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Musical Bodies: Corporeality, Emergent Subjectivity, and Improvisational Spaces

Chris Stover

Abstract

Introduction

Interactive improvisational musical spaces (which is to say, nearly all musical spaces) involve affective relations among bodies: between the bodies of human performers, between performers and active listeners, between the sonic "bodies" that comprise the multiple overlapping events that constitute a musical performance's unfolding. Music scholarship tends to focus on either music's sonic materialities (the sensible; what can be heard) or the cultural resonances that locate in and through music (the political or hermeneutic; how meaning is inscribed in and for a listening subject).

An embodied turn, however, has recently been manifesting, bringing music scholarship into communication with feminist theory, queer theory, and approaches that foreground subjectivity and embodiment. Exemplary in this area are works by Naomi Cumming (who asks a critical question, "does the self form the sound, or the sound the self?;" Cumming 7), Suzanne Cusick, Marion Guck, Fred Maus, and Susan McClary. All of these scholars, in various ways, thematise the *performative*—what it feels like to make or experience music, and what effect that making or experiencing has on subject-formation.

All of these authors strive to foreground the role of the performer and performativity in the context of the extended Western art music tradition. While each makes persuasive, significant points, my contention in this paper is that improvised music is a more fruitful starting place for thinking about embodiment and the co-constitutive relationship between performer and sound. That is, while (nearly) all music is improvised to a greater or lesser degree, the more radical contexts, in which paths are being selected and large-scale shapes drawn in the "heat of the moment," can bring these issues into stark relief and serve as more productive entry points for thinking through crucial questions of embodiment, perspective, identity, and emergent meaning.

Music-Improvisational Contexts

A musical improvisational space is a "context," in Lawrence Grossberg's sense of the term (26), where acts of territorialisation unfold an ongoing process of meaning-constitution. Territorialisation refers to an always-ongoing process of mapping out a space within which subjects and objects are constituted (Deleuze and Guattari 314). I posit that *musical* acts of territorialising are performed by two kinds of bodies in mutually constitutive relationships: interacting corporeal performing bodies, with individual pasts, tendencies, wills, and affective attunements (Massumi, *Semblance*), and what I term *musical-objects-as-bodies*. This second category represents a way of considering music's sonic materiality from an *affective* perspective—relational, internally differentiating, temporal. On the one hand musical-objects-as-bodies refer to the materiality of the now-ongoing music itself: from the speeds and slownesses of air molecules that are received by the ear and interpreted as sound in the brain, to notes and rhythms and musical gestures; to the various ways in which abstract forms are actively shaped by performers and interpreted by listeners, with their own individuated constellations of histories, tendencies, wants, attunements, and corporeal perspectives. On the other hand, musical-objects-as-bodies can refer to the histories, genres, dislocations, and nomadic movements that partially condition how sonic materialities are produced and perceived. These last two concepts should be read both in terms of how histories and genres become dislocated from themselves through the actions of practitioners, and as a priori principles—that is, not as aberrations that disrupt a norm, but as norms themselves.

This involves two levels of abstraction: ascribing body-status to sound-complexes, and then doing the same for historical trajectories, cultural conditionings, and dislocations. Elizabeth Grosz asks us to theorise the body as "the threshold or borderline concept that hovers perilously and undecidably at the pivotal joint of binary pairs" (Grosz, *Volatile* 23); one such binary that is problematised is that of production and perception, which within the context of an improvising music ensemble are really two perspectives on the same phenomenon. The producers are also the perceivers, in other words. This is true of listeners too: acts of perception are themselves productive in the sense that they create contexts in which meanings emerge.

In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's language (46–54), an emerging context represents a plurality of *milieux* that are brought together in acts of territorialisation (and deterritorialisation; see below). The term "milieu" refers to the notion that acts of territorialisation always take place in the *middle*—they are always already bound up in ongoing processes of context-building. Nothing ever emerges from whole cloth; everything modifies by differential degree the contexts upon which it draws. In musical contexts, we might consider four types of milieu. *External* milieux are articulated by such factors as syntactic norms (what makes a piece of music sound like it belongs within a genre) and cultural conditionings. *Internal* milieux refer to what gives the elements of a piece of music a sense of belonging together, including formal designs, motivic structures, and melodic or harmonic singularities. An *intermediary* milieu involves the way gestures acquire sign-status in a context, thereby becoming *meaningful*. *Annexed* milieux are locations where new materials are absorbed and incorporated from without.

