Dedicated to the Memory of
Ernst T. Ferand
(1887–1972)
Pioneer in the Study of Improvisation
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The origins of this volume are obscure, going back at least to the 1960s, when Bruno Nettl, stimulated by his study of Persian music, first began giving occasional seminars on improvisation and marveling at the diversity of the world’s improvisatory systems and practices. Serious planning began in 1994. Melinda Russell joined the project in 1995 as research assistant at the University of Illinois and remained as associate editor after joining the faculty of Carleton College in 1996.

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Last, and most, we wish to express our appreciation to the authors of the studies in this collection. We thank them for permitting us to include their work, and we want particularly to acknowledge their patience and good humor in the face of our frequent and sometimes seemingly inconsistent demands, and the inevitable but unforeseen delays, in what has sometimes been a slow but hopefully rewarding process.

B.N.
M.R.
INTRODUCTION

An Art Neglected in Scholarship

BRUNO NETTL

In the history of musicology, improvisation—sometimes defined as the creation of music in the course of performance—has played a minor role. Musicologists have been concerned in the first instance with composition, and less with the process than with the completed piece of music as set down by its creator. Affected by the research traditions of visual art and literature, they have concentrated on the finished work, analyzed the interrelationships of its components, and looked at its history, but rarely have they been concerned with the varying orders of creativity that may have led to the final product. Although it would be foolish to ignore the occasional reference to improvisation, there are few studies that go into the subject itself in detail, and thus it is reasonable to consider this form of music making as relatively neglected.

With the aim of helping to remedy this situation, this volume presents several studies of musical improvisation in a number of cultures and repertories using a variety of approaches. The purpose of this introductory essay is to provide a common context for these studies by offering some observations on the history of research on musical improvisation, the present state of scholarship, and some of the major issues.

In Musical Scholarship

About twenty years ago, it would have been appropriate to say that only one scholar had devoted himself substantially to the study of improvised music and improvisation, Ernst Ferand (1887–1972) stood out as the quintessential specialist. His book, Die Improvisation in der Musik (1938), devoted largely (but not exclusively) to Western music, was then the only substantial work. And Ferand was also the author of by far the largest encyclopedia article on improvisation (Ferand 1957) and other works on improvised European music, and he was generally the person upon whom editors called when the subject needed to be circumscribed. Ferand took a broad view of improvisation, providing historical, ethnographic, and systematic depth, showing that it was many things to many peoples, periods, and groups of scholars.

It is surprising (but may not be to those who know Ferand’s book) that no one since Ferand has tried to write a general book on the subject. To be sure, since then, especially since about 1960, scholarship on improvisation has in-
creased greatly, with the expansion of jazz studies and ethnomusicological studies of South, West, and Southeast Asian cultures, and with the growth of improvisatory techniques in experimental music and music education. And yet, even now, the synthetic literature on improvisation—in contrast to studies of individual musics—remains modest.

But progress has been made, as a brief survey of landmark publications of the last three decades readily shows. Two books by authors technically outside musicology have had some impact. David Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand* (1978) analyzes the process of learning jazz improvisation in the author's own experience, relating position and posture of the body, the physical possibilities and tendencies deriving from the structure and physiology of the hand, psychological insight, and approaches of cultural studies, such as ethnomethodology, and of philosophical phenomenology. But essentially it is a case study showing the relationship between conscious intention and behavior in music. Derek Bailey's *Improvisation* (1992) described a number of improvisational systems from the viewpoint of a composer, with emphasis on the relationship of contemporary group improvisation to jazz, baroque, and Indian musics. Here the orientation is practical and principally directed to those concerned with contemporary Western culture but is informed by comparative insight from music history and ethnomusicology. The area conveniently termed "systematic musicology" has also produced contributions. Of particular interest is the work of Jeff Pressing (e.g., 1984, 1988), which deals with physiology and neuropsychology, with motor control, and with concepts of intuition, creativity, and artificial intelligence, proposing a model of improvisation for understanding the processes of learning and performance. Pressing uses cross-cultural data but focuses on the concept of improvisation as something that can be analyzed outside the context of specific cultures.

The art of improvisation, as the concept is ordinarily used in Western discourse about music, appears to be quite different from the improvisatory processes that are necessary in ordinary speech, or from improvisation as a way of dealing with emergencies. Nevertheless, scholars dealing with the concept of improvisation as a universal cutting across cultural domains have used musical improvisation as a model and musico-theoretical research as an exemplar (e.g., Tambiah 1985; Tarasti 1993; and the synthesis by Sawyer 1996). The increased attention given to improvisation as an aspect of North American and European music education, some of it reviving ideas of early educators such as Emile Jaques-Dalcroze and Zoltan Kodaly, has produced important research, some of it drawing on the findings of ethnomusicologists (e.g., Campbell 1991).

Ethnomusicologists have dealt with improvised music for over a century, but the study of improvisation as a specific process is a later development. The word does not appear in the indices of major classics by Kunst (1959) and Merriam (1964). One of the earliest studies devoted to improvised performances as such was published by Rycroft (1962). But in the course of the late 1960s and 1970s, as my reference list reveals, a major cluster of publications appeared.

One of the most influential works affecting the study of improvisation was Albert Lord's classic, *The Singer of Tales* (1965). Although the term "improvisation" does not appear, Lord provides models for the understanding of South Slavic oral epic poetry, its structure and methods of performance. A close relationship between oral transmission and improvisation is postulated, and Lord's approach has sometimes led later scholars to the questionable view that all orally transmitted material is not only at some point improvised (which is arguable), but equally improvisatory (which I would deny).

Several conferences and the resulting publications have helped us to make strides. In 1968, a conference on improvisation in a number of cultures was held at the University of Chicago. The resulting papers were not assembled, but some were published individually. Each speaker was asked to address a group of common questions, for example, "How would you define the limits of improvisation in this music?" or "How does the performer learn the archetypal patterns?" and "How has improvisation affected the music that is non-improvised, or vice versa?" (Malm 1975, 44, 64). These kinds of questions suggest that the conference attempted to find a method for comparative analysis. Participants wished to determine what there is by way of improvisation in a variety of cultures, not focusing on cultures and repertories that have, as it were, made a specialty of improvising. Thus William Malm's study of Japanese *Shoden* (cited above) discusses the relationship of variation and improvisation in a music in which improvisation plays a restricted role.

A second coherent group of papers resulted from the Symposium on Improvisation in the Performing Arts in Honolulu, 1983, published together in volume 19 of the Yearbook for Traditional Music (e.g., Kaeppler 1987; Kassebaum 1987; Susilo 1987; Sutton 1987; and Trimillos 1987). A conference organized by Bernard Lortat-Jacob and John Blacking in Strasbourg in 1982 produced a volume of papers by European scholars focusing on fundamental issues such as definition (Lortat-Jacob 1987). It is devoted exclusively to cultures of oral tradition, and it attempts to provide a textbook-like survey, area by area, of types of improvisation in various parts of the world, thus becoming one of the fundamental publications on our subject. A group of papers on improvisation was published as a special issue of *World of Music*, examining central issues in the study of improvisation as exhibited in Gregorian chant (Treifler 1991), children's musical behavior (Kartomi 1991), jazz (Smith 1991), and Arabic music (Racy 1991).

Case studies of improvisation, a central core of research, have come largely from three areas: South Asia, Iran, and jazz studies. Illustrations of the literature include a series of dissertations and associated publications on Indian music (Kassebaum 1987; Viswanathan 1977; Slawek 1987; and Kippen 1988), publications on Persian music (Zonis 1973; Gerson-Kiwi 1963; Farhat 1990;
Massoudieh 1968; Wilkens 1967; and Nettl 1992), and a group of studies on jazz (Smith 1983; Owens 1974; Gushee 1981; Porter 1985; Stewart 1979). For each culture area, something approaching a paradigmatic approach may have been established as scholars have concentrated on a particular central problem. Thus, Indian music scholarship has been devoted importantly to the structure and individuality of the various improvisation types. Studies of Persian music have emphasized the nature and structure of the radif and its relationship to the performance which derives from it (a relationship sometimes described with statistical data), ascertaining norms, boundaries, and distributions of practices (During 1984; Nettl 1992). The studies of jazz, on the other hand, have concentrated on understanding techniques of individual musicians and analyzing the details of individual performances. The most important publication on improvisation from the 1990s is Paul Berliner's large work Thinking in Jazz (1994), which contributes most significantly to the issue of learning improvisation and the preparation of the improvising musician and the individual improvisation, and it provides an approach for studies in other musics.

**A Neglected Art?**

Progress since the 1950s is in part due to the establishment of ethnomusicology and the increasing respectability of research in non-Western cultures. The improvement of technology for sound and visual recording has doubtless played a role. Even so, it must be repeated that among the activities and processes studied by music historians and ethnomusicologists, improvisation plays a small part.

Various factors involving the techniques of music research and the available arsenal of methods could account for this neglect. One factor is the difficulty of discovering processes of musical creativity, and particularly the question of intention. Analyzing a Brahms symphony, one has at hand a score presumably approved by Brahms himself, and one may be justified in assuming that everything in it was explicitly intended to be just as it is. The study of the components and relationships involves one in the interpretation of their significance, but all of them are equally parts of the symphony. The study of an improvised performance, however, may require (following preparation of a notation) drawing distinctions between what the artist explicitly meant to play and be perceived by the listener as against what is somehow less essential and predictable. But we can overcome this problem, as music scholars are anything but lazy and are sometimes willing to deal with issues of this kind in the abstract.

It may be more rewarding to look to the status of improvisation in the world of Western art music for insight into its relative absence in music scholarship. The concept of improvisation is actually broader and encompasses more types of creative activity than the concept of composition, defined as an individual writing a score. Nevertheless, musicologists have tended to dismiss it as a single process which is not easily described.

Pointing out that “improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood,” Bailey (1992, ix) argues that improvisation is central to music as a whole, and that the understanding of music at large hinges on understanding something of improvisation. Bailey’s statement suggests the conclusion that an adequate paradigm of music making would have improvisation (with a different name? “composition?”) — but after all it's performance too — as the centerpiece, with a subdivision of composition (renamed “precomposition”?), under which we place the unimprovised performance of the precomposed (if it can ever exist without some elements of improvisation).

Brief consideration of the relationship to composition in cultures without notation or articulated music theory is relevant here. Native American music provides insight into the concept of improvisation as tantamount to unprepared and sudden composition. Peoples of the North American plains (and others) traditionally sought visions in order to learn songs, and these appeared, usually sung only once by an animal or other vision being, during periods of ecstasy or dreams sometimes brought on by fasting and self-torture. This suddenness of song creation is related to statements by Plains singers to the effect that songs can be and normally are learned in a single hearing, a claim not unreasonable in view of the fact that the forms of these songs are highly consistent, and that the musical content of songs is often virtually predictable from the initial motif (Nettl 1989, 153–54).

