

THE LANGUAGE OF IMPROVISATION

STEPHEN E. BRAUDE

Non-musicians are frequently puzzled or amused when they see how members of a jazz group react to one another during a performance. For example, they often find it odd or comical when players laugh, smile knowingly, or nod approvingly at something another has played. Laughter, in fact, seems to occasion the most surprise; one non-musician once said to me, "I feel like I'm being left out of a private joke." Of course, jazz players themselves rarely think twice about such matters. They regard these sorts of reactions to each other as a matter of course. And that is probably because they tacitly or at least casually accept a familiar view of their musical activity without fully appreciating its scope and implications. According to this view, jazz improvisation in a group setting is like a conversation, and the individual contributions to that conversation are subject to many of the same sorts of constraints and criteria of evaluation that apply to everyday verbal exchanges.

Of course, like all analogies, the match between jazz-improvisational interactions and verbal communication is imperfect. But the fit is extensive enough to justify their comparison and to lead to a variety of instructive observations. Most importantly, the analogy affords a way of making sense for non-musicians of some otherwise inscrutable behaviors of performing jazz musicians. What many musicians quite appropriately understand in technical musical terms--and what they would explain by appealing to matters of harmony, rhythm, and melody--can be explained to laypersons quite easily in terms of features of conversations.

The analogy between musical and verbal communication operates on a number of different levels. For example, in many cases it seems that improvisational and conversational *styles* are quite similar. For example, a musician's verbal and musical utterances might both tend to be laconic and careful; whereas, others might consistently express themselves in a more flashy, prolix, or nervously energetic manner. Similarly, a musician's sense of humor or lightness of spirit (or the relative lack of these qualities) might be apparent in both modes of expression. I think many would agree that, quite apart from purely musical disparities, the styles of Dizzy and (at least pre-fusion) Miles consistently reflect such differences in their personalities. Along the same lines, many have noted that Paul Desmond's musical

and verbal styles were comparably understated and witty, and that those of Bill Evans were analogously thoughtful and introverted.

Of course there is no simple correlation between conversational and improvisational styles, or (for that matter) musical and verbal "eloquence." Whereas some musicians display conspicuous stylistic regularities between the two forms of expression, others do not. In fact, their musical and verbal "selves" often seem to be alter egos. In some cases, social extroverts become musical introverts, and verbal glibness or volubility may be replaced by a pensive and more deliberate form of musical expressivity. However, it seems that in most cases in which musical and verbal selves differ, musicians who are socially awkward or reserved find their "voice," so to speak, in more dramatic, emotional, and confident forms of musical expression. It seems as if music frees them from the presumable self-imposed constraints that limit or inhibit their verbal behavior, allowing them to display an unprecedented range of ideas and feelings.

But these sorts of connections between musical and verbal expression exist in many other forms of music besides jazz. Hence, they do not reveal features of self-expression in jazz that are unique to that musical idiom. More importantly, however, they are not at the heart of the interactions between performing jazz musicians which laypersons often find so inscrutable. To understand those interactions, we must observe that the change from one soloist to another resembles the thread of a conversation passed from one speaker to another. For example, although in some cases a soloist may continue to develop the ideas of the preceding solo, in others the thread of a musical "conversation" may get lost in the transition, and sometimes the new "speaker" (soloist) takes the topic in an unexpected direction. Moreover, as in verbal communication, these changes can spark a variety of reactions from the other soloists, ranging from discomfort and uncertainty to excitement and inspiration.

Of course, sometimes a series of solos (like a conversation) consists of people more or less automatically covering territory they know all too well, or to which they are paying little attention. In other words, in both musical and verbal dialogues, people can behave more or less like expressive automata and fall back on "conversational" licks or personal clichés. Hence, solos

(like verbal statements) may be glib, irrelevant, boring, repetitious, or simply out of place. On the other hand, during jazz improvisations (especially, perhaps, when the musicians are trading fours or eights) some "statements" seem analogous to wry comments and clever retorts, and the entire dialogue might resemble witty repartee.

In fact, jazz improvisation reveals and duplicates a wide variety of conversational dynamics. For example, "cutting sessions" display the sort of competitiveness and one-upmanship that pervades many conversations. And in some cases, tensions between soloists emerge in their improvisations. Perhaps the most dramatic case of that phenomenon is the "argument" between Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy in their recording of *What Love* on *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*. Not only do their improvisations mimic the sound and inflection of (increasingly angry) verbal exchanges; the musical dialogue seems to have served as a way of acting through an earlier argument of the two musicians, in which Dolphy had announced his intention to leave the group.

