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Free Music Improvisation: An Ethnography of Brazilian Improvisers

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Abstract

A four-month research period into the practice of free music improvisation in Brazil during February-June 2014 allowed intriguing insights into how musicians think about, play and teach the music practice that is referred to as 'free improvisation.' An overview of the term 'free improvisation' with some historical context on its development will be provided to aid the reader to better situate the ethnographic study of 50 Brazilian improvisers during 2014. The ethnography was carried out by the author who speaks fluent Portuguese, using a participatory action research (PAR) framework, with the main aim of enquiring whether or how the practice of free improvisation is taught in the Brazilian higher education system.

The research was set at several higher education institutions in Brazil, which included the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), The Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO), The University of São Paulo (USP), The Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), The Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), with two shorter, single day visits to The Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte in Natal (UFRN) and The Escola Livre de Música in Unicamp (ELM).

Before providing a summarised interpretation of some of the interviewed improvisers, I will examine the improvisational spirit, this improvisatory worldmaking approach (the 'jeitinho brasileiro') that is often considered to be integral to the Brazilian way of life. I conclude the article by linking the skills of listening, so essential in the practice of free music improvisation, to the work of French composer and pedagogue Alain Savouret and his concept of the 'virtuosity of the ear.'

Free Improvisation: Some Historical Considerations

Let me commence by looking at the term and concept of 'free improvisation' –a musical movement that I situate within a historical musical lineage of jazz and the free jazz movements, with all their diverse influences by other cultural and musical traditions; especially noteworthy might be the influences on jazz music by the AACM.[1] The AACM's music and their political and cultural vision pushed the boundaries of the jazz tradition, commencing in the mid 60s, while simultaneously challenging the avant-garde classical Western music tradition, as fronted for instance by John Cage. These latter musical movements will not be considered in any detail in this paper, but I urge the reader to investigate some of the publications that set the ground for the wider field of Critical Improvisation Studies, in particular those that tackle jazz and free jazz to a good extent. These include Dean (1992), who provides a serious study of the European avant-garde from a variety of perspectives, but also Berliner (1994); Monson (1994), Smith and Dean (1997), as well as Belgrad (1998) and Heble (2000), amongst others.

In musical, and admittedly highly simplified, terms one might consider that 'free jazz' developed—and indeed attempted to free—the musical language of jazz, with 'free jazz' players wanting to liberate themselves from historically conventional constraints of jazz music pertaining to melody, harmony, timbre, or meter. Indeed, freedom was sought even from any traditional role and function of the musician within the ensemble. Seen from a musical perspective (and this is not to denigrate the many excellent writings that have, and are, emerging in the field of Critical Improvisation Studies that investigate free improvisation as a global, and not only a musical, phenomenon) 'free improvisation' attempted to move those parameters even further away from any historically recognisable music conventions (whether that is possible or not is another question).

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[1] AACM: The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians formed in 1965 as a cooperative non-profit organisation of musicians. It was established in Chicago, Illinois, by Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, Steve McCall, and Phil Cohran. See also Lewis (2008).

One might argue that 'free jazz' reached international audiences through the release of Ornette Coleman's album 1959, *The Shape of Jazz to Come,* and this release is often quoted as a cornerstone work that moved music improvisation away from an audible relationship of the African American jazz tradition of the early-to-mid Twentieth Century. Improviser and writer David Toop (2016) proposes that one might look even further back for a possible origin of the 'free jazz' movement. Toop suggests that the crazy, wild saxophone solo of Willis 'Gator Tail' Jackson, as played live on the Ed Sullivan show in 1955, might be considered an earlier starting point of 'free jazz.'[2] At whatever historical date one situates initial developments of this music that moved away from more prescribed harmonic frameworks of jazz music, it seems convincing that, broadly put, 'free jazz' of the late 1950's was a musical precursor to what is generally referred to as 'free improvisation.' Some of the main facets of free music improvisation is that it attempts to free itself even further than free jazz from any preset harmonic tradition, licks, melodies, or meter (again, whether this is a possibility is another point for discussion, which I will not pursue here).

Free improvisation aims to foster choice, collectivity, community-building, discovery (of self and other), dialogue, interconnection, listening, questioning (of self and other), and responsibility. As a social undertaking, free improvisation is a co-created activity that aims to enable a diversity of voices and meanings. In engaging in any free improvisational context, the improviser must accept a certain lack of control, and that in turn implies being open to the possibility of encountering the unexpected / the unpredictable, and maybe even chancing upon the impossible. In having to be open to what is happening in each moment, and to learn not to be afraid of failure, the improviser is aware that she is engaging in a risky business! Such a state of being and of letting things emerge without imposing one's anxieties of how or what the outcome should be, takes time to learn.

Keith Sawyer, a prolific writer on improvisation, highlights the idea of improvisation allowing us to do things 'in-the-moment.' Rather than focusing on clearly envisaged and consciously intended musical outcomes, free improvisation becomes linked to aspects of real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking and collaboration. In free improvisation there tends to be an emphasis on the *process* of creation as opposed to an end *product* alongside notions of 'collaborative emergence.' Sawyer points to this difference between process and product in creative work, stating that long periods of creative work often end in a creative *product*,

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[2] Free jazz continued to rise in popularity throughout the early 1960s with other musicians including Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, and Albert Ayler. Ayler's *The Hilversum Session* specifically advanced the improvisational notions of John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, and I suggest the reader listen to Ayler's *"Truth is Marching In" (1966/67).*

whereas, "in improvisational performance, the creative process is the *product*" (Sawyer, 2000, p. 149).

Perhaps Keith Johnstone has a valid point when he posits the improviser "like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future" (1979, p. 116). This implies that the improviser lives 'in-the-moment,' knowing only what she has just done or left behind, but with no particular foresight or intent for the future, i.e. for a specific musical outcome. This is not to take away from the liberatory element sought by many free improvisers; however, while playing 'in-the-moment,' the improviser simply cannot predict the future, and therefore should not pay attention to what *might* happen, as it takes away from an embodied, in-the-moment, dialogical commitment to the other collaborators.