In Western rationalist terminology, these songs are improvised when first sung (or perhaps, stated more properly, when first thought, in the course of the vision). But we have also been told that the visionary, upon dreaming the song, sang it to himself and, as it were, worked it out and perhaps practiced it before singing it to his community. Once the song exists it normally takes on the trappings of an established composition. The composer (visionary) is known and remembered, and the circumstances of composition may be recounted before singing. Repeated recordings show that the songs may remain reasonably stable as they are transmitted orally or re-dreamed by other singers. In what sense can the word “improvisation” be applied to this form of composition?

For the Pima people of the southwestern United States, on the other hand, songs not yet composed existed in the supernatural world but had to be “unraveled” by humans in order to be realized or made part of human culture (Herzog 1936, 333). The concept of “unraveling,” suggesting calculation, may be related to certain ideas about composition in Western art music, but of course there is no notation, and as a matter of fact, Pima songs are generally not very different in style from those of the Plains. The kind of process which composition is conceived to be may or may not have an effect on style and structure.

A third Native American example comes from the Inuit, who recognize two ways of making songs, a conventional and an improvised one (Cavanagh 1986, 495). The latter involves a type of song represented by the famous song-duels
wherein men settle disputes by competitive mocking. The use of a standard repertory of formulas is suspected, but such vocabularies are found as well in societies in which improvisation is explicitly recognized. On the other hand, improvised Inuit songs show no basic stylistic dissimilarity to "composed" and traditionally created songs.

So there are Native American societies in which all composition is improvised in ways that go beyond the simple assertion that improvisation is always present in aural tradition; and others in which the concept of composition as time-consuming labor is recognized; and yet others in which aural composition is distinguished from a more improvisatory, extemporizing activity.

There is, clearly, in the world at large and even in the culture of certain small societies, a wide spectrum of improvisation—a continuum of everything from formal composition without notation and the improvisation of cadenzas whose structures explicitly contradict the formal principles of the rest of the piece, to highly specialized genres such as fugues, and to pieces whose structure is predicated on choices made by the composer at the beginning of a musical statement. We can hardly imagine types of music and music making as different as the parts of paraphrasing instruments in gamelan, the swaras following a South Indian krithi, the singing of a Serbo-Croatian epic, and the group improvisation of organizations such as Joseph Holbrooke and the Music Improvement Company (Bailey 1992, 86–97). Fernand (1957, 1094) provides an outline of texture (monophonic or multivoiced), technique (e.g., ornamentation, or addition of independent voices), degree (total or partial, absolute or relative improvisation), and form (a large category, contrasting free and bound structures, for example Indian raga alapana contrasted with a fugue or with variations over an ostinato). Nevertheless, in the literature of general musicology, improvisation appears as a smaller, less variegated field than (pre)composition.

Changing the values as fundamentally as these paragraphs suggest may indeed require a reinvention of musicology, and even those scholars who might desire such a world turned upside down have little in the way of the needed tools.

In Societies and among Musics
Musicological neglect of improvisation may also stem from attitudes of Western middle-class culture towards the societies in which improvisation is significant—non-Western, perhaps folk, and certainly (in North America) minority—cultures whose arts may be appreciated but are not to be taken very seriously, belonging to the purview of folkloristics and social sciences. There are those who regard improvisation as the music of the improvident.

The musical establishment to which the profession of musicology belongs—it is an establishment of academics, in departments whose purpose is the study and advocacy of Western art music, and closely associated with the performing world of art music—connects improvisation as a musical practice, but even more as a concept, with a kind of third world of music. Jazz, the music of non-Western cultures, folk music, and all music in oral tradition are somehow included here. Even within the sphere of Western art music, music history texts say little about improvisation per see but are more likely to discuss works in "improvisatory style" (e.g., Stolba 1990, 277), whose characteristic is absence of clearcut structure; and some scholars feel it necessary to "protest too much." as when Wiita (1983, 11) insists that improvised fugues or fantasies in sonata form are not distant from the concept of the musical masterwork.

In the conception of the art music world, improvisation embodies the absence of precise planning and discipline. The most common contrast in the American public conception—it is far from descriptive of actual practice—is between composed art music and improvised jazz, in which art music is correlated with discipline, art for art's sake, reliability, and predictability, while the opposite of these characterizations apply in the case of jazz. There is further correlation between classical musicians as middle class and conventionally moral, as against the old stereotype of jazz musicians as unreliable, with unconventional dress and sexual mores, excessive use of alcohol and drugs, and more (Merriam and Mack 1960; Merriam 1964, 241–44).

Improvisation as the music of people who don't plan ahead and don't have elementary musical technology: can this be the white musical world's way of expressing a racist ideology? But on the other hand, within some white societies, musicians also partake of the stereotypes—they are unconventional and unreliable people—that are more closely associated with black musicians; this may suggest that to white society, African-American music (and consequently other people of color) represent a kind of quintessence of musicianship, and mutatis mutandis, improvisation and orally transmitted music is therefore the most "real" music. The notion that there are musicians who, as it were, can do anything they want on the spur of the moment is strange to the classical musician, who is scandalized by such lack of discipline but also attracted by its presumed liberty (for discussion see Tietjens 1991, 66–68; Levy 1990).

If the concept of improvisation in the world of Western art music and in the scholarship derived from it is of a minor art or craft associated mainly with cultural outsiders, the values are reversed in the distinction between precomposition and improvisation found in South and West Asia (Nettl, 1994, 58, 62, 64; al-Faruqi 1985, 8). In Iran, the area of my experience, the most desirable and acceptable music is improvised, and within the improvised genres, those lacking metric structure and thus rhythmic predictability are the most prestigious. By contrast, precomposed pieces are less respected, and pieces which have the highest degree of rhythmic predictability—those for example with a rhythmic ostinato—are most to be avoided. There are several reasons for this continuum of musical acceptability. The music most like the singing of the Qur'an—non-
metric vocal improvisation—is most esteemed. Music with edifying words is valued more than instrumental music with strictly entertainment value, and music performed in sacred, academic, or ceremonial contexts more than music performed in informal and even lascivious surroundings.

While disciplined musical professionalism has the highest value in the Western establishment, it is low in the Middle East as compared with expert amateurism. The learned amateur musician avoids designation as a professional because of the low esteem of musicians and music, particularly in its predictable form. The professional must perform when commanded, and play what is requested, and usually performs precomposed pieces—so goes the conventional wisdom—while the learned amateur has freedom to make all of these decisions. Thus in the Middle East, improvisation has the high prestige associated with freedom and unpredictability, while in the West, precomposition has the prestige associated with discipline and predictability. One can make a case for the dominance of these values in the social life of these cultures as well; but music, we all know, may also be used to express opposition to societal trends (as is often the case in the traditional musicology, a field developed in Germany, emphasizes those values—discipline and predictability—widely respected in German culture, and has privileged the music associated with these concepts (Teitler 1991, 66–68; Wiora 1983, 20–21 and passim).

Elsewhere I have tried to make a case for the suggestions that members of a society tend to see the domains of their culture somewhat as they structure and interpret their society; that we see our repertory as if it were, so to speak, a world of contemporary America, I proposed that the ruling class was headed by concertos and operas; in this, the degree of hierarchy in their musical structure along with their association with upper social classes, with structures more suggestive of equality, have the function of a conscience.

Using a similar perspective would require us to place improvisations and works associated with or reminiscent of improvisation low in the society of musics. The conception of improvisation as lack of planning contrasts with the notion that precision of planning, complexity of relationships, and interrelationships so abstruse as to be discernible only with sophisticated analytical techniques characterize the greatest masterworks, such as Bach’s Art of Fugue and Beethoven’s late quartets. The concept of control characterizing the great classic masters is one of the major criteria of the masterwork, and relates readily to the notion of control of complexity that suggests the musical counterpart of a ruling class. The works most esteemed in the art music world are large, intricately organized works—symphonies, operas, concertos, and perhaps major chamber works and piano sonatas; but rarely would the list include short works that suggest creation on the spur of the moment, such as “improvisation,” fantasies, moments musicaux, and rhapsodies. So within the realm of art music, improvisation is on a low rung, just as musics outside the realm of art music are often associated with the inferior practice of improvisation.

(For the importance of planning and strategy in the creation of true works of art, see Wiora 1983, 9–12; and Nattiez 1990, 69–70.)

In the conception of the art music world, there is a set of parallel contrastive relationships: between composition and improvisation, between crafted and inspired composition, between nature and culture, and between “feminine” and “masculine” character. But can we tell from the outcome which is which? Compare the nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of the painstaking and often protracted method of Beethoven as against Schubert’s quick, spontaneous style of creation (Einstein 1951, 92). Of course these views may not accord entirely with historical reality. Beethoven’s habit of sketching motivates us to see his works as the result of hard labor, and the legend of Schubert’s composing a lied on the back of a restaurant menu while waiting for his dinner suggests a method of composing quite opposite to Beethoven’s. But Beethoven was a famous improviser, and Schubert has his great complexities. Analysis of the two composers’ works does not suggest such a great difference, but to some degree it is there.

It is interesting to observe the distinction between the two composers sometimes associated with symbols of gender relationship: Beethoven the masculine, Schubert the feminine (Gramit 1993; Kramer 1993); or Beethoven the cultural technician, Schubert the natural and spontaneous. And it is significant for an understanding of contemporary ideas about art music that this distinction was associated with the possibility that Schubert was homosexual. Here, too, the concept of something improvised—sounding improvised, or known to have been created quickly, or otherwise lacking in obvious preparation—symbolizes the (sexually, culturally, biologically?) inferior.

Now, this view doesn’t pertain to improvisation per se. We’re talking about Schubert not as an improviser, but as a composer whose creative processes may bear some similarity to the concept of improvisation. What of the great improvisations of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, which seem not to be associated with anything feminine? It would seem that in some quarters of twentieth-century Western musical thought, improvisation, a “weaker” form of music making than composition, though not in itself feminine, becomes a weakening or “feminizing” factor when it affects true composition, that quintessentially male form of music making. And it’s not beside the point to remind ourselves that throughout the whole world, improvising is carried out more frequently by males than by female musicians. (But see Koskoff 1987 for various examples of female improvisation.)

In traditional Western art music, there seems to be a dichotomy between improvisatory practices and improvisation as a concept. As practices go, one finds musics in many styles and with various kinds of regulation and degrees
of prescription, from the improvisation of strict fugues on themes given on the spur of the moment, on to fantasies performed as cadenzas of concertos, and all the way to the unrestricted creation of "preludes." But the conception of improvisation involves freedom, lack of planning, and unclear relationships among parts and sections. In Western music one may find improvisation in a strict, compositional style, but also composition, carefully notated, in an "improvisatory" style, and everything in between.

