

# An Introduction to Free Improvisation Music Through YouTube

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**Abstract**—Even though it has passed more than half a century, free improvisation music is still unknown by the big public and still hasn't got the deserved recognition in the artistic and musical circles or institutions. Fortunately, this is starting to change and nowadays it is possible to access to a huge amount of historical and contemporary recordings and videos in internet, especially in the giant site YouTube. The objective of this article is to guide the neophytes in their quest to know more about this multi-faceted music by explaining what it is and how it developed. The text has links to YouTube videos and audios that explain, exemplify or develop the ideas. In addition, a link to a comprehensive list of YouTube videos about free improvisation is provided for further appreciation. The method used for making this list had four steps: researching about the definition and history of this music, searching for the important names in YouTube, watching several suggested links, and finally selecting some of the most relevant.

**Keywords**—*improvisation, experimental music, free improvisation; free music, YouTube music, free jazz, guided improvisation*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Probably the first music made by our oldest ancestors was a free improvisation [1] that explored found natural objects and/or their voices with curiosity and pleasure, perhaps imitating the aural surrounding. After some trials they observed the effect over themselves and over nature, and started to remember, develop, and collect by oral tradition some combinations of sounds that were suitable for ritual or amusement purposes. Since then composition and improvisation have been walking together in almost all traditions; although in the western "classical" world the composers began gaining more relevance until reaching a peak in the late XIX century romantic music and the early XX century contemporary music [2]. This process is reflected nowadays in the great majority of music schools, universities, and conservatories; where improvisation is not considered as part of the curricula, and there is a specialization division between the creative -the composer- and the executive -the interpreter. Nevertheless "*improvisation remains predominant within musical idioms centered upon communal interaction, individual expression, and the transmission of*

*musical ideas through modeling and imitation*" [3]. Fortunately, the academia and some cultural institutions are starting to accept and value improvisation because it has an important role in jazz, traditional and popular music from different corners of the world, European music from middle age to classicism; and free improvisation. Concerts, festivals, scholar texts, symposiums [4], workshops, and even formal studies about free improvisation are quickly blooming in many countries, especially the "developed" ones [5].

The article is aimed to introduce the neophytes to this multi-faceted music by defining it and describing its influences and history. Through all over the text there are links to YouTube website that further elaborates or exemplifies the ideas. Additionally, the readers can access a more comprehensive YouTube list [6] that includes a brief description of the links. Although it is possible to find good references in other sites like Bandcamp, Soundcloud, or Spotify; YouTube was chosen because it is free, diverse, and have a huge amount of material about free improvisation; although some videos are only accessed with YouTube Premium and some of the links could eventually be erased by the channel owner or the copyright owner.

Even though it is helpful to listen the audios, watch the concerts' videos, and hear the improvisers' words; the best way to really feel and understand free improvisation is attending to live performances, and even better: doing it with other people, no matter if you are a musician or not.

*"Theoretically speaking, a recorded document, whether visual or auditory, is never "improvisation", because it is a relic of a past activity; improvisation refers only to the act of spontaneous creation and not to any consequences of that act. Improvisation can only be analyzed indirectly, through considering its remnants, whether electronically recorded or mentally remembered"* [7].

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

A systematic literature review about the definition and history of free improvisation music was the basic method of this article. The search included physical and digital books,

journals, and articles; as well as many hours of listening to recordings and watching videos of free improvisers. All this data was evaluated and complemented with the author's own experience of 15 years as a free improviser. The YouTube links provided in the article and in the complementary list were selected after applying a subjective filter on repeated information, less interesting performances, or low quality recordings. The list, which will be updated with the years, is classified in: historical recordings, historical performance videos, contemporary recordings, contemporary performance videos, documentaries, tutorials, talks, series, films, and playlists.

### III. DISCUSSION

#### A. Definition

After six decades of history, the term free improvisation has been widely used by musicians, producers, and scholars; establishing it as a recognizable genre of music, but actually it is more than that: it is a process, a way of doing music, and a musical culture. Defining a music that purposely targets to escape from all kind of rules, systems, analysis, or institutions is indeed complicated and probably any definition will never cover its great diversity.

*"In defence of its molecular fluidity free improvisation is often defined by its practitioners more by its undefined qualities, by what it is not, by what it doesn't do and by what it avoids, rather than by its own idiomatic features..."* [8].