Essential to any discussion of free music improvisation is the thinking of African American improviser George Lewis, who, in his seminal text of 1996, provides an in-depth and critical overview of improvised music after 1950. In that text Lewis posits the music of African and African-American musicians, in particular the improvisatory activities as found in mid/late 1940s Bebop (exemplified by musicians such as Parker, Gillespie, Monk or Powell), with its incisive and transgressive nature, as precursor to improvisation practices in Eurological music (1996, p. 100). Bebop, understood as spontaneous and unique by Lewis, is understood as a resistance to the then dominant white American culture, but not only in terms of its musical concerns, since Bebop also challenged extra-musical ideas (1996, p. 95). It not only was associated with social disturbances; but asserted musicians in their own right; thus, Lewis understands Bebop as a radical redefinition and direct challenge to the social order of the time. Lewis' article is seminal as it emphasises the importance of the Afrological perspective, which, according to him is so often ignored or written out of the dominant white text books that seem unwilling to acknowledge an indebtedness to other traditions than their own (David Cope, 1993, being one example which Lewis quotes).

According to Lewis, the Afrological perspective on improvisation is about uniqueness (also emphasised in Berliner, 1994, pp. 268-269), but more so, it is about the personal narrative of the musicians, as opposed to the Eurological perspective, which Lewis argues, tends to exclude notions of memory and history (1996, p. 107).

It is not hard to see how for an African-American improviser, coming from a legacy of slavery and oppression (1996, p. 109), the idea of being 'free from memory' –a blatant erasure of history—so Lewis must seem rather suspicious if not a complete denial. In particular, Lewis argues that the idea of 'being free' in music, must always be read in wider political and social terms. According to Lewis, improvised music is about "individual life choices as well as cultural, ethnic, and personal location" (1996, p. 110), and although I agree that improvised

music in Europe in the 1960s posed challenges to Western ideas of structure, form, and expression (1996, p. 94), free improvised music was more about celebrating the ideas of a collective rather than that of an individual and her beliefs; it is a practice which allows alternative value systems, welcoming diverse characteristics, including "agency, social necessity, personality, and difference, as well as its strong relationship to popular and folk cultures" (1996, p. 110).

It is impossible to pinpoint a single moment when free music improvising was born, and Keith Rowe, one of the founding members of the influential British free improvisation group AMM (initiated in London in 1965) states that free improvisation may have started a long time ago: before AMM, before Bebop, before Lewis or the African American musical jazz traditions. Rowe says,

> You can imagine lute players in the 1500s getting drunk and doing improvisations for people in front of a log fire. The noise, the clatter must have been enormous.
> You read absolutely incredible descriptions of that. I cannot believe that musicians back then didn't float off into free playing. (In: Warburton, 2001, online).

Thus, musical improvisation dates back to the beginnings of our existence as human beings, and some writers, including Stephen Nachmanovitch in his work, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (1990), speak of improvisation as running deeper than music and art. Nachmanovitch understands improvisation as the essence of our being; as the essence of all our natural, spontaneous interactions, something we are born with and then endeavour to recapture throughout our lives. According to Nachmanovitch, improvising is a basic life function.

What becomes clear is that rather than simply a change towards the treatment of musical parameters, the free music improvisation movement was a seismic shift in the way musicians *thought* about music. This change in attitudes towards music making has also been discussed by Ekkehard Jost (1974/1994) who tackled the musics of Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago and Derek Bailey (1980).

Other critical texts that explore musical as well as non-musical themes in free improvisation practice and that reflect on improvisation in a wider scope than related to music making can be found in Benson (2003), Watson (2004) or Borgo (2005).[3]

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[3] I also direct the reader to IICSI, the 'International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation' (http://improvisationinstitute.ca) (URL 1). A further good and fairly up-to-date text resource on free

The writings of, amongst others, Fischlin and Heble (2004); Nicholls (2012) or Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz (2013) understand improvisation as collective, co-created, ethical and political; as a complex social phenomenon that "mediates transcultural inter-artistic exchanges, [producing] new conceptions of identity, community, history, and the body" (Heble & Siemerling, 2010, p. 4). The introduction to Heble and Caines' excellent collection of writings (2015) also shouts it loud and clearly, emphasising improvisation as more than music; as "a vital life-force and performance practice that has animated and activated diverse energies of inspiration, critique, and invention" (2015, p. 2). According to them it is an "artistic practice that accents and embodies real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking, trust, surprise, and collaboration;" a practice that teaches us about listening, responsibility and hope, "about how we can adapt to change, about how we might […] choose to create a shared future" (2015, p. 3).

David Toop even goes as far as to say that *doing nothing* is improvising. In his most recent book on the topic he entices us to sit still and to

> allow stray thoughts, inner tremors, sensory impressions to pass through the body. To listen to improvise: sifting, filtering, prioritising, placing, resisting, comparing, evaluating, rejecting and taking pleasure in sounds and absences of sounds; making immediate and predictive assessments of multilayered signals, both specific and amorphous; balancing these against the internal static of thought. From moment to moment, improvisation determines the outcomes of events, complex trajectories, the course of life. Humans must learn to improvise, to cope with the random events, failure, chaos, disaster and accident in order to survive…. (2016, p. 1)

Here is an explicit message that humans *have* to learn to improvise, to cope with the unexpected, to handle random, chaotic or accidental events and even to deal with failures.

I emphasise that free music improvisation commenced as a *practice* by young, inspired musicians, rather than as an academic study, and the saxophonist Evan Parker, one of the British "fathers" of the free music movement, has continually emphasised this point (lately in Schroeder, 2014). Parker also emphasises that free improvisation practice, in its origin, began as a social, political as well as an aesthetic endeavour, enabling musicians not only to explore their instruments in unusual ways, but allowing for modes of social organisation, challenging hierarchical structures of traditional Western music as well as structures of political systems.

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improvisation is kept by the University of Sheffield under the EFI pages: www.efi.group.shef.ac.uk (Stubley, 1996).

