, which, despite huge efforts, researchers in music information retrieval have failed to define satisfactorily in material terms (Craft 2008). I have described work identity as a social construction only weakly supported by material features (Cook 1999, 203); in this case, it is analytic philosophers of music who have wasted their efforts.

In this chapter, however, I pursue the argument in a different direction. In traditional musicological thinking (as in music philosophy), the concept of the score is thoroughly entangled with the Romantic aesthetic ideology to which I have referred. The question I want to address is how we might think about scores if, in contrast to the traditional musicological approach, we approach them as frameworks for social action and interaction.

Western “Art” Music and Social Interaction

When your discipline gets weighed down by sedimented assumptions and ideology, it helps to view your problems from the perspective of other disciplines. At this point, then, I want to inject two perspectives from art theory and material culture. One is Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2002) “relational aesthetics.” Though now arguably suffering from overexposure, it embodies an insight that sets into relief the overwhelming orientation of traditional musicology and aesthetics toward subjective experience: Bourriaud proposes that one of the functions of art is to construct social relationships among its spectators. While Bourriaud’s purpose is to provide a theoretical basis for specific developments in the art of the 1990s, I see this as one of the basic functions of music in general.

The second perspective arises out of the Peter B. Lewis Building in Cleveland, Ohio, which was designed by Frank Gehry for the Weatherhead School of Management and opened in 2002. Gehry views buildings as expressing and fostering social relationships. Because learning is a social activity,
writes Kim Cameron (who was dean of the Weatherhead School during this period), the Peter B. Lewis Building “had to foster lots of chance collisions and productive interaction patterns” (Cameron 2003, 90). The same approach characterized the design and construction process. It is well known, as documented by Eric Abrahamson and David H. Freedman (2006, 87–88), that no detailed blueprints were issued to contractors. They were expected to derive the measurements they needed from a scale model of the building. This forced them “to work with the Gehry team in the task of translating the look and feel of the model into a full-scale structure,” expressing Gehry’s philosophy that “everyone working on the building should keep creating throughout the construction process.” A wide range of visual aids was used as means of engaging the many different parties involved in the project. Richard Boland and Fred Collopy (2004, 11), both faculty members at Weatherhead, refer to the many models they saw as the design developed; Gehry’s team “work with their hands,” they say, “making models of the exterior and interior elements out of paper, metal, plastic, waxed cloth, or whatever material gives them both the form and feeling that they are seeking.”

Perhaps most telling are the freehand sketches that Gehry produced at an early stage of the design process (reproduced in Cameron 2003, 91). These calligraphic sketches are so abstract that if you saw them out of context, it would probably not occur to you that they represent a building. But when you see them that way, the spatial and aesthetic characteristics that they embody become aspects of the building. They do not embody significant informational content in the way that, for example, a quantity surveyor might define it: it would be absurd to think of the building being costed on such a basis. Boland and Collopy (2004, 11) explain that the sketches are “meant to be spontaneous and evocative of both form and emotion,” while for Cameron (2003, 90) they express “a playful sense of experimentation and right-brain thinking.” But the best insight into their function comes from Gehry himself: “You have to dream an idea. . . . Then you have to work it through the staff in my office. You have to work it through the client, all the people and the committee who have things to do with it. . . . There are thousands of people in the end that touch this thing” (quoted in Cameron 2003, 91). The purpose of these sketches, then, is to facilitate collaborative work, setting out a broad visual and affective framework without preempting the innumerable concrete decisions that must be negotiated in the course of the collaboration. In short, they structure the social relationships that are necessary to bring the project to a successful conclusion.
Such an interaction of human and material agents would lend itself to analysis in terms of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (2005), and this kind of approach would readily transfer to the analysis of graphic scores in music. However, I shall return to Mozart’s K. 387, but now in the context of a conference held in the Peter B. Lewis Building shortly after it opened. Entitled “Managing as Designing,” the conference was conceived around Gehry (who attended) and his building, and its aim was to develop a new vocabulary for management on the basis of the concepts and practices of design. “Design” was interpreted in a broad sense, and I was invited. My paper was titled, “In Praise of Symbolic Poverty,” and it presented conventional musical notation as a means of designing concerted action. I construed K. 387 as a performative script that choreographs a series of varied social engagements: it sets out a broad vision of what is to be achieved but at the same time, through the radical under-determination that characterizes staff notation, delegates local decisions to be made on the ground, in real time. It invokes and relies on individuals’ tacit knowledge and creativity, their ability both literally and metaphorically to play things by ear. This is the musical equivalent of what, in the architectural design process, Gehry (2004, 21) refers to as “staying liquid” rather than fixing design decisions at too early a stage, and to my surprise this turned out to be the guiding idea of the whole conference. In the case of music, it represents not only a more positive but also a more realistic alternative to Dean Rowan’s conception of the classical score as an exhaustive specification of deliverables mandating fully accountable implementation, in a kind of musical analog to the ISO 9000 family of quality management standards. In short, my claim, as Monson (1996, 186) says of jazz, is that music has “as one of its central functions the construction of social context”—an idea that precisely parallels Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics.

