Improvisation In Different Music Contexts

Improvisation is defined as “the extemporaneous composition or free performance of a musical passage,” by Britannica. However, the definition of improvisation has greatly changed over time and through different contexts. For example, in a Jazz context improvisation includes improvised solos. While in a Baroque context it includes ornamentation, figured bass and articulations, and in a Hip-Hop it involves MCing or rapping. In all contexts, however, improvisation shares similar characteristics. They all have a bank of predetermined articulations, pitches, or words that a performer can chose from while improvising. A pivotal point in improvisation was the introduction and improvement of recording technologies and practices which have caused a change in how we appreciate, understand and perform improvisations.

The first recording technology appeared in America in 1877 when Thomas Edison developed his prototype of his aluminium foil cylinder phonograph. He then perfected his phonograph using solid cast waxes which could be shaved and reused. The earliest surviving records were made using this technique, including Brahms playing his Hungarian Dance no. 1 as a piano solo in Vienna in 1889 . Emilie Berliner, a German working in New York, then improved this recording technique further by providing the predecessor of the gramophone that is now known today. In 1902 Fred Gaisberg persuaded the tenor Enrico Caruso to record 10 Songs and Arias with a wax disc recorder setup. Their success prompted other recording companies to set up and start recording their own music. In 1950 recording techniques started to include the use of long-playing (LP) microgroove records that were made of different materials, such as plastics. Meanwhile, in Germany from 1928 through to the 1950s, magnetic tape, which allowed a performer to take as many retakes and restarts required to create a perfect recording, was being developed. The use of magnetic tape became mainstream to the world in the form of a cassette tape in the late 1960s and was strong competition for gramophones and records. Technology has since evolved through the digital age where CDs, DVDs and now hand-held phones can record and play music. This increasing accessibility to recording equipment and the ability to record as much and as many times as you want has encourage musicians to move towards a state a perfection. No one wishes to publish music that is not perfect as we now have the means to perfect performances. Modern producers and singers are now known for using autotune where they tune the notes a singer sings to make a performance perfect. Always seeing perfect versions of music has caused many other musicians to feel pressured into achieving perfection, even though the perfection perceived may not be an actuality. This pressure for perfection has had a serious backlash on improvisation, an art form where impromptu decisions and mistakes are encouraged. Such pressure has forced jazz musicians to prewrite their improvised solos, modern baroque musicians to prewrite articulations and ornamentations and abandon figured bass and has seen the rise of hip-hop artists who no longer rap “off the head”.

When thinking of improvisation, the most common type to come to mind is Jazz soloing. Jazz arose from the Blues that the African slaves sung. The slaves sung to keep each other company and to pass time while they worked. They most commonly sung heartfelt and melancholic melodies that later became known as Blues. These slaves often improvised what they sung using a bank of known African rhythms and pitches derived from scales. This characterised what we now know as soloing in Jazz. Improvisation in jazz is defined as

extemporarily composing melodies, “guided by a non-negotiable framework that constrains what the soloist can play.” Mistakes while soloing are encouraged and learnt from However, due to the nature of recording practices some Jazz musicians, and in most high school jazz bands, an “improvised” solo will be written out. F.J Barrret states that “given the highly exploratory and tentative nature of improvisation, the potential for failure and incoherency always lurks just around the corner.” The ideal expectation of perfection that is encouraged by recording is put in jeopardy in jazz improvisation. Commonly, when a famous jazz improvisor comes up with a highly popular and successful improvisation that solo will be transcribed and then relearnt by many aspiring musicians. The solo will also be recorded to “satisfy the audiences who grew fond of the solos and regarded them as integral parts of the compositions’ performance tradition.” This shows that not only did a performer strive for perfection, but the audience demanded it, placing further pressure on a performer.

Another form of improvisation is in the articulation and ornamentation of baroque music. Most people don’t associate improvisation with baroque or western art music as their understanding of improvisation derives from jazz. Baroque improvisation is not necessarily composing melodies but embellishing pre-existing ones. Traditionally, ornamentation was used as a way for a musician to show off their virtuosity. They often came up with such embellishments on the spot. Unfortunately, musicians of today no longer embellish their own music. There are many recordings and copies of music available where it has been pre-embellished. This can be seen in the following example of the Adagio movement from Marcello’s Oboe in C minor (or D minor depending on the transcription).

The first image is a transcription of the original composition. There is no articulation, nor are there any ornaments. A baroque musician would have been able to include articulations and ornamentations on the spot as indicated by the harmonic line composed by Marcello.

In comparison, the second transcription includes both articulations and is highly ornamented. This version would have at some point been transcribed from a performance and has since become the most famous rendition of this movement. Many student musicians are also told to find their favourite recorded version of a piece and copy it often meaning the students don’t even use their own ideas of phrasing. Being taught to copy other musician’s “perfection”, as encouraged by recording techniques, has allowed for the acceptance of prewritten ornaments. It is important to note that although improvisation in Western Art music fell out of favour during the Classical period the cause for not returning to improvisation in a modern context is due to the need for perfection installed in us by viewing others “perfect” recordings.

One final form of improvisation is MCing, or rapping, in Hip Hop. Hip Hop developed as a way for underprivileged and oppressed African American teenagers of the 1970s to express themselves. They often competed in rap battles as opposed to violence. Hip hop has its roots in the Griot tradition, otherwise known as African praise singing. A Griot was a boy who went from town to town reciting the current affairs in a stylised vocal manner. They were required to improvise in order to be able to provide the news each day. This stylised vocal manner holds a high similarity to rapping. “‘Rapping’ is understood as an art form of entertainment by which a ‘man of words’ performs speaking verse to rhythmic accompaniment and in which virtuosity, spontaneity and the manner of the performance are important.” Most traditional rappers would participate in what Big Daddy Kane described as “Off-the-top-of-the-head” or “off the dome”, which is “when you don’t write it and say whatever comes to mind.” Artists such as Chris Turner still practice freestyle rapping by taking suggestions of themes from the audience as to

what to rap about. However, with the popularisation and recording of Hip hop, rapping veered away from this traditional way of improvising. The artist Eminem claimed himself to be the best at rapping in the song “Rap God”. However, due to the sheer velocity at which he is rapping there is no way that this was improvised and was instead prewritten and recorded until perfection was achieved. Mainstream artists such as Drake, Cardi B, Nicki Minaj and Fetty Wap all participate in the use of prewritten raps. In this case, the use of recording has allowed artists to prepare a rap and practise it until they are the fastest rappers completely detracting from the emotion and skill of an “off-the-top-of-the-head” rapper. Recording has completely redefined rapping and removed the improvisatory element of rapping.

In conclusion, the improvement of recording techniques has caused a standardisation of art forms involving improvisation. In jazz improvisation recording has caused artists to feel the need to achieve perfection due to the high expectations of the audience. Unfortunately, in Jazz mistakes are encouraged as a learning curve and as students become afraid of mistakes, they become unwilling to improvise so instead prewrite improvisations or play transcriptions. In baroque improvisation students are encouraged to find recordings of their favourite rendition of a piece and copy it causing students to no longer improvise their own ornamentations. In the same way baroque musicians are able to access transcriptions of popular versions of ornamentations and copy them. Finally, hip hop improvisation, in the form of MCing has lost its improvisatory element. Recording has caused rapping to become a competition to see who can rap the fastest and not who can come up with the best lyrics. This has caused rappers to prewrite a rap and practice it until it is perfect. In these ways recording practices has caused a redefinition or a complete loss of improvisation in jazz, baroque and hip hop.