The practice of free improvisation, according to Parker, was very much rooted in a kind of social egalitarianism, where musicians engaged with each other based on equality and trust. Parker's views seem to align with more recent scholarship, advanced for instance by Heller (2016) who describes the emergence of several young avant-garde improvisers of New York's Loft music scene during the 1970s. The Loft Jazz musicians were a collective group, shaping New York's flagging jazz scene by developing their craft in abandoned factories and warehouses. This was a group of self-determined improvisers who saw themselves as an equal collective of experimental, underground musicians.

Nowadays, free improvisation as a musical practice is an expanding field of academic research and there has been a burgeoning interest in research into improvisation, more generally. Inquiries come from musical and non-musical fields in the arts, sciences and humanities, and the field of Critical Improvisation Studies is steadily building a substantial body of works, acknowledging improvisation's complex role in a diversity of interdisciplinary contexts and varied cultural practices.

Improvisation as a mode of politically-engaged social practice has been theorised in the author's own edited volume (2014*),* but also more recently in Chare and Swiboda (Eds., 2018). Lewis' and Piekut' s 2016 *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* is a major volume dedicated to research into improvisation, and Heble's and Caines' 2015 *Improvisation Studies Reader,* as well as Siddal's and Waterman's (2016) volume all provide excellent discussions on improvisation and its wider cultural applications.

On the one hand we might say that improvisation "affords the opportunity to challenge musical and cultural hegemonies and develops new ways of collaborating and thinking creatively in music" (Rose, 2013; author's private copy). On the other hand, the view that free improvisation is little understood and often side-lined in music education rather than celebrated, is also widespread. Back in 2009 Hickey had argued for a re-examination of then existing methodologies in order to find ways to teach free music improvisation in schools. To me, it was such side-lining of free improvisation in pedagogical contexts that led to the enquiry in Brazilian higher education institutions and to the interviewing of 50 musicians working in the field of improvisation. In the next section I will reflect on the methodological approach which underlined this enquiry.

Methodological Approach

My methodological stance is born out of practice and an 'embodied knowing,' as I am a practising saxophonist and free improviser. The idea of 'embodied knowing' has a long tradition in contemporary continental philosophy and can be found in the writings of Hungarian born scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi (1891–1976). In his work "The

Tacit Dimension" (1966) Polanyi argued that we always have some knowledge that cannot be articulated, something he calls 'tacit knowledge.' Polanyi gives the example of a tool that when in use becomes more than just a tool. He says that when we use the tool, we soon do not feel it as such, but we feel *through* the tool. The tool becomes an extension of our hand and we start to inhabit the tool in the same way that we may inhabit our own body.

Thus, creative practice, i.e. being an improviser, for me is a mode of knowing; it is a mode for experiencing and for theorising, something which was poignantly echoed by Mick Wilson in a speech he gave at the12th ELIA Biennial in Vienna. In that speech, Wilson closely linked knowledge to practice ('art knows' he said), stating that '[a]rt knows provisionally, fragmentarily, in a way that is incomplete' (2012). This implies that practitioners often experience in their 'doing' (playing an instrument for example) that their practice already knows, and although this might be a subconscious 'knowing' that necessitates their bodies and tools/instruments to express on their behalf, but once their practice has managed to express itself, they tend to be in a good position to theorise and to conceptualise their 'embodied knowing,' or what English artist David Hockney calls 'secret knowledge' (2001), a knowledge that arises, through handling materials in practice.

For the ethnographic research in Brazil, my own practice as a free improviser was an integral part of accessing, but also integrating into, the Brazilian higher education improvisation community. During the four months research period, I played with many of the improvisers whom I interviewed. The fact that I am a practitioner, that I was able to offer hands-on workshops and lectures to each university I visited and that I speak Portuguese fluently, paved the way for being able to access the people I wanted to interview. It seemed to instill a certain amount of confidence in my ability to carry out the work, and I imagine that it also created a sense of trust –an essential part for doing ethnographic work.

This small practical 'offering' in the form of workshops and lectures served as an effective way of being invited to speak at and to collaborate on various events with staff and students. It was an essential way of being welcomed with open arms and of being able to engage in meaningful ways with the communities I wanted to interview.
Before commencing the work, I had designed three questions that resonated with my own practice as an improviser and educator, and which I believed would elicit meaningful responses.

three questions posed were:

1) How do you use free improvisation in your own practice as a musician?
2) Do you teach free improvisation? And if so, how?
3) Do you think improvisation can (or should) be taught?

These three questions were used consistently in the 50 video interviews with Brazilian musicians and teachers. The questions led to some musicians elaborating in great detail, leading to lengthy interviews (40 minutes), while others kept their answers more concise. I made the decision to edit all interviews to about 3-6 minutes maximum in length; thus, providing a *flavour* of each musician's reply rather than an accurately transcribed account. If people felt confident to carry out the interview in English, I encouraged them to respond in English. However, the majority preferred to speak in Portuguese.

The listener will therefore find most interviews with translated sub-titles. The end result is a video gallery of 50 Brazilian musicians, staff and students speaking about how they use free improvisation and whether they think it can be taught.[4] All musicians interviewed were, at the time of my visit, working and living in Brazil as independent musicians. All of them had a passion for playing 'free,' although most of them played many different types of music, from straight jazz and samba music to musicians engaged in choro, rock, and pop music. Some of the people interviewed were university lecturers who taught and played different styles of improvised musics. The students I interviewed were most often enrolled in fairly traditional music courses, learning about standard Western classical music, where they were required to take aural and theory classes, repertoire analysis as well as more traditional performance and composition classes.

The chosen interview method, using the same three questions for all interviewees, seemed a good way of documenting my encounters, while providing an excellent overview of the differing opinions of musicians across Brazil. Another output of the research includes an online Mindmap (URL 2), where I sketched networks of people, different sites, cities, and venues that I came into contact with over the research period.
Prior to commencing the interviews with the free improvising community across Brazil, it was essential to clarify other issues, including the role that I would take, not only as an improviser, but also as a white, female academic from the UK, entering the Brazil's higher education system, which I had previously not studied.