Well, this may be the musical public's evaluation of improvisation and its role in art music, and in other musics. In fact, of course, discipline, intricacy, and control of complexities all play major roles in various kinds of improvisation, as in Indian music with its detailed rules for proceeding, or in organists' practice of improvising fugues on given themes, to mention only two. And yet Western classical musicians are more inclined to see the quality of improvisation as emotional rather than intellectual, as free rather than controlled.

Definitions and Values

To understand further the role of improvisation in music scholarship, it is helpful to look at definitions. A sampler:

For lexicographical purposes, the concept and status of improvisation among the denizens of the art music world and among musicologists importantly involves its relationship to and contrast with composition or precomposition. The New Grove Dictionary looks at improvisation from the viewpoint of its end product, using the concept of the musical work as its point of departure: "The creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed" (Horsley et al. 1980, 9:31).

The twelfth edition of the Riemann Musiklexikon (Gurlitt and Eggebrecht 1967, 390) draws sharp distinctions between precomposition and improvisation, and also between improvisation and the simple variation of a work that results from the character of individual performance practices: "Improvisation ... besteht musikalisch im Erfinden und gleichzeitigen klanglichen Realisieren von Musik; sie schliesst die schriftliche Fixierung (Komposition) ebenso aus wie das Realisieren eines Werkes (Aufführung, Wiedergabe, Interpretation)" [Improvisation ... consists of the simultaneous invention and sonic realization of music; it excludes work fixed in writing as well as the realization of an extant work, i.e., performance, reproduction, interpretation,].


The question of definition is an issue in Lortat-Jacob (1987, 67-69), which contains a short chapter giving definitions of various lengths by the fourteen participants in that volume and in the conference that led to it. As this volume consists of a number of studies that deal with improvisation from a considerable number of viewpoints, it seems essential to provide a definition, and perhaps democratic to allow each author to provide his or her own. Here are some examples:

John Baily: "Improvisation is the intention to create unique musical utterances in the act of performance." Veit Erllman: "Création d'un énoncé musical, ou forme finale d'un énoncé musical déjà composé, au moment de sa réalisation en performance" [Creation of a musical utterance, or final form of a musical utterance already composed, at the moment of its realization in performance]. Michèle O'Suilebhein: "The process of creative interaction (in private or in public; consciously or unconsciously) between the performing musician and a musical model which may be more or less fixed," Simha Arom: "Au sens strict, interprétation d'une musique au moment même de sa conception" [In the strict sense, the performance of music at the very moment of its conception].

These definitions (and the other ten) do not conflict substantially. In contrast to the gathering of folklorists referred to earlier (Malm 1975), whose participants would have argued whether a particular performance or artifact is truly part of folklore, it seems that the scholars represented in Lortat-Jacob's collection have little difficulty deciding whether something is improvised or not. The issue was, rather, to find an elegant way of saying what is essential or central or required. All together, writing a definition of improvisation seems to have been more a matter of lexicographic niceties than of conceptualization.

If the European musicological world agrees generally on the basic definition of improvisation, there is less agreement among standard reference works on its value, and on what it is that the reader must in the first instance be informed about, and which of its aspects are worthy of discussion. Eggebrecht (Gurlitt and Eggebrecht 1967, 390) locates improvisation squarely in the framework of Western musical concepts, maintaining that it is found only in relatively recent Western music, as musics in oral tradition do not make the distinction between composition and performance which the concept of improvisation implies.

Earlier on, Hans Joachim Moser distinguished between "improvisation" as the spontaneous creation of a musical work in the true sense, using prescribed forms and established principles, and phantasieren (musical fantasizing), which he considered less involved with the interrelationships essential to proper music. He argues that the greatest improvisors, such as Bach and Handel, typically produced improvisations which, though based on themes given to them on the spot, resulted in finished, highly disciplined works (Moser 1955, 1:537). In the second edition of the Harvard Dictionary (Apel 1969), after defining improvisation as "the art of performing music spontaneously, without the aid of manuscript, sketches, or memory," Willi Apel quickly moves on to the "great days of improvisation," the era of Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven,
who were, he says, known as much for their ability to improvise as for composing.

In Grove’s third edition, H. C. Colles asserts that “extemporization,” is “the primitive act of music-making, existing from the moment that the untutored individual obeys the impulse to relieve his feelings by bursting into song. Accordingly, therefore, amongst all primitive peoples musical composition consists of extemporization subsequently memorized” (Colles 1935). Colles insists, significantly, that all composition without notation begins as improvisation. The Grove’s series made little progress from the first edition, with its short article “Extempor Playing” (Taylor 1896a), through “Extemporization” in the much larger fifth edition, (Colles 1954), an abridgment of the third edition’s entry. The association of improvisation with the mere absence of notation is emphasized in the article “Extemporizing Machine” in the first edition (Taylor 1896b), which describes a kind of melograph connected with keyboard mechanisms that records on paper what has been played. It is interesting that this early stage of transcribing machinery, conceptually so central to ethnomusicology, arose out of the concept of improvisation.

The distinction between improvisation as an aspect of the interpretation of established compositions and as an independent art plays a role in some musico-logical literature. Robert Haas’s (1931) extensive survey of performance practice brings up improvisation at many points, as composition technique in nonliterate societies, in South Asian art musics, and as a requirement in many European art music genres. The parallel work published sixty years later by Danuser, this time titled Musikalische Interpretation, makes the distinction more explicit, giving attention to improvisation in the performance of masterworks but excluding genres that are explicitly improvisatory (Danuser 1992, 8). Yet the distinction between the concepts of performance practice, improvisation, and, indeed, composition in (at the very least) oral traditions is as yet an unsolved issue.

Looking, then, at the position of improvisation in musical scholarship and in the Western art music culture in which musicology is grounded, we find it to be regarded as (1) something definitely distinct from performance and precomposition, (2) imitation of precomposition with the helping hand of notation withdrawn, (3) the essence of composition where there is aural transmission, (4) an art at which the great composers particularly excelled, (5) a craft but not an art, (6) something to be evaluated along the same lines as composition, (7) a process that cannot be explained or analyzed, and (8) a kind of music making that sets apart the musical cultures outside the Western art music establishment.

Points of Departure

One occasionally hears statements to the effect that improvisation cannot be explained, analyzed, or described. Indeed, Derek Bailey (1992, ix) discourages explanation: “any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respects, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.”

The essays here at hand suggest otherwise, but it is easy to sympathize with Bailey’s view. For compositions, we believe that all components are equally and definitely intended by the composers to be as presented; never mind that for some compositions, several versions may have been successively created. In improvisation, one must face likelihood that some of the material may be precisely intended while other passages are thrown in without specific thought, possibly to permit the performer to think of “what to do next.” To be sure, there may be analogies in composition as, say, in the distinction between thematic and episodic material in eighteenth-century sonata forms. Even so, while one may analyze the transcription of an improvisation virtually as if it were a sonata or a rhapsody by Brahms, in an improvisation the relative significance of the various components would be harder to establish.

One approach that sets off improvisation from composition, and that helps the understanding of the improvisatory processes of individual performances as well as established practices, involves the identification of a point of departure (for which the term “model” has been used: see Zonis 1973, 62; and Lortat-Jacob 1987, 54–57) which the improvisor uses as a basis for his or her art. Used in a number of studies of music in several cultures, this approach comes closest to providing a paradigmatic method for improvisation research. These points of departure or models exhibit enormous variety throughout the world.

In some kinds of Western art music, thematic material and standardized form may be typical points of departure. The improvising organist has a given theme and the characteristics or requirements of fugal structure upon which he builds his creation. For a concerto cadenza, motifs and themes of the movement or work, along with musical gestures (scales, double-stops, arpeggios) that are characteristic for exhibiting virtuosity are, taken together, the model. Jazz musicians, obviously, use sequences of harmonies ("changes") and tunes which may be the basis of variation or which may lead to unrelated solo improvisations.

In Carnatic music, the large form, ragam-tanam-pallavi, proceeds from very general gradually to more restricted models. For alapana or ragam, there is the raga itself, in its broadest manifestation—an abstraction embodying scale and typical kinds of tone order, along with the tendency to show musical movement or progress. This is achieved by moving gradually to higher tessitura along with a greater degree of intensity, more ornamentation, and increased virtuosity, and it is followed by a rapid descent and relaxation of tension. Tanam contains the same requirements, to which is added a characteristic nonmetric rhythm. Niravai is based on the tonal characteristics of the raga as well,
but the model also includes a theme from a composition (pallavi) which is subjected to a set of variations. In kalpana swaram the musician uses the tonal characteristics of the raga, some thematic material from a composition, and a characteristic and formally predictable rapid-fire staccato delivery. Moving through the raga-unam-pallavi, performers gradually have less choice, and the model upon which they improvise increases in specificity.

Persian classical music has developed a unique model, the body of material known as the radif, described and analyzed in some detail by a number of authors (e.g., Zonis 1973; Farhat 1990; Nettl 1992; During 1992). It is unique in the sense that it has become a revered canon, a body of specific and memorized music (and associated concepts), which functions as the fundamental repertory and a corpus of pedagogical material, as well as a guide to improvisatory techniques, formal patterns, and overall structure of performances. It is a point of departure for improvisation as a whole, but its individual components provide guidance for various types of improvisation.

Iranian musicians distinguish several ways of using the radif as model (Caron and Safvate 1966, 133): (1) One may simply perform the radif as memorized but, as it were, in one's own way, slightly or moderately varying the canonic material, a degree of improvisation somewhat like the performance of a baroque work with improvised ornaments. (2) One may perform a kind of fantasia upon one mode, or dastgah in the radif, alternating virtually direct quotations with creative departures, but adhering in the broad sense to the radif's structure. In Western music, this might correspond to certain kinds of jazz, or perhaps to concerto cadenzas (when actually improvised). (3) A technique called marrakab-khani—"in the way of the composer-singer" or "singer-creator"—consists of modulating among dastghahs, putting together materials not ordinarily combined, using components of the radif but violating their canonic arrangement and order. This kind of performance might be compared to the eighteenth-century quodlibet or to a nineteenth-century practice of German student singing in which lines from unrelated songs would be combined ad lib.

In some respects, the Persian radif is comparable to the themes or tunes sometimes used in Western art music improvisation; in other ways, it corresponds to raga, or to the even less specifically prescribed Arabic maqams. Then again, in its various components (thematic and stylistic, motivic and rhythmic) it also corresponds to units of musical content such as gestures or motifs that may be called building blocks, and whose manipulation is a major component of improvisation in some cultures, as seen in some West African drum ensembles.

In the musical aspect of South Slavic epic traditions, whose verbal building blocks have been described in Albert Lord's distinguished book (1965, 30, 38–41), short musical phrases that accompany the ten-syllable lines are the relevant units. One epic may use a stock of six or eight musical phrases which are repeated, varied, alternated, and manipulated in ways that are in part determined by the movement of plot and action in the verbal text. These six or eight lines are the building blocks of the musical improvisation of which the epics consist.