In talking about the string quartet as a model for social interaction in music, I have chosen the classical genre that perhaps most closely resembles jazz improvisation. Both embody the same relational values: the need to play by ear—to communicate through the public medium of musical sound—means that everyone is open to everyone else, resulting in an ensemble that is egalitarian or, at least, in which hierarchies are dynamic and negotiated. Both genres involve the same give and take that characterizes polite conversation, and it is no accident that the metaphor of conversation was as deeply embedded in eighteenth-century thinking about chamber music as in twentieth-century thinking about jazz. But this is not the only form of sociality that is embedded in classical music. If the metaphor of con-
conversation serves to define classical chamber music, then one of its features is that each player has something to play that makes sense both in its own terms and in relation to what others are playing. This is not only the case of Mozart’s string quartets. As a former oboist, I would maintain that it is the case of his symphonies, too—but not of Beethoven’s. Seen from the oboists’ desk, a change took place in symphonic writing around the beginning of the nineteenth century. From then on, a given textural element might be assigned at one moment to one instrument or set of instruments and at the next moment to another. The overall sound makes sense for the audience, but for the players the individual instrumental parts no longer make the kind of sense that they did in Mozart’s symphonies.

The music still makes sense, of course, but it makes sense as heard from the conductor’s podium or from the auditorium, not from the oboists’ desk or the back row of the violins. And that means that performance becomes the expression of a different structure of social relationships from the chamber music model. The rank-and-file players become not so much participants in a collective social event as skilled workers employed to perform certain predefined services for the benefit of the ticket-buying public. It is at this time that the conductor appears, a silent performer who coordinates and supervises operations, rather in the manner—to continue with the architectural analogy—of a project manager, essentially representing the clients’ interests, though with due attention to other stakeholders. One such stakeholder, although normally absent, is the composer, who now becomes not so much a musical dramatist, choreographing real-time interactions between performers, as a sound designer. In short, a fundamentally different management structure is in place compared with that in a Mozart symphony (which normally would have been led, rather than conducted, by the principal violinist). There are new lines of accountability. It is still an insult to say that orchestral musicians do not listen, but it is now most crucially the conductor whom they are not listening to. And this new conception of symphonic performance is retrospectively imposed on eighteenth-century repertory conceived in terms of a quite different form of social organization. The interesting thing is the extent to which this social dimension of the orchestra has been overlooked by the historical performance movement that began in the 1970s as a reaction against the one-size-fits-all consensus of the postwar performance mainstream and by the century’s end had become a mainstream of its own. It is not hard to think of period-style orchestras that set great store on the use of authentic instruments and playing techniques—and then perform Mozart symphonies under a conductor.
This story is really too easy to tell. I could now go on to locate the emergence of ocular-centricity and the rest in this transition from chamber music understood as the collaboration of free individuals to the modern orchestra understood as a top-down structure, with management and employees having highly segmented roles and responsibilities, almost in the manner of Ford-style mass production. (The major constraint on such segmentation—the fact that everyone had to play together at the same time and place—disappeared with the introduction of multitrack recording.) And jazz fits into the story as a mode of resistance to the juggernaut of capitalist reification and alienation. But such a narrative of cultural and social decline is grossly oversimplified and illustrates the temptation to make translations between music and society—and back again—in a manner that is far too glib and literal. I shall make the point from two different points of view. The first is that of management studies, which has built up quite an extensive literature on how conductors and orchestras work together. The general assumption has been that the globe-trotting conductor is a prime exemplar of charismatic leadership—the kind of leadership that involves a top-down relationship between leader and followers. However, the management consultant Yaakov Atik (1994) carried out extensive interviews with conductors, players, and orchestral administrators, from which he concluded that all of these parties considered the most effective leadership style to be a transformational one. This involves “an interactive and dynamic perception of the relationship between superior and subordinate” (27), characterized by the delegation of local decision making to individual players. One of Atik’s informants, an administrator and former player, spoke of the conductor who will “communicate a point about something and from that point on, leave it up to the abilities that he knows the players have” and added, “That is true leadership” (26).