The main practice-based methodology underpinning this research was PAR (participatory action research). To clarify, 'participatory action research' (PAR) is often seen as particularly suitable for practitioner research in higher education settings. This approach inherits the general features of action research, aiming to transform existing practice through an ongoing 'reflective spiral' of planning-acting-observing-reflecting-re-planning. However, unlike the more traditional forms of action research, the emphasis in PAR is on the collaborative and

[4] All interviewees agreed to have their videos posted online and ethical permission was sought and received.

emancipatory enquiry. Participatory action research engages researchers collaboratively, examining their own knowledge, and their own "practices of communication, production and social organisation" (Kemmis & McTaggart 2005, p. 565). I see PAR as being placed along a continuum of 'pure observation' and 'pure participation,' both subsets or multiplicities of what Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2002) have explored in their writing on participant observation. In defining participant observation and allowing for multiple levels of participation, DeWalt and DeWalt explore this balance between entirely removing the researcher from participating in the activities and practices he/she is observing ('pure observation'), and on the other hand "going native" (i.e. 'pure participation'), where the researcher "sheds the identity of investigator and adopts the identity of a full participant..." (2002, p. 18). They say,

> The balance between observation and participation achieved by an individual researcher can fall anywhere along the continuum. The key point is that researchers should be aware of the compromises in access, objectivity, and community expectations that are being made at any particular place along the continuum. Further, in the writing of ethnography, the particular place of the researcher on this continuum should be made clear. Methodological notes, field notes, and diary entries should report the level of involvement of the researcher in the community or group being studied, and the degree to which the researcher comes to identify with the community. (p. 23)

Therefore, participatory action research enabled me to place myself along this continuum of 'pure observation' and 'pure participation,' allowing me to integrate into the higher education music communities which, not unsurprisingly, turned out to be mostly middle-class, relatively well-off Brazilians from educated backgrounds. 95% of the interviewed musicians were white males between 20 and 50 years of age. This unbalanced demographic set the scene for my enquiry into free improvisation practices. It might be worth noting that such demographic perhaps also resonates with much of the free improvisation scene in Europe. Further, such unequal demographic picture also mirrored Brazil's imbalanced wealth distribution, which I encountered in many places throughout Brazil, where even in the most affluent districts beggars were sleeping in the streets. It is said, though, that most of the poverty in Brazil is still found in the huge favelas that sit alongside the richest people and wealthiest areas in Brazil. Favelas themselves are often seen as places where improvisation and improvisatory attitudes can be seen clearly, and notions of Brazilian identity linked to improvisation has been advanced by scholars including Jason Stanyek (2011) and José Miguel Wisnik (2011). I will discuss this Brazilian improvisatory way of being in more detail below.

Brazil in 2014

It is worth noting that I arrived in Brazil in early January 2014 when South America's largest country was preparing for the hosting of the FIFA World Cup as well as for the 2016 Olympic Games. Brazil's usual peripheral placement on the world's map was clearly changing. It was not difficult to see why tensions were rising in the wake of overwhelming social and political problems, with the prospect of 600,000 overseas visitors expected for the World Cup and a huge increase in public spending. It had been estimated that £2.3bn were going to be spent on improving airports with a further £5.3bn on improving public transport, roads, the building of new hotels, and training for tourism staff. Another £600 million investment was to be made into the security forces, and even for the provision of free English classes for prostitutes![5] More importantly, though, the lives of the favela communities were being radically changed due to the occupation by Brazil's Special Police Operations Battalion (BOPE), which, at the end of March 2014, occupied one of Rio's largest favelas (Maré). The astonishing overspending by the government to provide infrastructures for the 2014 World Cup had become a focal point for news discussions.[6]

Arriving in Brazil just before the World Cup gave me a flavour of why one of the greatest artists of the Twentieth century, Tom Jobim, had said "Brazil isn't for beginners." (In Kramer, 2011). Jobim had referred to the fact that Brazilians do not fit easily into schematised explanations, and that notions of contradiction tend to be at the heart of many Brazilian lives due to what is often seen as the country's "peripheral" condition. Brazil is considered a country where opposites thrives; a country that is in constant flux, fluid, playful, and which embraces with full force a celebratory and improvisational spirit.

Literary professor José Miguel Wisnik, referring to the Brazilian culture, says:

> My hypothesis is that here in Brazil, in a culture where the signifier and the signified are not glued together, this means that life is a game, that opposites play, and that the signifiers *carnivalize* ready and given images. This is therefore part of a larger game than consciousness or of the intention of [any] agents. It means, in a certain way, that one pleasurably accepts carnival. (In Kramer, 2011, p. 8)

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[5] Sources: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-15824562; http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/05/sport/football/brazil-world-cup-security-football/index.html; http://edition.cnn.com/2013/01/08/world/americas/brazil-prostitutes-english-classes.

[6] You can read a more detailed report on budgetary implications and the overall political situation in Brazil pre-World Cup here: https://progressive.org/magazine/brazil-s-poor-pay-world-cup-penalty.

Without wanting to generalise, this playfulness, the 'carnivalising'[7] of life, where the sacred becomes mingled with the profane, the sublime with the ridiculous, where boundaries between the private and the public tend to be porous, was something I found rather striking. The abundance of graffiti art all over the city displaying juxtapositions of the sacred and the profane might be a rather obvious example, but also, Brazilians tended to refer to their public heroes (specifically soccer stars) by their first name as if they were part of their family (Pelé, Ronaldinho, etc.).

Wisnik (2011) argues that this assumed familiarity of public heroes indicates a further porosity between the public and the private sphere. Moreover, at the time of my arrival, Rio was preparing for the world's largest street spectacle—the carnival itself, which took place in early March 2014. This festivity showed numerous signs of the blurring of boundaries, for instance between genders—the street of the carnival is dominated by men, and although there is a great emphasis on the 'rainha' (the dancing queen) most of the percussionists (the 'bateria') tend to be men. The singers ('cantoras') of the samba school ('escola de samba') are always men, but the on-looking public consists of many women and children, singing and dancing along with incredible rhythmic accuracies and immense joy, pride and flair. Carnival in Brazil is fun while also constituting serious business!