So in a purely etymological sense, free improvisation music is understood as the opposite of any improvised music that is not "free"; in other words: it is improvisation that doesn't has rules, suggestions, or agreements before or during the performance; as well as improvisation that is not controlled, directed, guided, planned, composed, pre-defined, standardized, notated, and/or dependent on styles or genres' particularities. But how a music without pre-defined form or rules can actually be esthetically organized? Free improvisers store in their muscular and musical memories a great quantity of resources that are used intuitively through a mindful listening [9] and an egoless attitude that aim to achieve high quality collaborative real time creations [10]. Free improvisation is order in chaos, logical nonsense, unity in diversity, and for some: it is a mystical communion [11].

Since the beginning of the movement in the early 1960's, free improvisers have been inspired by the political and spiritual ideals of freedom and tried to abrogate any kind of restriction that impede them to reach it [12]. Nevertheless, the fact is that real freedom in music, and perhaps in life, is a utopia as it is understood by Galeano [13]: *"It is on the horizon. I move two steps closer; it moves two steps further away. I walk another ten steps and the horizon runs ten steps further away. As much as I may walk, I'll never reach it. So what's the point of utopia? The point is this: to keep walking"*. As pointed by Burrows [14], in a free improvisation performance there could be certain undescribed rules like:

*"The musicians should have instruments (including their voices), the musicians should play together in the same room, the musicians should listen to one another and use listening as a basis for the creation of further sounds... the performance will last about one hour (or some other specific time), the musicians will play more or less continuously with a few short breaks, the musicians are the performers and the audience members are the spectators (though it is equally possible that some artists may view the audience as participants) [15], the audience will listen and sit quietly"*.

Additionally, if an individual performer hasn't played and/or listened to many different styles of music as possible, and/or hasn't developed an emphatic playing towards the others and the flow of the music; he could be inevitable attached to his own background, memories, ego, and/or experience. Furthermore, a limited technique and/or the intrinsic characteristics of the instrument such as tuning, range, dynamics, or timbre could be a barrier to what the performer may want to express, an obstacle to freedom.

According to Neeman [7], *"the term 'free' in free improvisation...is typically employed in two different ways; it indicates either no preplanning or no stylistic restrictions"*. The same term is used in the music called free jazz, one of the main influences of free improvisation. Indeed, they are so close that sometimes both terms are used to name the same kind of music; but the truth is that not all free jazz is a free improvisation. On the other hand, some free improvisations are called free jazz although they don't resemble to jazz music at all, except for the improvisation. Actually many events, records, videos, or texts have been using the "free improvisation" label to refer not only to the strictly freest one; but also to other types of improvisation that are performed with some kind of plan, restriction, or agreement. A reason for this may be that both kinds of improvisation are normally performed by the same musicians, sometimes even in the same concert. To avoid a misunderstanding between them in this text, the last one will be called guided improvisation [16] and the strict one free improvisation [17].

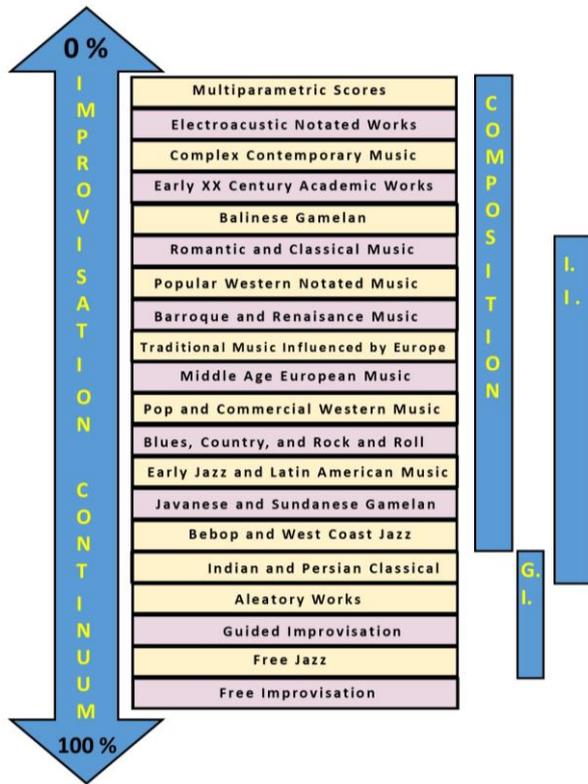


Fig. 1. Subjective and Generalized Position of Genres within the Improvisation Continuum (G.I.= Guided Improvisation, I.I.= Idiomatim Improvisation).