The point can also be made in musicological terms. To do this, I focus on changing practices in the performance of Webern’s music (as described in Day 2000, 178–85). The composer’s later music, for example, his Concerto Op. 24 (1934), is highly pointillistic in style. Melodic fragments of just one or two notes pass from instrument to instrument, often with large registral leaps or dynamic disjunctions. It was precisely Webern’s later music that was valued by the hard-core modernists associated with the Darmstadt Ferienkurse in the 1950s, owing to the perceived objectivity of its compositional engineering, but no performing tradition for this music had at that time come into being. As a result, when Robert Craft made his pioneering recordings of Webern’s complete published works, issued by Columbia in
1957, he coached each player individually “until he had learned his part like a cipher” (Stravinsky and Craft 1972, 95). In other words, the music was performed in just the way Rowan supposes, with each note being slotted into place in accordance with the specifications of the score. In terms of the social interaction involved here, a parallel might be drawn with a number of other musical contexts both within and beyond WAM: the opening of the final movement of Tchaikovsky’s Sixth Symphony (*Pathétique*), in which alternate notes of the tear-jerking melody are assigned to first and second violins, resulting in a peculiar stereophonic effect (but only if first and second violins are arranged in the old-fashioned way, to the left and right of the stage); change ringing of church bells, where each ringer controls one bell; and such non-Western traditions based on the principle of hocketing as the Indonesian angklung ensemble or central African horn orchestras.

The narrative of decline might seize on such practices as embodying an even clearer version of Ford-style segmentation, the model of an alienated society in which the individual worker has no investment in the overall process of production. But in reality these performance situations are neither socially nor musically dysfunctional. They have merely been misdescribed. Writing in the mid-1970s, by which time his own performances of Webern had become much more continuous and even lyrical, Boulez (1976, 79) was highly critical of the performances of twenty years earlier on the grounds that “the musicians did not seem to understand their roles.” As a conductor, he explained the implications of this for rehearsal and performance: “You have to discover how an instrumentalist can play an isolated sound in a way that links it *intelligently* with what has gone before and what follows. You must make him understand a pointillistic phrasing, not just with his intellect but with his physical senses. So long as a player does not realize that when he has a note to play it comes to him from another instrument and passes from him to yet another, . . . he will . . . produce a note that is ‘stupid,’ divorced from context.” As Timothy Day suggests through the judicious juxtaposition of these and other quotations, Boulez was in effect replicating the more general advice offered by the famous modernist conductor Hermann Scherchen (1933, 94) in his *Handbook of Conducting*: “Melodies that are not given out by one soloist throughout, but pass, in subdivision, from one instrument to another, cannot be correctly performed unless each player sings the whole of them as they are played, and contributes his share in accordance with the conception of the whole thus formed.”