Further, the porous boundaries are highlighted as carnival brings together a multitude of social classes and races, while the spaces of the street and the home become highly permeable. Indeed, during the "ensaio do Salgueiro" (a fortunate place to be on the 22nd of January 2014 when the samba school of Salgueiro was lining the streets for one of their intensely competitive rehearsals) many families opened their doors to the spectators to serve nourishment and to allow for the use of their bathroom facilities.[8] These experiences were highly essential to me as they allowed an insight into the musical and cultural life of Brazil, while providing some insights into the frequently mentioned 'jeitinho brasileiro,' the essential Brazilian way of doing things.

Brazil's Improvisational Spirit: The 'Jeitinho Brasileiro'

So, what is this 'jeitinho brasileiro?' Brazilians themselves talk about the 'jeitinho' as "the Brazilian way of doing things," as finding a creative way around things when in need. It is

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[7] Mikhail Bakhtin first used the term 'carnivalising' in his work "Rabelais and his world" to refer to the literary traditions (1941).

[8] Roberto DaMatta has written extensively on the carnival and on Brazil's fluid boundaries (1997).

something rather ingrained in their daily lives, a way of getting by[9] (URL 3), and I urge the reader to watch this rather amusing video with some remarkable and some highly ingenious examples of this improvisatory approach to Brazilian living (URL 4).
The 'jeitinho brasileiro' is marked by an improvisational spirit, an improvisatory worldmaking, a relational practice which characterises the Brazilian way of life.

Joseph Page states that

> Brazilians characteristically seek subtle ways to circumvent difficult situations. Instead of resorting to confrontation, they prefer what they call the jeito or jeitinho, a difficult to translate term referring to what a French scholar once described as "an ingenious maneuver that renders the impossible possible; the unjust just and the illegal legal. (1995, p. 10)

The 'jeitinho' also links to the idea of 'ginga,' that effortless flair with which many in Brazil conduct their lives. *Ginga* implies a malleable bodily disposition, a bodily dynamic that, according to Wisnik (In Kramer, 2011, p. 7) "signals one's ability to respond to situations with solutions that one comes up with in the moment."

In this bodily attitude *ginga* links to the *jeitinho,* and it is often based upon non-verbal communication, or on bodily comportment. Fernanda Carlos Borges for instance links the *jeitinho* to the postures of the body, meaning that it refers to the way in which the body is cast, and in which way the body moves—a "mode of *thinking* with the body through the quality of emotion that emerges from affectivity" (2011, p. 1).

The *jeitinho brasileiro* is seen as an essential way of being in Brazil; it closely relates to notions of improvisation, and Jason Stanyek[10] describes it as a,

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[9] Some examples include getting a seat when all the places are booked up, travelling with more luggage than allowed, parking in spots for disabled people, improvising a garden sprinkler with a perforated plastic bottle, cooling a beer by strapping the bottle onto the air-conditioning unit. In legal situations, a Brazilian might figure out a loophole or an alternative way, even if something is not permitted.

[10] I am highly indebted to the work of ethnomusicologist, performer and composer Jason Stanyek, whose fascinating article I came across through the Critical Studies in Improvisation publications site. His work served as an essential starting point for my outlook onto Brazilian life. Jason had indeed intended his article and the special issue (Vol 7, No 1: 2011) as a call for non-Brazilian researchers not only to look at the worldmaking capacities of Brazilian improvisatory practices, but also in more general terms, to pay attention to all the scholarly work on improvisation being done in Brazil.

> fundamentally relational practice, a type of improvisative[11] worldmaking that relies upon sophisticated modalities of interaction and subtle understandings of environment and context (2011, p. 7).

An improvisational attitude, or at least openness to improvisation, is widespread in Brazil even if expressed in slightly differing terms (jeitinho, jeito, or ginga).

Further, the country's most famous sport, soccer, has often been linked to improvisation. Brazilian soccer is considered a result of creativity, geniality and technique (Fernandez Vaz, 2011).[12] The announcement in November 2012 of Luiz Felipe Scolari as Brazil's national team coach for the 2014 World Cup was published under the headline "Analysis - Brazil remain the masters of improvisation" and described as a classic case of "jeitinho brasileiro" (Reuters, 2012).

Players like Garrincha, Ronaldinho and, more recently, Neymar—or, above any of these, Pelé—are regarded as exemplars of an improvisative ethos that is characteristic of soccer-art: these are ball jugglers, endowed with the capacity to accomplish the remarkable and the unusual—the unpredictable move (*a jogada imprevisível*) (Fernandez Vaz, 2001, p. 1).

And if this way of always 'living in solution,' a certain messiness (which Brazilians call bagunça) penetrates much of the Brazilian lifestyle, it is also often seen as a natural answer to a highly bureaucratic way of living.

> *A bagunça, aliás, é um produto genuinamente brasileiro, é a resposta a um mundo burocrático, frio e tedioso; a bagunça no Brasil é igualitária. O jeitinho brasileiro é socialista, orgânico, sensual.* (José Pedro Goulart, 2010)
>
> Messiness is a genuine Brazilian product and is the answer to a bureaucratic, cold and tedious world; messiness in Brazil means egalitarian. The Brazilian way is socialist, organic and sensual. (Author's translation).

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[11] Note that when speaking about music making I use the term *improvisatory* rather than *improvisative* as it is a term more commonly used by improvising musicians.

[12] Soccer has been extensively written about by writers, such as José Miguel Wisnik (Veneno Remédio: O Futebol e o Brasil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2008.)