In order to understand the place of free improvisation among improvised music as a whole we need to imagine a continuum that have in one edge the multipara metric compositions with an extremely detailed notation, such as Fernyhough’s [18]. This kind of works tries to control all aspects of the music phenomena, but that’s also an utopia tending towards 0% of improvisation. No matter how hard an interpreter rehearsal a piece, there will always be something that is un-purposely improvised, thus creating a difference in every live performance. The more far we move in this continuum, the more freedom the composer allows; until we reach free improvisation at the opposite edge, tending towards the utopia of 100% of improvisation. Just beside it we found the guided improvisation music, and the more far we move, the more detailed is the notation or the instructions for perform; so at some point guided improvisation merges with composition like in some Hindustani rags compositions, freestyle hip-hop, “In C” by Terry Riley [19], or the composition-improvisation pieces by Roscoe Mitchel, between others.

*“Improvisation is the creation of something new in the moment of performance. It exists exclusively in the present...composition is about planning for the future and interpretation is about determining the meaning of music created in the past” [7].*

### B. History

As stated before, improvisation has been part of the musical history since its beginnings; and nowadays is still important in several traditions in India, Indonesia, Middle East, Japan, China, West Africa, and Gypsi music, just to mention some [20]. Improvisation is also widely used in popular music such as rock, jazz, Latin, blues, and folk; and in a less extend, in western cult music since the middle age [21]. All these types are classified by Derek Bailey [1] as idiomatic improvisation because they follow the esthetic rules of an idiom, this is: a genre or a style. In contrast, guided and free improvisation are called non-idiomatic improvisation.

Richard Scott [8] sees free improvisation as an avant-garde movement which has its ideological roots in earlier movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism [22]. According to him, the avant-garde understanding must be redefined in relation to three concepts that are present in free improvisation: autonomy, popular culture, and praxis. Musically, free improvisation appeared as an answer of experiments and quests in various traditions, becoming a melting pot of musicians from diverse backgrounds.

“[...] In one hand, the freedom wind that blows strong from the USA since the last years of the 1950s -that is the last revolt of the new black music- and in the other the crossroad of contemporary cult music: between the depletion of integral serialism, the opening towards aleatoricism and indeterminacy, stochastic music, and the discovery of sound material in its inner structure, thanks to concrete and electroacoustic music. Not forgetting to mention the rock revolution, the revitalization of popular music at the end of 1950s, and the irruption of a flood of new and diverse esthetics such as minimalism, repetitive music, neo-lyricism, ambience or light music (muzac), mimesis, ethnic music, world music, and a long etcetera. This musical pluralism caused a *totum revolutum* in the sonic scape that, along with new artistic manifestation and hybridizations like sound performance, happening, musical theater, sound sculpture and installations, multimedia, phonetic poetry, radiophonic art, disc manipulation, soundscapes, etc.; reactivated the use of improvisation as a way, a tool or parameter, and an end by itself, recovering the vitality of this way to musically create and express.” [23].

New York, Chicago, California, London, and lately Melbourne and Berlin were important spots for the development of free improvisation. By the mid-1940s swing black musicians in New York experimented with harmony, melody, and rhythm; creating an avant-garde revolutionary movement called bebop [24], which later developed in cool bop, post bob, cubop, hard bop, cool jazz and the “west coast jazz” in the 1950s. By the 1960s jazz players like Cecyl Taylor, Ornette Coleman [25], Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, and some works by John Coltrane broke with the harmonic and metric structure of previous jazz styles, giving birth to free jazz, as it was called later due to the homonymous album by Coleman. They also explored timbre and form, but in general they still were attached to the rhythmic role of the contrabass and drum, and the solo melodic role of

the sax or other melodic/harmonic instruments. Later works drifted apart from these functions, approaching free improvisation's ideal and intermingling with it, like Coltrane's album *Ascension* [26] in 1965. Both bebop and free jazz coincide with the civil rights movements of black Americans, embracing and supporting it in several ways. "For the first time black musicians declared complete opposition to white American and European high culture, asserting the superiority of their own forms, and specifically of improvisation over composition" [8].