As it happens, Scherchen had been in the audience six years earlier when the composer Ernst Krenek achieved a musical *succès de scandale* through
the premiere of his Second Symphony. According to his biographer John Stewart (1991, 43), Krenek “told the players: ‘Now we are going to play a piece which you will not understand one bit. Whoever thinks he has the theme please play very loud.’ The players dutifully did so, and the ragged performance had a colossal effect that produced an immediate uproar in the audience.” Krenek, in other words, created his musical effect through constructing a social situation in which the players precisely did not listen to or negotiate with one another, resulting in a “vision of terror and catastrophe” that “simply overwhelmed” another audience member, the twenty-year-old Adorno.2 By contrast, Scherchen’s utopian image of an orchestra whose members collectively “sing” the melody of which each plays only a few notes dramatizes the nature and extent of the social interaction involved in orchestral performance. The first and second violinists in the fourth movement of Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique each “sing” the complete melody, although they play only half of it, and the effort to coordinate individual and social action, matching collective instrumental sound to individually imagined vocalization, arguably results in an effect of concentration, of the forging of social community against the odds, that would be hard to create in any other manner. (Why else would Tchaikovsky have scored it that way?) The hocketing of change ringing, angklung performance, and African horn orchestras can similarly be seen as both fostering and expressing a particular kind of social interdependence and cohesion, and in this way what might too easily be misinterpreted as an extreme form of segmentation or alienation turns out to be more realistically understood as an extreme form of communality. In essence, what we are talking about is distributed cognition. As Burrows (2004, 2) writes, “Cognition may literally be shared among individuals through the mediation of objects, tools, symbols, and signs” (although in Scherchen’s case, the mediating element is melody). Tellingly, Burrows introduces the idea of distributed cognition in order to explain the “subtle, web-like interplay” of social and musical relationships that develops in the course of free, collective improvisation—what, in a neat inversion of Jung’s terminology, he terms “the collective conscious” (2004).

I conclude from this that the irreducibly social dimension of musical interaction extends all the way from free jazz to modernist orchestral music and that it is only the lingering effect of idealist aesthetic ideologies, on the one hand, and painful racial histories, on the other, that lead us to think otherwise. But I would pursue the argument one step further. I hope I have deconstructed the opposition between jazz and WAM as musical practices. Despite the obvious differences between jazz improvisation and WAM performance,
not to mention the equally striking differences between different genres of jazz and WAM, there is a level at which both are socially grounded through mutual listening, real-time interaction, and collectivity. But that does not explain away the image of WAM presented by Johnson and by Rowan. Given WAM’s marginalized role in contemporary culture, it is ironic that it remains widely associated with a hegemonic establishment, with institutionalized authority in terms of education and validation, and with bureaucratic documentation. Even if in important ways WAM notations function like Gehry’s sketches, the notations look a lot more like the blueprints Gehry did not give to his contractors. The contrast with the highly mythologized culture of free jazz is palpable. But there is a sense in which this might be seen as one of WAM’s strengths. We do not live in the utopian community signified by free jazz. We live in an administered world constituted by a hegemonic establishment, institutionalized authority, and bureaucratic documentation. The issue is how we can make this world habitable, how we can personalize and take possession of it in the same way that, in the built environment, individuals “refuse the neat divisions and classifications of the powerful and, in doing so, critique the spatialization of domination” (Cresswell 2006, 47, paraphrasing Michel de Certeau). At a literal level, personal stereo from the Walkman to the iPod has been celebrated as a means of taking possession of the cityscape, but at a deeper and more social level, the most characteristic transformational potential of classical music may lie in its demonstration of how the administered world may be opened up to improvisation, social interaction, and creativity. And seen from such a perspective, music does not just symbolize social actions and relationships: it enacts them. It is not just a metaphor but a metonym.

Second Thoughts

But if that is a conclusion, it is a problematic one for a number of reasons. One is that characterizations of music as the expression of an ideal society tend to be unrealistic and sentimental. Alan Stanbridge (2008, 8) complains about Jacques Attali’s “rather idealized claim that free jazz was a prime example of a music that heralded ‘the arrival of new social relations’ . . . and offered the possibility of the ‘emergence of a truly new society.’ ” (Stanbridge also casts doubt on Attali’s basic knowledge of jazz.) A related issue is the extent to which the enactment of social relationships in performance translates into actual relationships between human individuals. I made a distinction between the depersonalized agents of traditional musicological
descriptions of Mozart quartets and the social interactions that the music choreographs. But what do these interactions have to do with the actual relationships between the male second violinist and three female members of a student quartet, in which the second violinist was the weakest player but felt that, as a man, he should exercise an authority that was musically inappropriate (Davidson and Goode 2002)? What this shows is that although musicians enact their parts, they do so in the same sense that actors play their roles. While theatrical and cinematic diegesis is based on the difference between the time that is narrated and the time of narration, musical diegesis exists only in real time—but it is still diegesis, and it is as diegesis that it enters the realm of the aesthetic. There is, then, a diegetic gap between the social enactment I have been talking about and the actual social relationships between the players. How easily this gap is jumped is not easy to say. It is the same issue that confronts understanding of the real-world effects of videogames and pornography.