A related but even more subtle phenomenon concerns the level of intimacy or familiarity of the musicians in a group. In conversations, how much of ourselves we reveal to others usually depends on how comfortable we feel. For example, most people will sing, tell certain kinds of jokes, discuss certain subjects, or disclose certain sides of their character (such as their sensuality) only with those in whose company they are sufficiently comfortable and with whom they do not need to fear reproach. For example, in the company of some people I might tend to joke in the manner of certain night-club comedians, and I might not worry about whether my attempts at humor fall flat. With others, however, I might tailor my humor to their distinctive preferences, by joking more in the style of Oscar Wilde. Moreover, with that circle of friends I might be more reluctant to tell a joke I think might not be effective. Something similar occurs within the context of a jazz group. For instance, whether or not a soloist is willing to take chances rather than rely on old licks, or whether or not a soloist is willing to be musically assertive and take the "conversation" in new directions (rather than those of the nominal leader of the group) will depend on the sorts of

dynamics that undergird ordinary verbal communication. It will be a complex function of how confident the soloist is generally, how well the musicians know one another, and how judgmental or critical the musicians tend to be.

Group dynamics affect the nature of a jazz-improvisational "conversation" in yet another way. In ordinary verbal communication, people with powerful personalities and strong points of view often draw others into their orbit. They raise the overall level of conversation, and sometimes they intentionally or unintentionally impose their assumptions and vocabulary on the other speakers. However, once outside this conversational orbit or atmosphere, the others might drift back to their usual level and style of discourse (although occasionally traces remain of their "brush with greatness"). The analogue to this phenomenon in jazz concerns the influence of a handful of very powerful musical personalities on the musicians they have hired as sidemen. For example, many would argue that most of the musicians who worked for Miles, Mingus, and Coltrane (and possibly also Monk) played the best music of their careers with those leaders, and that when they led their own groups or worked for other leaders the level of their performance declined accordingly.

Other similarities between improvisation and conversation reflect the fact that certain behavioral norms are common to both forms of communication. For example, conversations usually occur against a background of unstated assumptions about protocol and etiquette. For example, we usually expect participants in a conversation to listen to each other, and when that does not happen, we often express our annoyance. A similar phenomenon occurs (all too frequently) on the bandstand. Moreover, in ordinary conversation, we expect participants to make distinctive sorts of contributions and thereby demonstrate the individuality of their "voice." Usually, they would do this by saying something the others have not yet said. But they might simply find an idiosyncratic way to make a point already made by another speaker. Jazz soloists operate under an analogous constraint. They expect each other to make a genuine contribution to the musical dialogue, and success in that endeavor depends in part on the distinctiveness of a solo's substance and style.

Along the same lines, we expect that people will not participate in a discussion for which they are unqualified. At the very least, we usually expect people to recognize that some individuals speak with more authority than others, and that in many cases it is proper to defer to them. It appears that a similar assumption underlies the scorn, derision, or condescension shown toward musicians who try to sit in but who can't "cut it." Those players are like people who try to participate in a technical discussion without the requisite background knowledge. Probably every academic discipline has a version of that phenomenon. More than once I have seen a presumptuous undergraduate (say, at a conference) try to enter into an intricate discussion among professional philosophers, unaware that he was in no way able to participate at their level, and that he was in fact both lowering the level and retarding the flow of the conversation.

The fact that some people may be unqualified to participate in a musical or verbal dialogue brings us to another similarity between improvisation and conversation. The number of people who want to communicate and who feel they have something to say far exceeds the number the people who actually have something to say, much less something novel, interesting, or substantive to say. Whether we like it or not, some people have more ideas, or better ideas, than others. My suspicion is that many musicians are reluctant to acknowledge this fact openly (even if they accept it privately). Rather than criticize their peers, they would prefer to say that different musicians simply exhibit different styles (or dialects), and that we should be reluctant to make normative judgments about such differences. Now to be sure, jazz musicians' (stylistic) accents and dialects *do* vary. (In fact, I'll return to this point shortly.) But so does the quality of their musical thought. That is why listening to a string of solos, generally, is no more uniformly interesting than listening to a sequence of speakers. And that is why members of a jazz group listening to a solo often exhibit a range of reactions similar to those found among participants in a conversation. They might exhibit surprise, boredom, delight, admiration, impatience, puzzlement, and many other reactions.