Bodies Improvising

A small example should put these points into focus. Four jazz musicians are on stage, performing a version of the well-known (in that community) song "Stella by Starlight." External milieux here include the conventions of the genre: syntactic expectations, prescribed roles for different instruments, certain perspectives on historical performance practices. Internal milieux include the defining features of this song: its melody, harmonic progression, formal design. The performers' affective attunements to the history of the song's complex life so far form an intermediary milieu; note that that history is in a process of modification by the very act of the now-ongoing performance. Annexed milieux might include flights into the unexpected, fracturings of stylistic norms, or incorporations of other contexts into this one. The act of territorialisation is how these (and more) milieux are drawn together as forces in *this* performance, this time. Each performer is an agent, articulating sounds that represent the now-emerging object, *this* "Stella by Starlight." Those articulated sounds, as musical-objects-as-bodies, conjoin with each other, and with performers, in ongoing processes of subject-formation.

A double movement is at play in this characterisation. The first is strategic: thinking of musical forces as bodies in order to consider how relationships unfold between them in embodied terms—in terms of affect. But simultaneous with this is a reverse move that begins with affective forces and from there constructs those very bodies—human performing bodies as well as musical-objects-as-bodies. In other words, in order to draw lines between bodies that suggest contextual co-determinations where each exists in a continual process of engendering the other, we can turn to a consideration of the encounters between, and impingements of, affective forces through which bodies are constructed and actions are mobilised. This double movement is a paradox that requires three presuppositions. First, that bodies are indeed constituted through encounters of affective forces—this is Deleuze's Spinozist claim (Deleuze, *Spinoza* 49–50). Second, that identity is performative within the context of a discourse. This is Judith Butler's position, which I modify slightly to consider the potential of non- (or pre-) linguistic discourse, such as what can stem from *drastic* (active, experiential) music-syntactic spaces (Abbate). And third, that concepts like agency and passivity involve force-relations between human actors (with embodied perspectives, agencies, histories, tendencies, and diverse ranges of affective attunements), and the musical utterances expressed by and between them. Therefore, there is value in considering both actor and utterance as unfolding along the same plane, each participating in the other's constitution.

What is at stake when we conceive of sonic materiality in bodily terms in this way? The sounds produced in interactive music-improvisational settings are products of human agency. But there is a passive element to human musical-sound production. There is a degree of passivity that owes to learned behaviors, habits, and the singularities of one's own history—this is the passive nature of Deleuze's first synthesis of time (Deleuze, *Difference* 71–79), where past experiences and activities are drawn into a now-present action, partially conditioning it. Even overtly active selection in the living present is founded on this passivity, since one can only draw upon one's own history and experience, which provides a limiting force on technique, which in turn directs expressive possibilities. In music-improvisation pedagogy, this might be phrased as "you can only play what you can hear." Another way to say this is that passive synthesis conditions active selection.

One way to overcome the foreclosure of possibility that necessarily falls out of passive synthesis is through interaction and engagement with the affective forces at play in interactive encounters. Through encounters, conditions for new possibilities emerge. The limiting concept "you can only play what you hear" is mitigated by an

encounter with newly received stimuli: a heard gesture that invites further excavation of a motivic idea or that sparks a "line of flight" into a thus-far unthought-of next action. The way a newly received stimulus inspires new action is an affective encounter, and it re-conditions—it *deteritorialises*—the ongoing process of subject-formation. The encounter is a direct line drawn between the two types of bodies—that is, between the situated body of a producing and perceiving subject and the sonic materiality of a musical-object-as-body. While there are other kinds of encounters that unfold in the course of interactive musical performance (visual cues, for example, or tactile nearnesses), the events of heard sounds are the primary locations where bodies are constituted or subjects are formed. This is made transparent in a recent study by Schober and Spiro, where jazz musicians improvised together with no visual or tactile connection, relying solely on sound for their points of interactive contact. This suggested that jazz musicians are able to communicate effectively with only sonic data exchanged. That many improvisers play with their eyes closed, or with their backs to one another, only reinforces this.

There are three aspects of sound that I wish to offer as support for a reading of musical objects as bodies. First is that sounds are temporally articulated and perceived. The materiality of sound is bound up with its temporality in ways that are more directly perceivable than many other worldly materialities. The *obviousness* of its temporally bound nature is one reason that music is used so often as an entry point for thinking through the ontological nature of time and process; *viz.* Husserl's utilisation of musical melodies to explicate his phenomenology of internal time-consciousness, and Deleuze and Guattari's location of acts of territorialisation in the (musical) refrain. Of course the distinction between sonic and other materialities is only a matter of degree: all matter, including bodies, is "continually subjected to transformation, to becoming, to unfolding over time" (Grosz, *Time 79*), but music foregrounds temporality in ways that many philosophers have found vivid and constructive.