For the music of the Shona people of Zimbabwe, we find an interesting dilemma. Berliner (1978) suggests a complex of theoretical concepts, themes, and rhythmic interactions which provide a vocabulary. On the other hand, Dumisani Mariire's (1971, 14) notes accompanying his own recording of performance on the nyunga-nyunga mbira or karimba indicate that the model for his work is a sequence of nine steps or sections of which a piece must consist, and whose order provides increased tension but finally, in a circular structure, goes back to the content and mood of the beginning. This form, plus the identity of a theme, is the material which the performer (who may often be making music for his personal entertainment or solace) uses as the basis of performance. Mariire's theory does not appear to be shared by other Shona musicians, and one must ask to what extent apparently credible and reasonable musicians' interpretations of their own culture must be accepted by their peers in order to have authenticity.

In the Arabic taqsim, the principal instrumental nonmetric improvised form, we can identify several levels of building blocks (Touma 1971; Touma 1975, 57–69; Reichow 1971; Elkholy 1978). First there are the tones of the taqsim's principal maqam, from which the performer draws more or less at will, observing typical sequences of order, although the melodic movement must be largely scalar. Motifs of three to five tones associated with each maqam that must appear at least occasionally are building blocks of a higher order. Beyond this, a taqsim is composed of different kinds of sections, most easily characterized by their length, and these sections as well as their lengths may also be regarded as building blocks. Musicians arrange them in appropriate but individual order, permitting each to carry out a particular musical function. Thus, the long sections contain modulations to secondary maqams, the shorter ones may serve to establish the main maqam, and the shortest ones provide relief from the building intensity. The wider use of the "building block" concept, existing at various levels, is developed by Lortat-Jacob (1987, 56–57) with the use of the terms systèmes monomodulaires and pluriomodulaires.

These building blocks, individually and in their options of interrelationship, are, as it were, the vocabulary on which the improviser may draw. Observing the manipulation of the components of a musical vocabulary may also be an analytical technique for composed music, but the supply of building blocks in an improvised style is likely to be less extensive than in precomposed music. Conceivably an improvisatory repertory can be developed only if the options are limited, satisfying the needs of both spontaneity and oral transmission.

It may be stated as an article of faith that improvisers always have a point of departure, something which they use to improvise upon. There are many types, extending from themes, tunes, and chord sequences to forms, from a vocu-
lary of techniques to a vocabulary of motifs and longer materials, from what is easy or "natural" for the hand to what is intellectually complex.

What is it that actually happens in the mind of the improviser in the course of a performance? This may be the most significant question for scholars investigating the process. In one way or another, it has resulted in the largest body of studies. But to generalize from these? Again, Berliner's study of jazz (1994) suggests that musicians may have much to say about this, but it is difficult to establish patterns of thought process and attitude. One cross-culturally valid approach is examining the musician's need to balance "doing your own thing" with sticking to the rules. There is the recognition of a risk factor, the belief that improvisers purposely place themselves in difficult situations in order to prove their ability to escape from them by solving their musical problems of logic and consistency. Ferand proposes a kind of joy, an attitude of enthusiasm, that lies at the bottom of the activities (Bailey 1992, ix), while Jairazbhoy asserts a virtual dialogue between the musician and his music: "when the musician is performing beyond his normal capacity . . . the music becomes alive" (Jairazbhoy 1971, 31).

Recognizing the significance of singling out improvisation for specific studies as if it were one kind of thing, we will nevertheless probably find it necessary to discard this simple line of demarcation between improvisation and pre-composition, or to draw lines at different points. We may wish to reexamine the significance of paper and notation as diagnostic features of true music, and to stop thinking that the mark of a true work of art is the time devoted to its explicit preparation. And of course we will increasingly have to look at improvisation as a group of perhaps very different phenomena.

* * *

This collection of essays is not an attempt to provide a survey of improvisation in the world's musics, past and recent. But the selection of studies presented herewith cuts across the world of improvisation in several ways. Emphasizing three areas that have received the greatest amount of attention—jazz, South Asia, and West Asia—it pays attention also to several other parts of the musical world. While it has not been possible (nor has it been the purpose) to provide representation of all musics or areas of musical culture in which improvisation plays a major role, the contributions provided here touch on many points of the globe; and while contemporary practice is at the forefront, the recent and more distant past also appear.

More important than geographic and chronologic representation is the series of approaches that are represented. Four essays (including the present introduction) approach the issue of improvisation most broadly, and together function as an introduction to the rest of the work, which consists principally of case studies. Stephen Blum, taking a view that combines philosophy, ethnography, and philology, integrates the concept of improvisation with other processes in human behavior and musicality in a detailed, cross-cultural study of the uses of various terms relating to improvisation—providing in particular an analysis of these relationships in Arabic and Persian culture, literature, and musical thought. Jeff Pressing's approach draws from the related subdiscipline of systematic musicology and from the discipline of psychology to look at improvisation in the light of analysis of various forms of behavior. He suggests the use of expertise theory as an explanatory device for understanding ways in which various psychological and cultural constraints shape improvisational strategizing. R. Anderson Sutton asks fundamental questions about the existence and nature of improvisation, using gamelan music as a template. In his title—"Do Javanese Gamelan Musicians Really Improvise?"—he tackles one of our major questions: the line between composition and improvisation, and how we can deal with it interculturally. Looking at gamelan music from a broad intercultural perspective, he concludes that Javanese musicians improvise, but Javanese music is not really improvisatory.

Although the four introductory papers do study specific cases, the rest of our presentation is more explicitly devoted to case studies. They are divided into two groups, but they will readily be seen to overlap. The second group is concerned particularly with the work of individual artists. Although the initial purpose was not to present essays on prominent improvisers, five of our studies are about the work of artists who are unquestionably among the world's greats.

Two studies concern outstanding figures in the history of jazz. Lawrence Gushee analyzes the stature of Louis Armstrong, wrestling with the musicologist's perennial question about the great ones—What did they do that made them so great?—and grounding much of his essay on the facts of Armstrong's life and relationship to other musicians, as well as the analysis of a multitude of recordings. Christopher Smith turns to Miles Davis from the viewpoint of semiotics and the quest for musical meaning, seeing whether one can move from the improvised performance to a sense of what the musician and what African-American music as a whole try to say. Smith's study of Miles is based on analysis of audio and video recordings and accounts by colleagues.

In a historical study quite different from and yet related to the many studies on individual jazz artists, Valerie Goertzen studies the art of Clara Schumann as performer and composer, teasing out information on biographical and historical context, and out of notations, a portrait of the improvisatory art of this great musician and the role of improvisation in her life.

Stephen Slawek concentrates on several distinguished Hindustani musicians, most significantly his teachers, Pandit Ravi Shankar and Dr. Lainsina Misra, in order to take apart the concept of improvisation in the context of Hindustani music. Using as a starting point a teacher's emphasis on "keeping it going," he explains the "given" or point of departure and the performer's contribution, and the complexity of concepts and terms with the use of close analysis of several performances, showing the interaction of the learned and the created, of terminology and musical sound.
The study of Jihad Racy’s performances of taqsim nahawand, a case study attempting to show norms and boundaries, what is typical, required, rare, and forbidden in a restricted corpus, by Ronald Riddle and myself, was first published in 1974. It is presented here in a revised version, and brought up to date by comparison with Racy’s performances some twenty years later, a period during which Racy rose to great distinction as one of the best-known performers of Arabic music in North America.

These studies, concentrating on individuals, are preceded by a larger group of essays that deal with the role of improvisation in musical culture more broadly. In some, the focus is genre or repertory, but each of them contributes as well to an understanding of the broader relationships of music and society. Here too, however, the perspective of the individual musician plays a major role. Thus we provide two studies by scholars who write about music in which they themselves participate as improvisers. T. Viswanathan, a leading figure in the world of Carnatic music in Madras and in North America, and his colleague and former student, Jody Cormack, provide an explanation of three types of improvisation in South Indian classical music, balancing the performer’s and the analyst’s perspectives. A. Jihad Racy, of Lebanese origin and himself the subject of an essay, a performer and distinguished scholar (and thus also able to balance cultural and musical insider’s and outsider’s perspectives), looks at the importance of the audience in stimulating the improviser, and further analyzes the concept of ecstasy in performance by deconstructing the statements of a distinguished Egyptian singer.

Several studies relate to Racy’s in their perspective of the cultural role of improvisation, but with widely divergent scope. Eve Harwood looks at the concept of improvisation as a way of understanding social and artistic relationships in children’s games, as several girls in an Illinois school playground and several of their games lead to an account of a number of roles that improvisation can play. In contrast to this study of one localized venue, Peter Manuel’s essay views a broad spectrum of Latin American music with European and African heritage and explains the interaction of formal structure and improvisation in a number of genres, identifying common patterns and practices.

Ingrid Monson’s study of modal jazz, particularly in the work of George Russell and John Coltrane, analyses a genre that is self-contained and yet reaches out across stylistic and national boundaries, and provides interpretation from social, cultural, and political perspectives. Saú Y. Chan, turning to Cantonese opera, a genre not ordinarily included as among improvisational styles, examines the several ways in which the concept of improvisation can be used to shed light on the structure of an entire musical work, and the various kinds of improvisation that appear.

Several of the case studies make significant contributions to the methodology of studying improvisation in an ethnomusicological context. This is particularly true of Tullia Magrini’s work on Italian folk music. Accounting for Italian lyrical singing as musical and social behavior, she analyzes several performances from a number of viewpoints and suggests a new model for the analysis of the relationship of point of departure to performance. Importantly, she illustrates the function of group improvisation in enacting social relationships.

Besides pointing out the significance of the principal grouping of the papers in the table of contents, it may be instructive to suggest other features by which they are related. The essays range from studies of specific venues and individual musicians (e.g., those of Harwood, Gushee, Smith, Goertzen) to broad syntheses (e.g., Blum, Viswanathan and Cormack, and Sutton); from studies of the “typical” musician (e.g., the studies of Chan, Sutton, and Magrini) to studies of outstanding and perhaps culturally exceptional artists. In several essays we see how improvisation lives, as it were, in a musical culture (e.g., in the essays of Sutton, Magrini, Viswanathan and Cormack, and Monson), and how individual musicians contribute to its development (e.g., in the essays of Goertzen, Gushee, and Smith). Several essays—notably those of Slawek, Chan, and Smith—provide discussion of the role of mistakes in shaping the improvisational outcome. We see improvisation in music of folk cultures (Magrini), in everyday modern life (Harwood), in popular music (Manuel), along with the better-represented areas of classical or canonic musics and jazz. While the majority of studies are based on field work or the analysis of twentieth-century recordings, the reader will also find the use of old source material that gives a distant sense of musical sound (for example, in the studies of Goertzen and Blum), and of materials generated specifically for the purpose of the research (e.g., Nettl and Riddle, Viswanathan and Cormack).