Of course, it is not always easy to distinguish the substance of a musical thought from the style in which it is expressed. In fact, in the case of some jazz musicians and classical composers, distinctive stylistic gestures *comprise* (at

least a major part of) the substance of the music. Some have made that charge in connection with Debussy and Varèse, and in the jazz world it has been leveled at a broad spectrum of musicians, from avant-garde players such as Sun Ra to neo-conservatives such as Wynton Marsalis. Whether or not one agrees with this assessment of particular musicians, most recognize that for some musicians, style is the point of their music, and not simply an idiom in which musical ideas are manipulated or developed. Moreover, the parallel here with certain types of verbal communication is striking. The success of a debate team, for example, is usually a triumph of style over substance (if substance matters at all). And the effectiveness of charismatic speakers often depends less on what they say than on how they say it.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the importance of stylistic considerations in understanding the dynamics of a "conversation" between improvising jazz musicians. Jazz players improvise within broad constraints imposed by the jazz idiom generally and also by the more or less specific style they adopt within that idiom. Analogously, our linguistic productions are shaped by general constraints of grammar and vocabulary, and also by more specific sets of constraints provided by shared assumptions, needs, and interests. Failures to communicate verbally often occur because of radical differences in vocabulary or because speakers operate from conflicting sets of assumptions or constraints. One sees this, for example, in quarrels between spouses, or between religious or political adversaries, or when one person speaks largely in a vernacular or jargon unknown to another. And apparently, something similar happens when, say, a soloist and rhythm section are stylistically disparate or incompatible--or example, when a pianist or guitar player lays down an inappropriate harmonic or rhythmic foundation behind a soloist.

A clear example of this phenomenon can be found on a recording John Coltrane made with Cecil Taylor, called "Coltrane Time." This recording is one of the more egregious (but interesting) failures in Coltrane's discography. No doubt some would say that the failure reflects the disparity in the quality of the two musicians' ideas or abilities. They would contend either that Taylor was inept or that he simply had less to say musically than Coltrane. But quite apart from that issue, perhaps the most striking feature of the recording date is the way in which the

"languages," "dialects," or styles of the two musicians are incommensurate. Although it sounds as if Taylor attempted to modify his playing somewhat to fit Coltrane's solos and the generally boppish nature of the recording date, he nevertheless seemed uncomfortable or unfamiliar with that musical dialect. Hence, even if Taylor had the ability to play bebop competently and also the ability to transcend his own harmonic and rhythmic gestures for the sake of overall musical coherence, the vestiges of his style clash and interfere with the efforts of his partners. The failure to communicate here resembles difficulties encountered by speakers of dramatically different regional dialects or local idioms or slang, or (perhaps more appropriately) between speakers of widely divergent political or other theoretical persuasions. In fact, many academic disciplines offer similar opportunities for awkward communication or outright miscommunication. The musical dialogue between Coltrane and Taylor was perhaps as inevitably unsuccessful as a conversation between a Freudian and behaviorist, or analytic and continental philosopher, or communist and capitalist.

The flip side of this phenomenon, of course, occurs when musicians share a musical vocabulary or dialect. In verbal communication, speakers sometimes find conversation unusually easy or natural, even from the beginning, because of pervasive similarities in their assumptions, interests, goals, and style of talking. In the same way, apparently, certain combinations of musicians have been uncommonly successful. In fact, in some of these cases, it almost seems as if the different members of the group are all parts of the same musical "voice." Many would argue that Coltrane enjoyed this sort of relationship with McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones, as did Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker, or Stan Getz and Bob Brookmeyer, and that Miles's quintet with Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Tony Williams displayed a similar singularity of purpose and unity of expression.

I should add, however, that when stylistic disparities occur, they do not always frustrate musical interaction as they did in the case of Coltrane and Cecil Taylor. They might even elicit gratifyingly distinctive and novel sorts of responses from other musicians. Monk once recorded some tunes with Pee Wee Russell that demonstrate this possibility. Another example would be Ben Webster's contributions to Oliver Nelson's *More Blues and the Abstract Truth*. It is easy to find conversational

analogues to these successes. For example, clinical and experimental psychologists often engage in fruitful professional discussions, as do philosophers of different specialties, or philosophers and scientists, or (for that matter) theoretical physicists and truck drivers.