Favelas and the Improvisational Ethos

The Brazilian improvisatory ethos is said to have emerged from the favelas, the huge shantytowns that moved into the eye of the international community, enabled by series such as "City of Men - Cidade dos Homens."[13] This film portrayed favelas and their people, the favelados, as dangerous but also as creative places, dominated by highly hierarchical power structures. One of the essential signs of the favelados is their perceived resourcefulness and entrepreneurial passion. Favelas are celebrated as dangerous but also as creative places where people tend to improvise solutions. In "Slumsploitation," about the genre of Brazilian TV shows and films set in favelas, Melanie Gilligan writes about this improvisatory approach of the favela people who, she argues, show resourcefulness and entrepreneurial zeal, and manage to get

> themselves out of the tight spots and near-death experiences that living in a community regulated by arbitrary police and gang violence creates. In other words, it celebrates the slum as a dangerous but creative place where people improvise solutions. (In Stanyek, 2011, p. 9)

Jason Stanyek talks about the 'worldmaking improvisations of favela aesthetics' (2011, p. 8) when highlighting the rise of "favela chic." He sees the favela aesthetics as manifestations of the worldmaking capacities of a certain 'Brazilien-ness, or *brasilidade* (p. 8), arguing that the favela

> …performs a dual function within the realm of global culture: it is a potent marker of violence and destitution and it is an example of and—compellingly—a source for heightened, improvisative forms of creativity. (p. 9)

Stanyek's excellent article examines a long-standing discourse that links improvisation with Brazilian national identity. He argues that the social and cultural spheres in Brazil—and he includes here a spectrum reaching from sports to politics, from economics to pedagogy, from the arts to the daily life—have often been characterised as having distinctly improvisatory aspects or valences (2011, p. 4).

Specifically, favelas with their improvised buildings and improvisatory capacities harbour people that rely on improvisation to help themselves in what are often basic living conditions.

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[13] This was a Brazilian television programme that ran between 2002 and 2005, made by Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles, who previously (2002) directed the highly acclaimed film "City of God."

José Miguel Wisnik takes this 'living in solution' even further when he refers to an entire essential culture of worldmaking, a 'culture of improvisation, that is rife in social conditions where the underprivileged often need to build an identity for themselves, in short where they need to resort to improvisation.

> I would say that this is the essence of improvisation. It is the matrix, in the sense of a base of reference, for a culture of improvisation: the *bricolage* with which you constitute an identity in a precarious condition. And this, in turn, becomes the matrix for a culture, where— beyond this social condition, which is that of these individuals who live in such a precarious condition—the very capacity to *get by* even in adverse conditions becomes a reference and an affirmation of life. (In Kramer, 2011, p. 6)

However, such improvisatory approaches to life, often held to be a response to highly challenging social conditions, are not always seen in a positive light in Brazil. These worldmaking approaches or the *jeitinho brasileiro*, despite at times being useful in negotiating the highly complex and unnecessary bureaucracy of daily life, can become simply over-romanticised and indeed, they have been criticised by many. Those critics see the *jeitinho brasileiro* as a source of social malaise. The headline "Chega de improviso!" (Stop Improvising!), which appeared in the Brazilian newspaper "O Globo" in 2010, shouted it loud and clearly. Here, the call was for politicians to stop improvising and to tackle the many social problems that face the Brazilian people.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into a detailed argument on the jeitinho's dual nature, and I suggest to the reader further writings on this topic by Vinicio Pasquini (1975) or Barbosa (1992).

Teaching Free Improvisation!?

This Brazilian 'improvisational spirit' was edged deeply into my way of researching and living (and learning to get by) in Brazil. In this section I look in closer detail at what individual Brazilian musicians said about teaching the practice of free improvisation.
It is essential to stress that, apart from one student, none of the interviewed musicians lived in a favela, and it might be argued that a constant way of having to improvise solutions, of having to live in solutions, and, often, in fear—true for many favelados—is a far-removed reality for the white middle-class improvisers with whom I spoke.

I am thankful to one past reviewer who suggested that perhaps the white middle-class improvisers play free music as a fantasy of the 'jeitinho brasileiro,' as a fantasy of finding spontaneous solutions to difficult situations, which is such a necessity for the poor; however,

for the white middle class improvisers such improvisatory approach to life is potentially a way of living that they will never (and never wish to) experience.

I urge the reader to listen to the online video interviews in parallel to this text in order to discover more about the musicians' particular journeys and musical backgrounds and the ways in which they individually arrived at the practice of playing and practice of teaching free improvisation. As stated above, all videos are edited versions of the overall conversations I had with the improvisers, and I am simply offering my own summaries of the data, with a particular emphasis on whether musicians thought that improvisation can be or should be taught. The online video interviews contain further details that are not expounded in this section.

In analysing the interviews, it became clear that the majority of players were uncomfortable with the idea of 'teaching' free improvisation. There was a consensus amongst many of the improvisers that it was more important to create an environment or a culture in which musicians could grow, and specifically in which people would become more attuned to listening.

Independent musician Marcos Campello (Rio) for instance talked about getting people into a 'special state' where different musical things can happen. He believes that one needs to first take away 'the musical baggage' from people, to 'pull the carpet from under their feet' by for instance detuning their instrument (the guitar), and then to ask them to play something free. Sound artist Max Schenkman (USP) likewise spoke of giving people space to grow, and to encourage a culture to play in, specifically to enable silence rather than pursuing an idea of 'teaching' free improvisation. Rodrigo Velloso (UFRJ) talked about teaching not only technique, but to give students principles that they can explore (just as he does in teaching composition). Leonardo Fuks (UFRJ), arguing that it is impossible to be free since we are always influenced by something, thought that interacting with others and specifically with an audience can make musicians 'more free.' Guitarist Matthias Koole (UFMG) questioned not whether free improvisation *can* be taught, but whether it *should* be taught. According to him, if we teach a practice, we also teach a personal aesthetic and he feels uncomfortable with involving personal bias in free improvisation. Free improvisation was seen by Pedro Bittencourt (UFRJ) as allowing us to do things in a more 'natural way;" as a practice that is difficult to teach but that can be stimulated and that can generate experiences which can be shared.