Meanwhile academic composers were approaching improvisation in several ways, for example: Henry Cowell's "elastic form" in dance works by the late 1930s [27]; Morton Feldman's graphic notation and spontaneity in the 1950s; Giacinto Scelsi's records, transcriptions, and instrumentation of solo improvisations since the 1950s; Earl Brown's open forms and graphic notation since the 1950s; Iannis Xenakis' "stochastic music" in the late 1950s; Christian Wolf's "game-strategy" pieces in the late 1950s, John Cage's "chance operations", "music of contingency", "indeterminacy" and "structural improvisation" since the 1960s; Karlheinz Stockhausen's "intuitive music" in the late 1960s; Witold Lutoslawski's "limited aleatorism" in the 1960s and 1970s, or the works by Terry Riley, Harry Partch, La Monte Young, Larry Austin, and Pauline Oliveros [28]. According to Anthony Braxton all these terms "are words which have been coined ... to bypass the word improvisation and as such the influence of non-white sensibility" [29], but the fact is that even John Cage, who openly showed his disinterest about jazz, used the term improvisation in some of his works [30].

On the other hand, traditional music from different countries of the world; specially India, Japan, China, Korea, Indonesia, the countries in the Middle East, and the sub-Saharan Africa influenced musicians from the afrological (jazz) and eurological (cult music) traditions, as this two main forces were called by Lewis [27]. Serious ethnomusicological research started by the end of the XIX century, spreading their findings in commercial and documentary recordings, scholar articles, and books. By 1960 Mantle Hood created the first department in the world for the education of ethnomusicology. UCLA's students in Los Angeles, were able to learn Japanese, Chinese, Javanese, Balinese, Persian and Indian traditional music; in which improvisation have an important role [31]. This effort was followed by the founding of similar institutions in the US, Europe, Canada, and Australia; training professionals that could perform several musical systems, a capacity called bi-musicality by Hood. Many of these musicians were involved in the free improvisation movement, bringing new timbre and tunings to the melting pot [32].

"The proliferation of music departments as centers of artistic experimentation [...] resulted in the formation of improvisation groups on campuses across California, and eventually across the United States. Robert Erickson's biographer Charles Shere cites John Cage and Lou Harrison as predecessors of the group-performance trend in California, during their time in the Bay Area during the late 1930s. The

Improvisation Chamber Ensemble (ICE), the New Music Ensemble (NME), and an improvisation ensemble consisting of Pauline Oliveros, Terry Riley, and Loren Rush were founded in the late 1950 or early 1960s" [7].

Other improvisation projects that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and the US were *Stockhausen Ensemble* [33], *Spontaneous Music Ensemble* [34], *The Scratch Orchestra* [35], *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)* [36] - *Art Ensemble of Chicago* [37], *Theater of Eternal Music* [38], *Music Improvisation Company* [39], *AMM* [40], *Iskra 1903* [41], *Globe Unity Orchestra* [42], *The Feminist Improvising Group* [43], *The Brotherhood of Breath* [44], *Taj Mahal Travelers (Japan)* [45], *Solar Arkestra* [46], *Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza* [47]; or the electronic/computer-based improvisation ensembles *Gentle Fire* [48], *Intermodulation* [49], *Musica Elettronica Viva* [50], *Morphogenesis* [51], and the *League of Automatic Composers* [52].

These groups featured different musicians in every performance and/or recording, performing both free and guided improvisation. Their members collaborated widely with another improvisers and projects, creating an amazing movement that quickly spread to other countries and regions in the world. They created horizontal associations and networks for the development of their art and some of them like AACM, Archie Shepp [53], Max Roach, Christian Wolff, Cornelius Cardew, Hans Werner Henze, Vinko Globokar, Larry Austin, and Frederic Rzewski; in accordance to the equal and communal intrinsic characteristics of free improvisation, did political activity and proselytism in favor of black people's rights and/or socialism.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The free improvisation movement is expanding through the world as an alternative to the lack of "feeling" of some contemporary academic music and to the rigidness of some jazz or other idiomatic improvisation styles. Young musicians are using it as a solution to the complicated task to keep a stable group during the last decades of economic crisis and the last year of sanitarian restrictions; and many non-musicians or amateur musicians are discovering the joy of music through listening to concerts or playing at informal free improvisation jam sessions. There is a lot to be researched about the history, pedagogy, philosophy, esthetics, and neuropsychology of free improvisation; so hopefully this text serves as a useful guide to any people willing to introduce themselves, both aurally and intellectually, in this vast and generous ocean.

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