We (editors and authors) are happy to provide a wide range of studies that view improvisation from many perspectives, though naturally less happy with the inevitable gaps in the representation of places, peoples, genres, periods, and approaches. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the understanding of music created in the course of performance.

References


Chapter Six

Improvisation in Latin Dance Music:
History and Style

Peter Manuel

Latin dance music constitutes one of the most dynamic and sophisticated urban popular music traditions in the Americas. Improvisation plays an important role in this set of genres, and its styles are sufficiently distinctive, complex, and internally significant as to merit book-length treatment along the lines of Paul Berliner's volume *Thinking in Jazz* (1994). To date, however, the subject of Latin improvisation has received only marginal and cursory analytical treatment, primarily in recent pedagogical guidebooks and videos. While a single chapter such as this can hardly do justice to the subject, an attempt will be made here to sketch some aspects of the historical development of Latin improvisational styles, to outline the sorts of improvisation occurring in mainstream contemporary Latin music, and to take a more focused look at improvisational styles of one representative instrument, the piano. An ultimate and only partially realized goal in this study is to hypothesize a unified, coherent aesthetic of Latin improvisation in general.

In this chapter, the term “Latin music” is used not to denote the realm of Latin American music in its entirety, but instead to refer to popular musics based on Afro-Cuban rhythms, as developed and performed throughout the Hispanic Caribbean basin and its diaspora, including New York City. Our focus thus comprises the interrelated genres *rumba*, *danzón*, *son*, *guaracha*, *mambo*, and *chachachá*, both in their traditional forms and as incorporated under the stylistically ambiguous rubric “salsa.” Due to space limitations and the natural affinities of this particular set of genres, this article will not deal with Dominican *merengue*, Colombian *cumbia* and *valleynato*, or Puerto Rican *bombaja*, *plena*, and *música jíbaro*, however rich the improvisatory styles therein may be. Likewise, only passing reference will be made to Latin jazz; although improvisation plays a more prominent role in Latin jazz than in Latin dance music itself, the distinctive features of Latin improvisation styles are more visible in the latter than in the former, much of which overlaps with mainstream jazz itself. In contrast with jazz and Latin jazz, Latin dance music, as the term indicates, is quintessentially designed for accompanying social dancing. However, if its improvisatory styles are ideally intended to support this function rather than to command attention in themselves, their sheer sophistication and uniqueness amply justify critical regard.
Sources: The African and European Heritages

While Latin improvisational styles are original products of Hispanic Caribbean musicians in the twentieth century, they did not emerge out of a vacuum, but can be seen to have evolved from a specific set of sources. One influence of increasing importance from the 1920s on was jazz, whose impact will require further mention below. On the whole, however, Latin improvisation has evolved as a form parallel to jazz rather than derivative from it; indeed, since the beginnings of jazz history, the influences between the two genres have been mutual rather than unidirectional (see, e.g., Fiehrer 1991). The more immediate, original, and profound sources for modern Latin improvisational traditions were the diverse varieties of musics flourishing in Cuba at the turn of the century, which can be seen as occupying places on a continuum according to their predominance of European-derived or African-derived features.

The music genres on the European-derived side of this spectrum comprise a heritage of remarkable richness. At the same time, their contributions to the emergence of a distinctive improvisation style are in some respects indirect or unverifiable. The most substantial body of Spanish-derived folk music in Cuba is the set of regional varieties of the punto, whose aesthetic emphasis is on the text (generally in ten-line décima form) rather than the music per se. Although the modern punto does feature lively improvisations on the mandolin-like lute between verses, there is no evidence that this tradition exerted any significant role on improvisation styles in urban popular music. Similarly, improvisation does not appear to have played a significant role in the local creole contradanza (habanera), as it flourished in bourgeois circles in the nineteenth century. It is true that such pieces were performed not only from written scores as parlor piano works, but also as popular veraculas dances by ad hoc ensembles for working-class audiences. Performance styles in such contexts may well have accommodated some flexibility, but there is no documentation of such a tradition. There is somewhat more evidence for the role of improvised trumpet flourishes in the pasodobles and other genres played by regimental bands (Edgardo Díaz Díaz, personal communication), and bombardino improvisations were important features of the late nineteenth-century Puerto Rican danza (Veray 1977, 32). However, the extent to which such traditions constituted direct precursors and sources for subsequent mainstream brass improvisation styles is unclear. Rather, the contribution of these traditions to Latin improvisation appears to lie more in the eventual application of instrumental technique and knowledge of formal theory to improvising—a process that evidently commenced in the danzón in the latter 1920s.

If the European-derived contribution to Latin dance music is as great as the African-derived one, it is the latter which appears to account for most of what is distinctive in this music, thereby justifying the music's designation as "Afro-Cuban." On the most basic level, the Afro-Cuban contribution to mainstream dance music comprises the use of a set of interrelated rhythmic cells. As shown in example 6.1, these include the tresillo, the cincoillo, the ritmo de tango, the figure (ex. 6.1d) which could be regarded as a "displaced cincoillo," and, most importantly, the clave, in its "3–2" and "2–3" variants. The notion of clave comprises not only these two specific patterns and the hardwood sticks on which they are played, but also the conception of these patterns as generative structures underlying the entire composite rhythm of two-bar ostinatos.

Most of these rhythms came to pervade creole musics as well as Afro-Cuban genres; the ritmo de tango and cincoillo, for example, were fundamental ostinatos in the contradanza and danzón, respectively. Nevertheless, the ultimate origins of all these patterns in prior Afro-Caribbean or African musics appear well established, especially if clave is understood in the more general sense of connoting what could be analyzed as a two-measure open/closed or syncopated/unsyncopated ostinato format. In mainstream Latin dance music, these rhythms constitute basic building blocks for composition as well as improvisation, thereby illustrating Nettl's observation (see the introduction to this volume) that the same principles tend to underlie the two processes in most cultures.

The Afro-Cuban musical heritage includes styles associated with neo-African syncretic religions (primarily santería, Palo, yansá, and arará), with the abakuá societies, and with the congá genre featured in Carnival processes. Improvisation figures prominently in only a few of these styles; in the realm of santería music, for example, while bembé drumming foregrounds elaborate solos by a lead drummer, the more widespread and better-known bátá music consists primarily of standardized patterns, however loosely and flexibly rendered. Nevertheless, knowledgeable percussionists do assert that such styles are the sources for many of the rhythms used in percussion improvisation in secular dance music (Orlando Fiol, personal communication).

By far the more direct source, however, is the traditional rumba, which flourished in the early twentieth century as a lower-class, predominantly Afro-Cuban dance and music genre, performed by voices and percussion. The rumba's formal structure, as determined by the lead vocalist, consists of a few short vocal warm-up phrases (the diana), followed by an extended text (canto, largo), leading to a longer montuno section sung in call-and-response with a
chorus. This structure is evidently the source and model for that of son and salsa, including the semi-improvised calls (soneo, inspiración) of the lead vocalist in the responsorial montuno. The rumba’s instrumental accompaniment consists of a composite ostinato most typically rendered on two conga drums, clave, and palitos (two sticks beaten on a hard surface). Throughout the song, a lead drummer improvises rhythms on a third, higher-pitched conga (the quinto), ideally interacting with the dancers (solo male in rumba columbia, and a single couple in yambú and the more popular guaguancó). As we have suggested, quinto patterns may incorporate certain features evidently derived from Afro-Cuban religious musics, but they appear to derive more directly from equally old secular dance traditions (e.g., the Congolese-derived yuka), and in terms of basic rhythmic principles and structures they have close affinities to traditional African drum musics. Especially important for purposes of this chapter is the way the quinto rhythms exhibit structural devices which, I submit, are basic to Latin improvisation as a whole. Specifically, these devices include the use of binary phrasing of triplet passages and ternary phrasing of passages in binary subdivisions, of which more will be said below. In more general terms, these affinities involve a percussive aesthetic which pervades all solo styles.\textsuperscript{3}

The Son and Danzón until 1940
While negrophobic repression to some extent confined the rumba—and especially the obstreperous conga drum—to lower-class Afro-Cuban tenements, its influence eventually came to permeate Cuban musical culture. By the 1920s and ‘30s, danzón composers were omnivorously borrowing popular Afro-Cuban tunes (Díaz Ayala 1994, 104), and teatro bufo troupes and stage bands like the Lecuona Cuban Boys were presenting their own vaudeville-style versions of rumbas. A more significant vehicle for the mainstreaming of Afro-Cuban structural features was the son, which emerged in the first decades of the century and by the ‘30s had become Cuba’s most popular dance music genre, as played primarily by sextets (vocals, guitar, tres, trumpet, maracas, güiro scraper, cowbell, and string bass).

The son resists compartmentalization as exclusively Afro-Cuban or Euro-Cuban, instead constituting a felicitously balanced and definitive fusion of the two streams. The European heritage of the early son is obvious in its predominantly nonpercussive texture (unlike that of the rumba, for example), the presence of trumpet, guitar, and the guitar-like tres, and the use of functional harmonies and chordal harmonic progressions in the initial, “song”-like first section (now often called guisa), which came to frequently rely on the 32-bar AABA form typical of American popular music. At the same time, the son, which was performed mostly by Afro-Cuban musicians, adopted from the rumba the clave, the canto/guina-montuno formal structure, the presence of a continually improvising drum (the bongo, rather than the quinto), many particular compositions, and the tradition of texts foregrounding Afro-Cuban culture and often extolling the rumba itself. For its part, the role of the tres in the son is as much rhythmic as melodic or chordal, consisting primarily of syncopated, standardized accompanimental ostinatos called guajeos. The use of the marimba bass—an enlarged version of the African mbira-type lamellophone—further illustrates the fundamentally synergetic nature of the early son.

The improvisational styles of the early son, which are fairly well documented in recordings of the 1920s and ‘30s, are the direct ancestors of their counterparts in modern Latin music. The bongo, as suggested, perpetuates the role—and many specific techniques and rhythms—of the rumba’s quinto, although without the function of interacting with a specific dancer (the son being danced by loosely embracing couples). The montuno usually commences with the trumpet player improvising two-bar phrases in alternation with the choral refrains (coros); typically, after four of these exchanges, the lead singer improvises his own soneo in alternation with the coro, which may continue indefinitely, perhaps interrupted by a solo on the bongo or, less often, the tres. The syllabic, relatively unalurred soneo style is essentially identical to that of the rumba, except for the occasional use of a more European, vibrato-laden vocal production. For its part, the trumpet style, rather than being flashy or markedly idiomatistic, closely resembles the vocal soneo style, from which it presumably derives. (Similarly, contemporary jazz trumpet style was also essentially vocal in character, as can be heard, for example, in the marked affinities between Louis Armstrong’s singing and cornet playing.) The occasional tres solos, unlike the flashy styles of the laud and Puerto Rican cuatro, stress syncopated percussive chords and guajeo-type passages rather than fast single-note runs.