Alexandre Zamith (USP) also shared the belief that free improvisation cannot be taught in terms of materials or formulas, but in terms of 'sensitising' musicians towards sonorities, towards sounds. He stated that there are strategies that can stimulate and create an

environment for free improvisation. He proposed to (re)search sounds, to find an attunement towards listening where musicians ask themselves how they listen and how they listen together. Mario DelNunzio (USP) affirmed that it was difficult to think of a specific methodology for teaching free improvisation, but that free improvisation was more about a personal search rather than a standardised method. Cliff Korman (UFMG) spoke of creating an environment where one can expose people to the possibilities that are available; where one can give people permission to let go.

According to Korman it is more about a process which one can make available to students, which then also necessitates the training of that same process, and that has more to do with knowing one's instrument intimately. The strongest view against 'teaching' free improvisation came from Manu Falleiros (EML) who warned of the dangers of 'teaching' altogether. He cautioned that free improvisation might cease to be a culture, before it has even established itself as such. He further spoke of the importance of promoting a culture within which people can play, and he warned of not turning free improvisation into a sort of 'Macdonald-isation,' a concept borrowed from Ritzer who saw society as being overly homogenised or standardised (Ritzer, 2008).

Falleiros eloquently argued against a pedagogy that involves the ones who 'know' and who impose some knowledge on 'the uninitiated' or the less cultured.[14] Falleiros, in thinking about what it means to teach something that is supposedly impossible to teach (that of being free), wishes for free improvisation to become a culture that everybody engages in, something that becomes so natural that it would be strange if you *didn't* play free improv.

It is also worth mentioning that many musicians, including Claudio Dauelsberg (Rio), Vinicio Mendes (UFMG) and Guilherme Perussi (UFMG), stated that free improvisation was still quite new in Brazil. They saw it as something a little 'underground,' as something that people were not much used to. Dauelsberg said that more people were needed who would stimulate a new generation of practitioners in universities.

Many improvisers talked about a 'natural' or 'organic' way of making music, saying that it is essential to let yourself be surprised, and to seek a kind of natural freedom (Pedro Bittencourt, Rio), or an organic music (Maria Rita, USP) that can exist with fewer rules. Free

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[14] I also invite the reader to follow up on ideas put forward by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1993). In developing his 'pedagogy of the oppressed' or 'pedagogy of hope,' Freire had emphasised the idea of dialogue as a co-operative activity involving respect. He was specifically interested in a pedagogy that was concerned with praxis and that would enhance communities, build social capital and that was situated in the lived experience of participants.

improvisation was felt to be about exploring a long lost 'natural,' i.e. some kind of 'lost childhood' approach to music making (Gabriel Carneiro, Rio).

There was also a particular emphasis on being very personally engaged, allowing space for a musician's personal search to encounter her own musical language, rather than learning by ways of a standard method (Mario DelNunzio and Max Schenkman, USP).

Marcos Campello (Rio) pushed this point of searching for one's own language even further by suggesting that in free improvisation people need to get into a special state, where they can allow things to happen, and where they search for something that doesn't come from a specific background or technique.

Several improvisers spoke about having a solid technique (and that means instrumental technique but also aural and historical skills), which then gives musicians the possibility to let go, while also making space for a process during which the musician can develop and can allow herself to let go (Korman, UFMG). Fernando Rocha (UFMG) likewise emphasised the importance of having a knowledge of one's instrument and of historical music repertoire, as it helps give musicians a structure in order to be free.

It is thought-provoking to hear that many improvisers speak of listening, but more particularly of a specific type of listening, of making a real effort to listen when playing free. Free improvisation is seen as a type of music that allows to search and (re)search sounds, that gives us a specific attainment towards listening. Henrique Iwao (UFMG) for instance talked of the importance of listening, seeing listening *as* important *as* playing. He said that when we play we are in the worst position of listening, and that the audience is in a much better position to hear clearly.

Marco Scarassatti (UFMG), thinking of the instrument not as an instrument as such, but as a source of sound, urged improvisers to expand their listening by thinking of different types of listening. Scarassatti turned to soundscape studies to introduce different concepts of listening, speaking of a type of listening that can zoom in and out, where one can discover other sonic links that do not necessarily come from within a specific musical culture. This specific listening was seen by Marco Scarassatti as the greatest challenge, where technique has to develop alongside musical maturity and wisdom, with technique not dominating the musician. Free improvisation allows musicians to explore listening within a collaborative environment, where musicians listen to each other. Scarassatti talked of a culture where musicians 'catch a wave together,' rather than show off their skills in front of others.

This very intense focus on listening in free improvisation, mentioned by so many of the Brazilian improvisers I interviewed, chimes with the writings and thinking of French composer and educator Alain Savouret and his concept of training the 'virtuosity of the ear,' to which I now turn in the final section.

A Virtuosity of the Ear

Let me recall the important contributions to the teachings of improvisation by Alain Savouret, specifically his different types of listening, outlined in "Introduction à un solfège de l'audible" (2011).

In 1992 Savouret established a class of free improvisation, what he then called 'generative improvisation,' at the Paris Conservatoire. In an interview with Clement Canonne Savouret talks about the practice of free improvisation, *L'improvisation libre n'est pas une technique qui s'enseigne, c'est une pratique de l'entendre, nous y reviendrons certainement.*
Free improvisation is not a technique that can be taught, it is a practice to hear; it will definitely return. (Canonne, 2012, p. 239, *author's translation*)

Savouret' s original aim for offering the class at the Conservatoire was to show classical music performers that they could be inventors rather than solely interpreters. He states that he wanted,

> *... démontrer aux interprètes qu'ils pouvaient être inventeurs de musique et pas seulement exécutants d'une musique écrite qui n'était pas la leur, comme cela est d'usage et trop passivement admis dans la culture savante occidentale*
>
> … to show the interpreters that they could be inventors and not solely interpreters of written music that was not their own, which is too often passively assumed in Western culture (Canonne, 2012, p. 241, *author's translation*).