Second, musical sounds acquire meaning through their relationships with other sounds in contexts, both in the immediate context of the now-ongoing performance and in extended contexts of genre, syntax, and so on. Those relationships are with histories of past sounds, now-ongoing sounds, and future sounds expressed as results of accumulations of meaning-complexes. A gesture is played, and it acquires meaning through the ways it is "picked up" by differently attuned performers and listeners.

In this sense, third, the line is blurred between action and agent; the distinction between the gesture and the execution of the gesture is effectively erased. From the performer's perspective, how a gesture is "picked up" is made somewhat evident by the sonic materiality of the next gesture. This next gesture is a *sign* that represents the singularity of the performer's affective attunement, or an *expression* of a stage (or, better, some now-ongoing aspect) of what Whitehead would call her "eventful" subjectivity (166–167). What is expressed is the way the performer is (actively or passively) attuning to the constellations of meanings that resonate in the event of the encounter with the musical-object-as-body, as that musical-object-as-body in turn expresses the history of past encounters that (actively or passively) engendered it. The present action as most-contracted expression of the past is Deleuze's second synthesis of time, while the eventful way an action cuts into the future marks the time of his third synthesis (Deleuze, *Difference 80–91*).

What is at stake in a turn to corporeality in music analysis? Nietzsche admonishes us to turn from the "facts" that the senses take in, process, and evaluate and re-begin our inquiry by questioning the body (272). This means, for music analysis, turning away from certain quantifiable aspects of sonic materiality (pitches, chords, rhythms, formal designs), towards the ways in which sounds are articulated by bodies in interactive contexts. This has been attempted from various perspectives in recent music scholarship, but again the reading of musical bodies I am pursuing foregrounds affective forces, eventful subject-formation, and performativity as identity, on the ground of improvised interaction. Improvising bodies engage in spaces where "all kinds of affects play their game" (Nietzsche 264), and they exist in constant states of change as they are impinged on by events (and as they impinge on events), those events also forming conduits to other bodies. Subjects are not just impinged on by events; they *are* events, processes, accumulations, and distributions of affective forces. As Grosz puts it, "the body codes the meanings projected onto it" (*Volatile 18*). In musical improvisation, performers are always in the process of becoming a subject, conditioned by the ways in which they are impinged upon by affective forces and the creative ways those impingements are taken up.

Musical-objects-as-bodies, likewise, unfold as ongoing processes, their identity emerging through accumulations and distributions of relationships with other musical-objects-as-bodies. A musical gesture acquires meaning through the emerging context in which it participates, just as a performer acquires a sense of identity through acts of production and perception in, and that help create, a context. Moreover, an affective consideration of performer (as corporeal body) and musical gesture (as sonic utterance) involves "the torsion of one into the other, the passage, vector, or uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside" (Grosz, *Volatile xii*). Grosz is describing the essential irreducibility of body and mind, but her language is compelling for thinking through the relationships between bodies and musical-objects-as-bodies as an ongoing co-constitutive, boundary-dissolving process.

Bodies and/as Affect

Affect begins in the in-between, in the productive space of the event in which bodies encounter one another. This is not, however, a pure in-between. Bodies are constructed by the ways in which affective forces impinge on them, but affective forces also stem from bodies. Bodies affect and are affected by one another, as Deleuze is fond of repeating (*Spinoza 49*). No affect, no bodies, but also no bodies, no affect. What does this mean? The in-between does not subvert corporeality, perspective, intention, or subjectivity, nor is there a hierarchical relation between them (that is, bodies do not emerge *because of* affective relations, nor the reverse). If we think of bodies as emergent subjectivities—as processes of subject-formation irreducibly connected to the ecological conditions in which they are acting—then the ways in which their identities come to be constructed are intricately connected to the performative utterances they are making and the variable ways they are taking up those utterances and folding them into their emergent processes of becoming. Here, the utterer–utterance distinction begins to break down. Judith Butler (24–25) argues that the ways in which bodies are defined emerge from performative acts, and that every such act constitutes a political action that contributes to the constitution of identity. As Butler writes, "that the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality" (136). Gender is a status that emerges through one's actions in contexts—we perform gender, and by performing it we undergo a process of inscribing it on ourselves. This is one of many key points where music scholarship can learn from feminist theory. Like gender, musical identity is performed—we inscribe upon ourselves an emergent musical subjectivity through acts of performance and perception (which is itself a performance too, as an interaction with a musical-object-as-body).

Performative acts, therefore, are not simply enacted by bodies; if identity is performed, then the acts themselves are what define the very bodies performing them. Again, the hierarchy breaks down: rather than beginning with a body (a subject) that acts, actions comprise what a body is, as an emergent subject, as the product of its actions. For Deleuze and Guattari, performed acts involve masks; masks do not disguise expression or identity but rather *are* expressions through which identity is drawn. "The mask does not hide the face, it *is* the face" (115); "the mask assures the [...] construction of the face, the facialization of the head and the body: the mask is now the face itself, the abstraction or operation of the face. [...] Never does the face assume a prior signifier or subject" (Deleuze and Guattari 181). In Butler's terms, the performance does not presuppose the performer; the performer *is* the performance.