Until the late 1930s, piano and wind instruments aside from the trumpet were not used in the son sextets. Instead, flute and piano styles evolved in the context of the danzón, as played since the first decade of the century by charanga ensembles consisting of flute, two violins, piano, bass, and percussion. In 1910 José Urfé’s “El bombón de Barreto” had initiated the practice of adding a harmonically static, vamp-like final section to the danzón. Pianist and bandleader Antonio María Romeu was evidently the first to introduce improvised solos in this section. Díaz Ayala (1994, 135) refers to a “timid hint” of a solo in two Romeu recordings of 1925. John Santos (1982) cites as famous and seminal the extended solo in Romeu’s 1926 recording of “Tres Lindas Cubanas,” which is re-created by Romeu on a subsequent release (FE 4066). This solo, somewhat like those recorded in the 1930s by Armando Orefiche of the Lecuona Cuban Boys, consists of an amalgam of classical-style snippets, evoking Czerny rather than Earl Hines. By modern standards, many aspects of the solo appear manneristic and archaic, including its tinkling Alberti bass patterns, quaint Schubertian arpeggios, and block chords reminiscent of Rachmaninoff or, closer to home, Lecuona. At the same time, the solo contains features that would become trademarks of Latin piano; these include vigorous
Liszian double- and triple-octave runs (occasionally with parallel thirds added), an emphasis on syncopation and rhythm in general, and, most preciously, the juxtaposition of discrete passages in contrasting rhythms and textures rather than extended thematic continuity or development.

According to Max Salazar (1992, 13), Romeu was one of the very few pianists to improvise solos before the late 1930s. The idiosyncratic nature of his playing, the scarcity of recorded flute solos, statements by elderly informants, and the relative simplicity of trumpet playing in the son septets all suggest that until this time Latin improvisation styles had not really developed a distinctive character. The notable exceptions, of course, were the dynamic styles associated with the lowly bongo and quinto, whose richness and vitality would animate all the instrumental styles maturing in the next decade.

It was in the 1940s that a definitive mainstream Latin dance music style coalesced, comprising norms of composition, arranging, and improvisation that remain structurally fundamental even in the salsa of today. The most salient developments included the following: the popularization of the conjunto format, in which conga, piano, and second or third trumpets were added to the son septet; the incorporation of the timbales into the standard dance band ensemble; the standardization of accompaniment parts; the use of more sophisticated and elaborate horn arrangements (in the case of the mambo big bands, adopting sectional arrangement principles from swing jazz); the adaptation of these techniques (whether in conjuntos, charangos, or larger groups) to playing pieces in up-tempo Afro-Cuban rhythms (especially as derived from the rumba via the son); and, finally, the unprecedented emphasis on instrumental solos and the concomitant emergence of mature, distinctive instrumental improvisatory styles. The mambo big band of Machito and Mario Bauzá is sometimes credited with being the first to feature sophisticated instrumental solos, although the practice had clearly commenced earlier.

Salazar (1992, 13) indicates that the inclusion of improvised piano solos in arrangements became popular from about 1938, perhaps first inspired by the tres solo recorded by Arsenio Rodríguez. The transitional period to more modern styles can be traced in the early recordings of Arsenio, Conjunto Casino, Orquesta Casino de la Playa, and the Sonora Matancera. The piano playing featured on most of these records (especially by Anselmo Sacasas, Pérez Prado, Agustín Mercier, and Roberto Alvarez) indicates the rapid emergence of the modern accompaniment and solo styles. The solo playing includes arcaishms and eccentricities like oomph left-hand patterns and Alberti bass passages, along with what would become standard features: runs in doubled and tripled octaves, occasional guajeo-type accompaniment patterns, and a delight in quasi-tonal nonsense riffs (typically involving chromatic descending sequences) introduced for their rhythmic and textural irregularity. As archaism disappeared in the latter 40s, the playing of Lili Martínez, Pedro "Peruchín" Jústiz, Noro Morales, and Jesús López essentially codified the modern piano style.

By 1950 a mainstream Latin dance music style in general had congealed which continues to form the basis of modern salsa. Indeed, the relabeling of Cuban dance music as "salsa" in the latter 1960s involved a socio-musical resignification rather than a fundamental stylistic change (Manuel 1994, 264–80), such that Díaz Ayala may have been only slightly exaggerating to state, "In the legacy of Arsenio, salsa was already complete" (1981, 174). Within this general body of music, however, one can distinguish substyles which are self-consciously típico (loosely, "traditional"), as opposed to more modern approaches. The former would include much charanga groups (see Murphy 1991) as well as salsa conjuntos led by Johnny Pacheco and Pete "El Conde" Rodríguez, modeled on 1950s Cuban performers like Felix Chappotín and the Sonora Matancera. Aside from Latin jazz, the stylistic vanguard of Latin dance music has been represented by ensembles of Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Jerry and Andy Gonzalez, and others. Both these sets of substyles, as well as the familiar mainstream, rely on a core of improvisation norms inherited from the latter 1940s. It is to this mainstream core that we may now turn.

Modern Latin Music: Accompaniment Improvisation

Popular and academic discourse on improvisation naturally tends to focus on featured instrumental solos by virtuoso performers. In many types of music, however, improvisation also plays a crucial role in accompaniment styles; such is certainly the case in Latin dance pieces, wherein improvised solos are often short or entirely absent. Improvisation in Latin music accompaniment ranges from microrhythmic nuanced by individual players to overtly audible passages involving spontaneous collective collaboration.

Much of the expressive essence of Latin music lies in the intricate composite rhythm created by the percussion, bass, and piano, which together constitute the rhythm section. This composite rhythm is the product of a set of standardized accompanimental ostinatos, such as are illustrated in the montuno except in example 6.2. These patterns, or alternative versions thereof, are maintained with a limited amount of variation throughout a given song. In the words of pianist Oscar Hernandez, "You have to perform as a unit—a team player" (in Gerard and Sheller 1989, 35). At the same time, the composite rhythm is enlivened by judicious amounts of improvised variation, along the lines of what Berliner calls "controlled flexibility" (1994). Keil terms "participatory discrepancies" (1995), and Leonard Meyer would subsume under the term "simultaneous deviation" (1956, 234–46). As pianist Sonny Bravo notes, within certain limitations, "anyone in the [rhythm] section can alter what he's doing a little bit to build the groove" (in Doerschuk 1992, 317).

Because some of these improvised variation techniques have been outlined elsewhere (esp. Mauleón 1993, Gerard and Sheller 1989, and Doerschuk 1992), our observations here will be brief. The ostinato generally played on the side (cascara, paño) of the timbales or on its attached cowbell is perhaps the least subject to variation (Gerard and Sheller 1989, 50); it functions as a funda-
mentally time-keeper roughly analogous to the “time line” of West African percussion. Somewhat greater flexibility is allowed to the conga drum, which was incorporated into dance band ensembles in the 1940s. However, the conga's role in this context is not comparable to that of the quinto in the rumba. That is, it is not featured as a foreground, constantly improvising instrument, but rather as a secondary cog in the composite rhythm, reiterating, with some creative latitude, a standardized ostinato (the tumbao). As mentioned above, the quinto's role in the son septets had been usurped by the bongo, which improvised freely throughout a given song. With the coalescence of the standardized composite rhythm in the mainstream style, the bongo's improvisatory flexibility was also reduced to performing variations (repiques) on a stock ostinato (the martillo or “hammer”) during the guía (the bongo player generally switching to cowbell during the montuno). These variations, while more free than those played on the conga, generally maintain a steady eighth-note pulse.

As in jazz, the bass plays an important role in maintaining the composite rhythm. As bassist Andy González states, “In Latin music you have to approach the bass as a drummer would approach the drums—with the same sense of percussiveness and attacks” (in Gerard and Sheller 1989, 42). The most typical accompanying pattern is the “anticipated bass” ostinato such as is shown in example 6.2, or variants thereof. The bass player enjoys some latitude to alter his part, with the “sense of percussiveness” noted by González. These variations might consist of alternate ostinatos, or, as in jazz drumming, they might comprise subtle, microrhythmic nuances referred to, for example, as “pushing the beat” or “playing on top of the beat”; musicians state that such nuances, however incremental, can greatly intensify the music when deployed effectively (Chris Washburne, personal communication).

If jazz piano accompaniment consists of “comping” chords in a loose, desultory, irregular manner, the Latin pianist must maintain a regular ostinato pattern, at least throughout the montuno. These standardized patterns themselves are called guajeo or montuno and derive ultimately from counterparts played on the tres in traditional son. Generally a pianist will maintain a given guajeo (such as that in ex. 6.2) throughout an entire section of the montuno, altering it primarily during the ensemble horn breaks (mambo, moña). Excessive or even slight but inappropriate alterations can be seen by aficionados as distracting and reflective of immaturity, and extensive reiteration of the same ostinato, rather than being monotonous, can help create a hypnotic intensity. However, skilled pianists can also introduce discreet variations which can heighten rather than muddy the effect, even, for example, behind horn solos. In general, as Mauleón notes (1993, 118), “a solid montuno is one that creates a balance between repetition and variation.”

One of the most distinctive forms of improvisation in Latin music is the spontaneous creation of moñas by the horn section. A moña is an instrumental interlude which is typically introduced between soneos or montuno sections, or during the latter part of an instrumental solo. It generally features two or three layered, interlocking or overlapping horn lines, played, for example, by the trombones and trumpets. While a typical salsa chart may contain one or more precomposed moñas, horn players in the better salsa bands often improvise moñas in longer songs. A good moña can greatly intensify the “groove” in an extended solo, while providing a creative outlet for horn players otherwise relegated to reading parts from scores.

Improvising a moña requires a remarkable collective interaction. Typically, the trombone player might initiate a line, which a trumpeter would answer with a complementary riff; the other horn players would then join in. Ideally, the moña should sound as if it were precomposed. Once, for example, after watching the Ray Sepúlveda band play what seemed to me an entirely precomposed song (except for the solos), I was quite surprised to hear from the group’s trombonist, ethnomusicologist Chris Washburne, that the final moña had been spontaneous. Washburne explained to me after the set:

What happened there was that Ray started to cue us during the piano solo to go into the final mambo and end the song, but I thought the music was just getting hot, and that we should build on it, so I signalled to him that we would do a moña. Then I sang the trombone part I had in mind to the other trombonist, so we came in together, and the trumpet players, who were ready, answered it right away with their own line. And it worked.