In certain respects, the stylistic conflicts and compatibilities considered above resemble (or perhaps overlap) a rather different sort of musical phenomenon, one that also has a counterpart in verbal communication. Sometimes, the success or failure of a conversation has to do with how familiar the speakers are with each other's histories, personalities, and interests. Such knowledge about one's conversational partners helps a speaker to know what kinds of references, allusions, jokes, or choice of vocabulary will be appropriate or effective. Like the broader sets of similarities between speakers noted earlier (e.g., speaking the same language and regional dialect, and sharing numerous underlying general assumptions), these relatively fine-grained variations between speakers might also be considered differences in their styles or conversational "dialects." But because they tend to exhibit numerous personality-specific features, it might be more instructive to think of them as analogous to character traits. For example, some speakers will not understand or appreciate conversational references to art history (or simply French Impressionism), or television shows from the 1950s, just as some people will be singularly amused (or offended) by scatological or ethnic humor. Similarly, speakers sometimes differ primarily with respect to syntactical idiosyncrasies or "verbal rhythm." That is, some might speak at great length in long sentences and convoluted phrases; whereas, others might adopt a simpler syntactical style and confine themselves to brief comments rather than oratory. Knowledge of these sorts of idiosyncrasies helps one to anticipate when a speaker will pause, or know when a speaker has completed a thought. Hence it enables one to know when to begin speaking and how to interject comments without interrupting.

In jazz, familiarity with a soloist's syntactical idiosyncrasies helps a pianist or guitarist know when to place a chord behind a solo, and familiarity with subtleties of musical vocabulary helps in the selection of particular voicings. Moreover, knowledge of a soloist's history, interests, sense of humor, etc., helps others in the group to collaborate successfully. For example, just as speakers who know each other well often

volunteer the same or similar joke or comment at the same time, jazz musicians might also spontaneously make a certain musical joke, play a similar phrase, or complete another's thought.

The disanalogies between verbal and jazz-improvisational dialogue also merit some comment. Perhaps most notably, in a typical jazz performance, the soloist does not function as independently as a speaker in a conversation. The latter is relatively autonomous and may hold the floor while the others simply listen. Of course, that can also happen in a jazz performance. But usually a soloist is constantly interacting with others in the group, at least (in a conventional jazz setting) with members of the rhythm section. For example, the piano, bass, or guitar not only feed changes and provide rhythmic support to the soloist. Assuming those musicians are listening to the soloist, how they fulfill these tasks will depend on what the soloist has just played or suggested would be appropriate. Hence, their supporting role is based in part on reactions to the soloist, and (ideally, at least) the soloist will respond to the aptness or stimulation of that support.

Hence, one might think that the analogy between verbal and jazz-improvisational dialogue fails, not only because soloists are seldom as autonomous as participants in a conversation, but also because unlike soloist and supporting rhythm section, participants in a conversation seldom talk at the same time. However, in this case, the analogy may hold after all, at the very least for situations in which soloist and rhythm section have a relatively egalitarian relationship, and where members of the rhythm section do not simply supply a rhythmic or harmonic foundation for the soloist. In those cases, their musical interaction resembles a conversation in which people *collaboratively* exchange ideas that both support and overlap the "statements" of the other speakers. For example, some "brainstorming" sessions seem quite similar to the musical dialogues between Bill Evans and Scott La Faro, or the interplay between the members of Mingus's quartet with Eric Dolphy, Ted Curson, and Danny Richmond (e.g., "Folk Forms No. 1" on *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*).

But I think there is even a conversational analogue to the more conventionally supportive role of a player in a rhythm section. Many conversations are one-sided, with a single person doing most of the talking. In those conversations, others often do

little more than interject appropriate expressions of understanding, or questions that provide a basis for additional comments by the dominant speaker. The secondary conversational role here is to provide a nurturing and stimulating background for the central speaker.

So what should one say to the layperson who is mystified by the way jazz musicians react to each other on the stand? At least one can note that the musicians are engaged in something very much like an ordinary verbal conversation. We've probably all had the experience of overhearing a conversation between people speaking a language we do not know. We may not understand what they are saying, but their reactions are often quite clear and familiar. Moreover, in some cases, the reactions afford clues to the content of the remarks. Similarly, listeners who do not understand the language of jazz may nevertheless grasp the reactions of the musicians on the stand. And those gestures of approval, indifference, perplexity, etc. might likewise provide some insight into the substance of the musical utterances. In that respect, appreciating the social components of the language of jazz may enhance the non-musician's understanding of jazz itself.

Stephen Braude is a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, and the author of various books and articles. He has been a professional jazz pianist and composer for more than 30 years.