Affect corresponds, then, not only to the pre-linguistic (Deleuze's "dark precursor;" *Difference 119–121*) but also to the super-discursive: to the multiple embedded meaning-trajectories implicit in any discursive utterance; to the creative ways in which those meaning-trajectories can be taken up variably within the performance space; to the micro-political implications of both utterance and taking-up. Bergson writes: "[m]y body is [...] in the aggregate of the material world [...] receiving and giving back movement, with, perhaps, this difference only, that my body appears to choose, within certain limits, the manner in which it shall restore what it receives" (Bergson 4–5; also cited in Grosz, *The Nick 165*). This is exactly Grossberg's "context," by the way. The "manner in which it shall restore what it receives" refers, in the case of musically performing (corporeal) bodies, to how a gesture is taken up in a next performed action. In the case of musical-objects-as-bodies, conversely, it refers to how a next gesture contributes to the ongoing sense of meaning-accumulation in response to the ongoing flux of musical-objects-as-bodies within which it locates.

In music-improvisational spaces, not only does the utterer–utterance, agent–action, or performer–performed gesture distinction break down, but the distinction between performed and received gesture likewise blurs, in two senses: because of the nature of eventful subject-formation (whereby a musical gesture's meaning is being drawn within its emergent context), and because the events of individual musical gestures are subsumed into larger composite events. This problematises the utterer–utterance breakdown by blurring the threshold between individual performed events, inviting a consideration of a paradoxical, but productive, excluded middle where musical-objects-as-bodies are both expressions of corporeal performative acts (engendering contextual subject-formations) and constituent elements of an emergent musical subjectivity ("the performance." See Masumi (*Parables*) for more on productive engagements with the excluded middle). While beyond the scope of this paper, we might consider the radical co-constitution of different kinds of bodies in this way as a *system*, following Gregory Seigworth's description: "the transitive effect undergone by a body (human or otherwise) in a system—a mobile and open system—composed of the various, innumerable forces of existing and the

relations between those forces" (161).

Performing Bodies and the Emergent Work

This, ultimately, is my thesis: how to think about musical performance beginning with performing bodies rather than with a reified notion of musical materiality. Performing bodies are situated within the emerging context of improvised, interactive music-making. Musical utterances are enacted by those bodies, which are also taking up the utterances made by other bodies—as musical-objects-as-bodies. The context that is being built through this process of affective exchange is *the performance* (the *this performance, this time* of the jazz example above). Christopher Hasty writes,

to perform, from *per-formare* is to really, actually (fully) form or shape. The '-ance' of performance connotes action and process. The thing performed apart from or outside the forming is problematic. Is it a fixed, ideal form above or beyond (transcending), or beneath or behind (founding) the actual doing, a thing that can be known quite apart from the situated knowing itself? (200)

The work-performance dichotomy that animates Hasty's question (as well as those of Abbate, Goehr, and others) is not my question, since I suggest that using improvised music as an entry point into musical inquiry makes a turn to performance axiomatic. The improvised work is *necessarily* an active, emergent process, its particularities, boundaries, and meanings being drawn through its performed actions. Perhaps the question that underlies my query is, instead, how do we think about the processes of subject-formation that unfold through interactive music-making; how are performing and performed bodies being inscribed through what kinds of relationships with musical materialities?

Is there, in the end, simply a *musical body* that subsumes both utterer and utterance, both subjectively-forming body and material sonic gesture? I do not wish to go quite that far, but I do wish to continue to problematise where one body stops and the next begins. To paraphrase one of themes of this special issue, where do the boundaries, thresholds, and intersections of musical bodies lie? Deleuze, following Spinoza, tells us frequently that we do not yet know what a body is capable of. This must be at least in part because we know not what a body *is* at any given point—the body, like the subject which we might now think of as no more than a sign, is in a process of becoming; there is no *is* (ontology), there is only *and* (conjunction). And there is no body, there are only bodies, for a body only exists in a complex and emergent ecological relationship with other bodies (see Grosz, *Volatile* 19). To conceive of porous thresholds between performing bodies and musical-objects-as-bodies is to foreground the performative aspects of improvised music-making and to break down the hierarchy, and possibly even the distinction, between agent, action, and the content of that action. Bodies of all types inscribe one another in ongoing acts of meaning-constitution: *this* is the properly drastic starting place for inquiry into the nature of musical process.

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