Collectively improvising moñas involves a dimension of risk, as well as expressivity, different from that in soloing. The initiator of a moña may feel exasperated if his colleagues respond with an incompatible line (see, e.g., Sonny
Bravo quoted in Doerschuk 1992, 318) or if they fail to answer at all, whether due to fatigue, laziness, or incompetence. As Washburne relates,

It's like having a gun to your head, but if you want to hang with the big boys and not just be a B-grade hack playing on autopilot, you have to rise to the occasion. So sometimes we try something, and it's a disaster. Or perhaps I'm tired myself, or not in the most creative mood, so I just recycle a riff that I know, perhaps varying it to fit the situation. But then it can turn into something completely different. And if a night goes by where I don't try something new, I'm not growing as a musician. (Personal communication)

As Washburne observes, the tradition of improvising *moltas* persists in the live performances of bandleaders like Sepulveda who are appreciative of their accompanists' virtuosity, and even in studio recordings, where scores may be quite incomplete. Nevertheless, the practice has declined significantly since the “classic” salsa era of roughly 1965–78. The change may be due in part to the tendency of modern pop *salsa romántica* to stress the singer's star image over musicianship, such that contemporary bands tend to mechanically follow scores rather than improvise on stage. The increasingly rigid adherence to recorded versions of songs perpetuates this decline, especially since modern recordings are generally done by overdubbing individual parts, rendering impossible any form of spontaneous group interaction (see Manuel 1995:88).

**Modern Latin Music: Solo Improvisation**

Although in Latin music the role of improvisation in accompaniment styles is important, solo improvisations are naturally more conspicuous. While clearly incorporating features from jazz and from African and European sources, Latin solo styles have evolved as highly original and distinctive idioms. Solos generally take place not in the short, largely precomposed *guía*, but in the longer *montuno* section, which can be extended indefinitely by solos, perhaps punctuated by mambos and moltas.

Although instrumental solo styles are the most elaborate, improvisations by the lead singer are in their own way at least as prominent. Indeed, Latin music vocalists have often been bandleaders and star attractions, whether because of their musical skills or, as is often the case today, the pop-star image projected around them by the commercial music industry. Talented vocalists can function as musical leaders in spite of being musically illiterate and ignorant of theory. The classic example is Cuban singer and bandleader Beny Moré (d. 1963), who, although lacking formal musical knowledge, was, in Acosta's words, “three-quarters of the band” (1993, 16).

Aside from interpretative nuances in rendering the melody of the *guía*, vocal improvisation occurs primarily in the context of the lead singer's *son* or *espiraciones* performed responsorially with the *coro*. This style, consisting generally of two- or four-bar phrases in overlapping call-and-response style, derives directly from the traditional rumba, which itself evolved primarily from African predecessors. According to some singers, the lyrics of the *son* should relate to the story or subject of the song lyrics proper, whether consisting of quotes from the *guía* lyrics or original (if precomposed) snippets of verse (see, e.g., Miguelito Valdés's comments in Salazar 1992, 11). Often, however, vocalists simply sing stock and thematically unrelated phrases, typically in colloquial slang (Gerard and Sheller 1989, 30–32). Since the phrases are so short, involve both text and tune, and are often sung by vocalists lacking technical musical knowledge, it is natural that they often consist of flexible reiterations of vocalists' favorite phrases than truly spontaneous creations. Such is particularly the case with many of the modern pop *salsa romántica* singers who adhere to rigidly to their recorded versions of their songs, and who, at any rate, may be promoted less for their talent than for their star image. These tendencies serve to throw into greater relief the few contemporary singers such as Gilberto Santa Rosa who are fluid improvisers.

As we have suggested above, the Latin improvisational piano and wind instrument styles that coalesced in the 1940s continue to form the bases for their modern counterparts. Such changes as have occurred in the interim consist mostly of jazz influences, whose incorporation has led to the use of the term *típico* to distinguish older styles. *Típico*, as in reference to music or food, implies “traditional” or “old-fashioned,” or redolent of island life. As John Murphy (1991) documents, the *charanga* ensemble, with its somewhat quaint flute-and-violins format, is itself regarded as *típico*, suggestive as it is of bygone days in Cuban bourgeois salons and cotillons. Although *charangas* have largely forsaken the archaic *danzón* for the up-tempo Afro-Cuban *son* and *guaracha*, the flute improvisation style associated with *charanga* remains distinctively *típico*. Murphy observes that this *típico* aesthetic can be understood partly as the avoidance of jazz-type chromaticisms, and also as the self-conscious use of a vocabulary of familiar phrases and riffs (1991, 121–22). Example 6.3a, cited by Murphy, is a typical and ubiquitous stock phrase, as is the figure shown in example 6.3b.

Equally popular are arpeggios and other patterns reflective of the classical (rather than jazz) background of most *charanga* flautists. Although heavily reliant on such a finite repertoire of stock riffs, *charanga* flautists often improvise not only in solos but throughout entire songs. *Charanga* violinists also solo, and they have their own somewhat idiosyncratic *típico* style.

Latin trumpet playing evolved in different contexts, namely, the *son*-based septets and, later, *conjuntos*. In the traditional *son*, the trumpet would improvise in the opening of the *guía* and in call-and-response style with the first four *coros* of the *montuno* (the latter practice remaining standard in modern salsa). As mentioned above, trumpet playing in the septets was fairly simple; indeed, it closely resembled the vocal *son* style, and might incorporate snippets of contemporary songs (Orlando Fiol, personal communication). In the 1940s,
however, improved technical standards led trumpet playing to depart from vocal models and develop in its own direction, as happened contemporaneously with jazz; the better soloists also cultivated an interest in jazz and freely incorporated elements from it. Despite such influences, Latin trumpet playing acquired and retained its own character, especially in the *típico* style represented by players like Alfredo “Chocolate” Armenteros. As with *charanga* flute, the *típico* style comprises both a reiteration of favorite, typical phrases as well as an avoidance, whether deliberate or ingenuous, of jazz mannerisms. As dance bands incorporated saxophones and trombones, characteristic Latin styles of soloing on these instruments also evolved.

We have outlined the sorts of improvisatory latitude accorded to the bongo, timbales, and conga in their accompanimental roles. *Montunos* may also feature improvised solos on these instruments, and percussionists like Patato Valdés and Tito Puente may acquire considerable renown as soloists. To some extent, solo styles on these instruments have their own distinct histories and idiosyncrasies. Modern bongo playing has natural affinities with the bongo style of the *son* septets, as does conga soloing with the *quinto* style of the traditional rumba; however, the presence of conga solos in dance band music dates only from the mid-century decades, when it was popularized by Mongo Santamaría. The use of the timbales as a solo instrument for up-tempo Afro-Cuban dance music commenced around the same time, when the bongos were popularized its usage, along with a colorful and flamboyant improvisatory style.

In other respects the solo styles associated with the three instruments are quite similar, drawing from a common vocabulary of motives and devices. Accordingly, most modern percussionists learn to perform on two or three of the instruments, using many of the same rhythmic principles and techniques. Some of these are evident in the bongo solo schematically transcribed as example 6.4. Brief as this solo is, it exhibits some quintessential features of the *típico* idiom, including the emphasis on artful syncopation rather than gratuitous speed and virtuosity: the tendency—as pervasive in West African drumming as in the solos of *charanga* flautist Dave Valentín—to establish a given phrase that can be repeated (with or without slight variation) a few times, and then move to another discrete phrase; and lastly, the sequential use of contrasting syncopations, particularly different articulations of either ternary phrasings of binary subdivisions, or, conversely, binary phrasing of triplets. In this case, the solo quickly progresses through the following phrases: ternary-phrased single strokes (mm. 1–3); reiterations of a four- or five-stroke sextuplet figure (mm. 4–6); an extended series of regular triplet strokes (mm. 11–13); and lastly, a stock phrase consisting of threefold repetition of a pattern with ternary phrasing of binary subdivision (such as could be schematized: 1 2 3 4 5 6 1 2 3 4 5 6 etc.), all in eighth-notes (mm. 15–17).

Omitted from this and other transcriptions in this article are the numerous and subtle microrhythmic nuances (playing “behind the beat,” straddling triplet and quadruple subdivisions, and the like) which can be judiciously introduced (and perhaps subsequently avoided) in all instrumental styles in order to heighten rhythmic drive and tension (see Washburne 1998).

**Latin Piano Improvisation**

Latin piano style constitutes one of the most original and distinctive features of Latin music. Because of its uniqueness and the way it embodies what can be seen as certain quintessential features of Latin improvisation, it merits more expansive discussion in this article. Essentially, the solo style comprises a set of standardized patterns or techniques having contrasting textures, which, in a given solo, are introduced in the form of relatively short, discrete phrases. In several of these typical patterns, rhythm and texture are of greater importance than melody and harmony. The most common patterns include the following:

1. Repeated ternary-phrased, three-pitch, eighth-note arpeggios, usually with doubled or tripled octaves, alternating between tonic and dominant chords (as in ex. 6.5, or mm. 3–5 of ex. 6.7, or, in triplets, mm. 19–24 of ex. 6.7); (2) melodies played in double, triple, or quadruple octaves (e.g., mm. 16–19 in ex. 6.7, or throughout ex. 6.8); (3) phrases using parallel thirds (or tenths), also generally played in doubled octaves (mm. 9–14, 30–32 in ex. 6.7); (4) syncopated patterns repeating short, double-octave right-hand phrases (usually one or two pitches) with left-hand chords (mm. 9–18 of ex. 6.8); (5) guajeolton-
tunio-like passages; (6) block chords; (7) quasi-atonal, and often a-rhythmic nonsense riffs (often descending sequences like the passage in ex. 6.6); (8) single-note right-hand runs, with occasional left-hand “comping” chords, as in mainstream jazz piano.

The affinities with jazz are apparent mostly in the realm of chord voicings, which often use ninths, thirteenth, and, in less típico contexts, piled fourths such as were popularized by McCoy Tyner. However, the differences from jazz are perhaps more striking. Since the emergence of bebop in the early 1940s, mainstream jazz piano style has consisted overwhelmingly of single-note right-hand runs, punctuated by occasional left-hand chords (comping). That is, it is essentially a one-handed style (such as prompted Art Tatum to state of bebop pianist Bud Powell, “He ain’t got no left”). This texture does occur in Latin piano (pattern 8 above), but as merely one of several more common textures. In general, Latin piano stresses volume, power, textural contrast, and rhythm more than intricacy of melodic line. As Sonny Bravo states, half in jest, “We’re not dealing with subtle music here; we’re dealing with savages from the jungle” (in Doerschuk 1992, 323). It may also be noted that such textural variation works much more naturally with harmonically static or repetitive montunos than it would with extended harmonic progressions used in jazz standards; pattern 1 (ex. 6.5), for example, is designed to fit over a repeated tonic-dominant ostinato, and would be difficult to introduce in a jazz song with extended chord progressions. Conversely, it would be difficult to sustain interest in a solo over an extended montuno ostinato by using only jazz-style single-note right-hand runs. Accordingly, when Latin jazz pianists play songs with sequential harmonic progressions, they tend to lapse into the single-note format, reserving the more varied textures for chordal ostinato sections.