Even if we accept the efficacy of music’s directly enacted microsocialities—which represent only the first of Georgina Born’s (2010a, 232) four orders of music’s social mediation—we still have the issue of how they might be disseminated across society, as Attali’s vision implies. According to Gustavo Dudamel, former member and conductor of the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra, “An orchestra is a little community, but the perfect community, because you need to listen [to] the other musicians.” But what makes the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra different from other such ensembles is that it is the apex of an entire system of orchestral education in Venezuela, through which the microsocialities of performance are translated into broader social action. And, of course, if we consider musical participation across all styles and genres rather than merely in relation to WAM, the extent of teenage socialization that is grounded on musical performance adds up to a significant intervention in the wider social order. There is also the issue of how far socialization might be achieved through virtual participation—that is, through watching or listening to music: when I listen to classical chamber music I feel I am hearing the sound of social interaction, and that is what keeps me listening however well I know the music in a score-based, informational sense. In the absence of empirical support, however, the idea that listening can in itself constitute a medium of socialization may amount to no more than wishful thinking.

And then, how can all this be reconciled with the awkward fact that free jazz and classical chamber music—the genres on which I have concentrated, and on which other writers about music and social interaction also con-
centrate—represent niche practices? It is again Stanbridge (2008, 10) who makes the argument most pointedly: the “more challenging forms of contemporary jazz and improvised music remain resolutely minority tastes,” he writes, “which tends to circumscribe rather severely the utopian and far-reaching claims made regarding the development of ‘new social relations’ or ‘the transformation of societies’ based primarily on free jazz or the avant-garde.” Perhaps, he concludes, the editors of Critical Studies in Improvisation/Études critiques en improvisation should acknowledge “not only the positive socio-political potential of improvisatory creative practice, but also its social and political limits” (10). But here the problem may be that, in stressing the socializing power of musical performance, commentators have laid too much emphasis on a few iconic genres in which core values of interaction are elaborated into symbolically resonant representations of ideal societies. After all, real-time processes of entrainment and imitation are widely distributed across the spectrum of the world’s music. As Tal-Chen Rabinowitch (2010) explains, entrainment is linked to emotional empathy, “which depends first and foremost on the ability to adjust to someone else’s inner pace, to shift from one’s own rhythm and be prepared to open up to and synchronize with someone else who is in a different emotional state,” while imitation “is able to provide us with an experience that is very close to the first-person experience, enabling us to recognize and internalize the emotional conditions of another.” Rabinowitch’s experimental study, based on a battery of empathy measures, showed that children who were taking part in a year-long program involving games-based musical participation outperformed a control group who participated in similar games but without the music component.

There is increasing evidence that music has evolved as a means of coordinating social interaction and, in particular, managing situations of social and emotional uncertainty (Cross 2006). If that is the case, it would explain the apparent universality of entrainment as a phenomenon that is equally musical and social. To this extent, as with music and film or music and performance, it is not a matter of music and the social, because music is already part of the social (as well as the other way round). And that would imply that there is a level at which the empirical evaluation of music’s role in socialization becomes impossible, because—unlike in Rabinowitch’s study—there is no possibility of having a control group. The experiment of creating a human society without music has never been attempted.
Notes

1. Since I wrote this paper in 2010, I have developed certain parts of it in *Beyond the Score*: see Cook 2014, esp. chaps. 7–8.

2. I owe this quotation to Matthew Pritchard, who points out that it conflicts with Krenek’s account of the incident (in which the words are attributed to the conductor).