What I find specifically inspiring in Savouret is his concept of the 'virtuosity of the ear,' which he saw as essential in free improvisation – it is not something that can be taught, not a method in itself, nor is there a 'method book for free improvisation,' but *C'est la virtuosité de l'oreille qu'il fallait promouvoir.* It is the virtuosity of the ear that we need to promote. (Canonne, 2012, p. 243, *author's translation*)

So, if anything can be taught it is the *quality* of listening.

> *Par contre, s'il y a bien quelque chose qui s'enseigne, ce sont des qualités d'écoute à développer. L'improvisation libre, c'est d'abord un entendre rigoureux; ce n'est pas une affaire de doigts mais d'oreilles, c'est le pouvoir donné à l'oreille, j'ai parlé plus tôt d'une virtuosité de l'oreille à promouvoir….le but, c'est de mieux entendre le monde.*

> Free improvisation is first and foremost rigorous listening; it is not a matter of fingers but of ears, the power given to the ear, as I have said it is to promote the virtuosity of the ear… the goal is to understand the world better *(*Canonne, 2012, p. 244, *author's translation).*

Through free improvisation the ear is forced to be more 'demanding' in what Savouret refers to as a mysterious toing and froing activity between *knowing-understanding* and *knowing-doing.* Savouret's different types of listening, outlined in his book "Introduction à un solfège de l'audible" (2011), tell us what the ear needs to do in each of these types. For Savouret in an 'ideal' situation the musician would learn to navigate between his threefold listenings, outlined succinctly here (*la triple écoute: écoutes micro / méso / macrophoniques*):

1) In 'microphonic' listening (écoutes microphoniques), the ear zooms in on the matter/sounds themselves; listening becomes more about de-contextualised and timeless sounds, focusing on basic criteria and sound qualities such as density, grain, degrees of fluctuation in frequency, or harmonic intensity.

   Cette écoute, que je qualifie de microphonique, peut zoomer avant sur la matière, selon nos intentions.
   This type of listening, which I call microphonic', can zoom in on the matter, according to our intentions. (Canonne, 2012, p. 243, *author's translation)*

2) In 'mesophonic' listening (écoutes mésophoniques), attention is given to short, but more coherent structures, a motif for instance, and formal context including attacks, continuation and endings of a musical idea are considered.

3) In 'macrophonic' listening (écoutes macrophoniques), attention is paid to the cultural and personal circumstances of the musicians. Different forms, styles, and genres form part of the combination of sounds into an overall 'composition'. And finally, Savouret says that in a collective learning context, in which free improvisation tends to be transmitted, the musicians don't learn to improvise music, but they learn, through the improvised music act, who they might be - or who they might become, I would like to add.

   Ce n'est donc pas la musique improvisée qu'on apprend dans la classe, c'est « qui on peut être » dans /par l'acte musical improvisé.

> It is therefore not improvised music one learns in the classroom, but 'who one can be' in / through the improvised musical act. *(*Canonne, 2012, p. 247*, author's translation)*

Savouret's idea of the "virtusosity of the ear'' and his emphasis not on learning *how* to improvise; but, through improvising freely, learning *about* yourself and *about* your own way of being, appears to be a certain 'letifmotif' in the context of free improvisation practice. Views from the Brazilian improviser community exposed above hopefully provide an excellent insight into how those musicians think about playing and teaching free music improvisation.

Summary

I provided some historical context on the development of one 'potential' free music improvisation movement (I purposely say 'potential' as it is only one way of conceptualising free music improvisation and I am aware that there will be plenty of other, different and equally valid ways of tracing a history of free improvisation).
I followed with a reflection on the Brazilian improvisatory ethos, an improvisatory worldmaking approach which has been particularly theorised by examining the lives of people living in the favelas. This improvisatory ethos was a guiding principle in my research on the different viewpoints of how 'free improvisation' is taught in some Brazilian higher education institutions. I presented reflections and findings on free improvisation practices, as based on summarised views of 50 musicians whom I interviewed over a 4 months research period. I also outlined their ways of thinking about the practice of free improvisation, and their views on teaching or enabling the practice.

The intense focus on listening, identified by many of the interviewed, allowed me to link to the work of French composer and educator Alain Savouret and his urgency towards the 'virtuosity of the ear.' I argued that it is essential to closely examine the intense, embodied and focused listening skills in free improvisation practices, something which all interviewed musicians emphasised, and which allowed me to revisit the thinking of Savouret who, already over 20 years ago, spoke about the indispensable virtuosity of listening required for free improvisation. The interviews further highlighted a reluctance on the part of many improvisers, to 'teaching' the practice, asking instead for practitioners to enable a collaborative culture in which musicians can trust each other and learn from each other on equal terms. This has implications for any practising improviser who might be asked to 'teach' free improvisation practice, as we need to question how not to turn free improvisation into a standardised practice, into a sort of 'Macdonald-isation.'

I believe we were and still are at a specifically pertinent moment in time (2016 - 2018), particularly in the UK, but also in several European cities and at higher education institutions, as taught courses on free improvisation[15] are being implementing by many. It might be inevitable that universities ride on the rather fashionable bandwagon of free improvisation, but such pedagogical move clearly needs experienced practitioners leading a debate on how best to share free improvisation in higher education settings without impinging on, or stifling students' political views, personal choices and creative decisions makings. Practitioners need to ensure that the practice of free improvisation is shared within a dialogical context that is deeply situated in the lived experience of students; but more importantly, I believe that practitioners need to understand that the practice not only imparts listening skills, instrumental technique, or collaborative decision-making, but much more poignantly, that the practice of free improvisation teaches us, as Savouret so poignantly states, who *we* can be, or become, through the improvised musical act.

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[15] For instance, the METRIC (Modernising European Higher Music Education through Improvisation) Consortium, an ERASMUS+ programme projects (2015-2018): http://metricimpro.eu is a cooperative project between several European conservatoires which focuses on curriculum development and intensive cooperation in the field of improvisation, with the aim of creating a European Master course for improvisation.

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