Example 6.7, a typical piano solo by Larry Harlow, illustrates how some of these textures are performed. A brief introductory two-octave phrase leads to a
two-bar ternary arpeggio figure (mm. 3–4), using the familiar device of ternary phrasing of duplet (eighth-note) subdivisions. Following this is a passage in doubled parallel thirds, structured, as are many phrases in Latin improvisation, in the form of what could be seen as an antecedent-consequent or call-and-response pattern (mm. 9–14). In the next passage (from m. 15), an ascending line in quadruple octaves climaxes in a double-octave call, which, after a pause, segues to a triplet arpeggio ostinato figure in doubled octaves, alternating tonic and dominant chords (mm. 20–25). A transitional phrase leads to a descending, ternary/montuno-type figure (mm. 28–29), and the solo concludes with another passage in doubled parallel thirds. (This solo, it may be noted, also reflects one of the basic principles of clave, that is, the tendency to stress downbeats only on the “2” side—here, odd-numbered bars—eliding the others.)

There is an obvious parallel between the aesthetic evident here and that in percussion solos, such as example 6.4. In both cases, the emphasis is not on extended thematic development, nor even on overt textural or rhythmic continuity per se, but rather on the sequential presentation of discrete contrasting phrases. Like percussion improvisations, these often take the form either of antecedent-consequent phrasing, or of a pattern repeated, perhaps with variation, twice or thrice, generally lasting less than five seconds. At the same time, the effect is not one of a disjointed pastiche, but of a continuous flow.

**Latin Improvisation and Jazz**

By this point it should be quite clear that Latin improvisation, although influenced by jazz, is best regarded as a parallel tradition, which, indeed, has exerted its own influence on jazz. Since the 1940s, many Latin musicians have informally studied jazz and freely incorporated elements from it into their playing. More than one instrumentalist has told me that since he grew up immersed in Latin music and eventually performing it, he presently cultivates a more active interest in jazz than Latin music. Further, jazz pedagogy has generally had much more to offer students in terms of publications, classes, “music minus one” records and the like. Jazz horn players have also regularly been featured as guest soloists in Latin jazz groups, especially in the 1940s and ’50s, when the distinctive Latin solo styles were just taking shape. The overlap between the two styles is formalized in the genre of Latin jazz, which uses the rhythms and often the montuno ostinatos of Latin music, while sharing with jazz the emphasis on solo improvisation, the predominantly instrumental (rather than vocal) format, and a function as music for listening rather than dancing.

In other respects, the realms of Latin music and jazz remain distinct. There are many Latin horn players who are fluent at improvising over montunos, but who would be hard-pressed to play a solo over a jazz standard like “Stella by Starlight.” Conversely, jazz players who delve into Latin music must be able to perform interesting solos over chordal ostinatos, and they must develop some feeling for the aesthetic, and, ideally, for rhythmic subtleties like clave. Of course, a fundamental distinction between the two genres is that Latin music, unlike jazz since the swing era, is dance music. Solos must ideally intensify the groove for dancers, and soloists learn to gauge the success of their improvisations by the degree to which dancers are “getting down.”

**Toward an Aesthetic of Latin Music Improvisation**

Latin music, like any mature musical genre, comprises not a random grab bag of diverse techniques and mannerisms, but a cohesive set of idiomatic sub-styles which have been organically cultivated by generations of musicians. As such, Latin improvisation may be presumed to be animated by a consistent underlying aesthetic, which may, however, be difficult to describe analytically. In attempting to abstract an aesthetic of Latin music improvisation per se, prior research on West African music may provide some useful models, especially because of the close affinities and historical bonds between the two culture areas. Robert Farris Thompson (1973) and, in a somewhat different manner, John Chernoff (1979) have posited a certain “aesthetic of the cool” pervading much of West African music and dance, and one might be tempted to seek parallels in Afro-Latin music. Latin percussionists do indeed articulate the importance of control and economy of style, rather than ostentatious and gratuitous display; similar notions, of course, can be found in many improvisational styles, from jazz to Hindustani music. However, extending the analogy is problematic; Latinos certainly do not praise music as fría or “cool,” but instead speak of salsa and rumba as caliente (hot) or brava (wild, fierce). At the risk of generalizing, I would opine that Latin music strives for intense drive and exuberance (implicit in the oft-used term sabor) rather than coolness and restraint.

David Locke presents a somewhat less abstract, more practical set of aesthetic guidelines in his pedagogical study of Ghanian drum Gahu (1987, 127–28). Among the goals Locke recommends to students are intensity, momentum, power, humor, orientation toward dance, interaction with other musicians, and thinking in terms of phrases rather than individual strokes. Such guidelines would apply well to Latin music, as indeed they might to other musics such as jazz.

A more analytical and perhaps less ambitious approach to hypothesizing a consistent aesthetic of Latin music would be to locate specific technical features that appear to recur as common denominators in all or most instrumental improvisational idioms. I have mentioned above, for example, the tendency toward short, discrete, contrasting phrases evident in both melodic instrument and percussion solos. Such phrasings may suggest question-answer-type patterns, or, alternately, formats in which a phrase is introduced, repeated or varied twice or thrice, and then dropped. Such tendencies reflect a continuity with traditional rumba drumming and dancing and, on a slightly more general level,
with the essentially percussive orientation of modern piano and even wind instrument styles. In this sense, Latin improvisation (and composition) could be said to be unified by a common and quite distinctive approach to rhythm, just as “swing” is sometimes posited as the essence of jazz. Several of the distinguishing features of Latin rhythm can be abstracted and enumerated. These would include the following: (1) the importance of clave as an underlying regulating rhythmic ostinato; (2) the use, as basic building blocks, of a set of stock rhythmic patterns, including the cells presented in example 6.1 (and others presented in Mauleón 1993); (3) a fondness for stressing offbeats, and especially anacrases (as in mm. 1–3 of ex. 6.4 above); (4) a particular approach to syncopation, involving the aforementioned use of binary subdivision with ternary phrasing, and conversely, triplet subdivision with binary phrasing.

The latter principle merits further discussion here. These two techniques pervade improvisations on percussion, piano, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, wind instruments, and innumerable examples of each technique could be presented. Ternary phrasing of binary-subdivided notes is the essence of what is one of the most familiar stock Latin piano riffs, described as pattern 1 in the list of common piano patterns above, as illustrated in example 6.5. Another cliché using the same principle is the aforementioned “1 2 3 4 5 6” pattern (or variants thereof), such as is found in the conclusion of example 6.4 and in measures 9–13 of example 6.8, a piano solo by Papo Lucca.15

The converse device, binary phrasing of triplet-subdivided notes or beats, is similarly common. Measures 10–13 of the bongo solo in example 6.4 show one typical application of this technique, in the form of an extended roll accented as 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 (etc.), using triplet subdivisions. Papo Lucca’s piano solo (ex. 6.8) illustrates two other forms of this syncopation: first, triplet (or sextuplet) quarter notes are melodically phrased as descending four-note sequences (indicated by dotted brackets, mm. 1–5), and subsequently as bases for a quadratic ostinato in the rhythm 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 (etc.). Indeed, the entire second half of this excerpt (mm. 9–18) constitutes a series of percussive variations on a simple melodic phrase, employing the two basic syncopation principles outlined here.

Much of the expressivity of these latter techniques lies in the way that they establish a temporary but quite overt sense of polyrhythm. Their usage can be seen as preserving in Afro-Latin music some of the polyrhythmic complexity that was otherwise sacrificed when quadratically-metered popular music forms replaced the structural (“12/8”) polymeters pervading so much of African and neo-African music.16 Also lost in the Middle Passage were most of the traditional African social structures and ways of life that, as Thompson and Chernoff persuasively show, ultimately informed the “cool” aesthetic itself. A more expansive and holistic study of the aesthetics of Latin music improvisation would ultimately seek not only to identify more of the fundamental technical tropes unifying the style, but to situate them ethnomusicologically in the contexts of their associated cultures and social histories.

Notes


2. Nor, for that matter, have laiad players been featured in Cuban dance bands, as has Puerto Rican cuatro virtuoso Yomo Toro in salsa formats.

3. Shown here is the son clave; in the rumba clave—i.e., that used in traditional rumba—the third note of the “3” side falls an eighth-note later. For further discussion of clave, see Mauleón 1993, ch. 3; Gerard and Sheller 1989, ch. 2; and Manuel 1995, 38–41; regarding the other rhythmic cells, see Behague 1980 and Mikowsky 1988.

4. For transcriptions of these patterns, see Gerard and Sheller 1989, ch. 6; Manuel 1995, 25.

5. Singer (1983) notes that the highest compliment that can be paid to a melodic instrumental player is to be likened to a drummer.

6. Such as pianist Agustín Mercier of Conjunto Casino, as interviewed by Delfín Pérez (personal communication).
7. Although terminology is occasionally inconsistent, *moñas* are generally distinguished as retaining the chordal estilato of the *montuno*, whereas the otherwise similar mambos depart from it. Because they involve coordination of the piano and bass as well as horns, mambos are precomposed. See Mauleón 1993, 156, for a transcribed example of a *moña*.

8. Informants like trumpeter Hector Colon claim that this trend is particularly marked in bands from Puerto Rico (personal communication).

9. Producer Sergio George, for example, comments, "You've got singers who are selling a lot of records who don't have a clue how to *sonear*" (Boggs 1993, 18).

10. Orlando Fiol states that this figure comes from Cuban *comparsa* ditties (personal communication).

11. Modern percussionists like Archie Flores and Giovanni Hidalgo have popularized more flashy, virtuoso styles of playing.

12. See, e.g., the left-hand voicings of the F-minor chord in m. 10 of example 6.8. I call the use of these features in Latin music "affinities" rather than "influences," since they may to some extent derive from common roots in popular and late Romantic harmony rather than solely from imitation of jazz.

13. I have, however, heard conflicting reports on this issue. While some Latin soloists stress the importance of *clave*, jazz sax player Chico Freeman, who toured extensively with the Machito band, told me, "*Clave* isn't really important for us soloists; it's mostly for the arrangers" (personal communication).

14. E.g., Orlando Fiol (personal communication), and Ray Barretto, who states of the younger percussionists, "Their action is based on speed and rapid-fire, and sometimes open space is as important as what you play" (Tamargo 1994, 14).

15. This riff can also be heard in the timbales solo in "Reina Rumba" on the same LP.

16. This fundamental shift, from polymetric African structures and Spanish triple meter to the quadratic rhythms of modern Latin music, remains to be analytically explored, although a somewhat problematic attempt is found in Pérez Fernández 1987.

References


