
SONIC CARDS

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IMPROVISING (WITH) SOUNDS: A SONIC POSTCARD FROM BELGRADE¹

Abstract: This *impressionistic* essay is indeed an *attempt* to record the thoughts I developed on improvisation while visiting different places in Belgrade, meeting various musicians who are living in this city, and reflecting on a few texts dealing with musical improvisation. In seven short meditations, seven “stops”, I criticize the anthropocentric discourse around improvisation, formulate ideas about improvisation that try to overcome dichotomous constructions, and trace improvisational structures in sound art, rock music, contemporary composed music, and everyday listening.

Key words: improvisation, soundscapes, Belgrade, new materialism, philosophy

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¹ In September 2017, my free, open access e-pub *The Field of Musical Improvisation* was published (<http://hdl.handle.net/1887/52784>). This text draws upon insights developed and further explored in this e-pub.

Galerija: An Improvised Soundscape

I have arrived in Belgrade for a short holiday. After refreshing myself I decide to go for a walk. Without a particular direction or destination in mind, I wander through some streets in Novi Beograd, the so-called new part of the city, with its infamous concrete dwellings among the many trees, before arriving at the Danube. I follow the river upstream until I find myself in Zemun. In front of the popular fish restaurant Šaran, I turn left and then immediately right. After some 20 meters I arrive at a little bar, Galerija, with a nice view of the characteristic red roofs with the bluish green river behind them. I order a coffee and faintly notice the music: trumpet sounds. It sounds like a conventional jazz standard, although I do not recognize it. In fact I can only hear the trumpet; due to the quality of the speakers, the other instruments – if there are any – are masked by environmental sounds: the rather strong wind which makes the leaves of the trees and bushes rustle, the many sparrows that are chatting as usual, the ventilation of the nearby restaurant producing a steady deep drone, the irregular and rather diverse sounds of some remote traffic, the voices of two men sitting at a nearby table. It is as if the trumpet is actually interacting with these ambient sounds. Closing my eyes for a moment, all these sounds together become the music, an improvised soundscape composition, just for me.



Photo No. 1. Red roofs + Danube

Stari Merkator: Between Freedom and Constraints

Near *Stari Merkator* I read an interview that professor of music Tracy McMulen had with the philosopher Judith Butler a couple of years ago. The topic is improvisation and the starting point a rather well-known phrase from Butler's famous book *Undoing Gender* in which she describes gender as an "improvisation within a sense of constraint". According to Butler, identity (and gender) is produced in the *doing* of language, law, race, and culture. In other words, a subject is acted on by norms, conventions, cultural forces, and prior practices that she has not chosen herself. It is in relationship to being acted upon that a subject itself acts. However, she is not completely determined by or dependent on these practices. Within the constraints, she has or can create for herself a certain freedom by bending, breaking, or operating outside of these norms and forces. In short, according to Butler, improvisation designates a relative domain of freedom in a rule-bound world (Siddal and Waterman 2016: 24-32).

Perhaps because of the midday summer heat and some *rakija*, I need to reflect on her thoughts for quite a while. At first the idea seems quite attractive, almost logical: improvising can be defined as an act that – at least partly – is able to withdraw from predetermined rules and norms, affecting a subject from the outside. This implies that improvisation is also parasitizing on those very same rules and norms: without them, improvisation is not possible nor can it be recognized. It reminds me of Derrida's thoughts on improvisation stating that it is impossible to improvise in the strictest sense, as one is always more or less obliged to reproduce stereotypes, already existing schemas and languages, prescribed in our memory and in our culture (Derrida 1982: n.p.).

I also recall the idea expressed by George Lewis that we continually need to improvise in our everyday lives. Events occur, and we have to respond to them, however, in our moment-to-moment existence we have few formal and explicit rules to follow (Lewis 2013: 2). Combining Lewis and Butler's thoughts, we could state that in concrete situations, norms, conventions, and forces not only become visible and active but also malleable, transformable, volatile. In the concretization of general rules and practices, they also undergo changes, becoming different in their repetition, as the subject is relating to them differently each time. Put otherwise, the subject is not only improvising *within* but also *with* the constraints. The constraints not only form the framework within which improvisation can take place; they themselves are always already materials with which one has to improvise. In other words, and this is expressed very well in Erlend Dehlin's PhD dissertation "The Flesh and Blood of Improvisation", planning, routine, and structure are not the opposites of improvisation: first of all because improvisation is not some kind of inferior action, lacking any plan or prepara-

tion, and second because creativity and spontaneity are always already operative in the concrete execution of rules and regulations. Besides, to equate improvisation with breaking rules and operating outside certain conventions does injustice to what is also an integral part of each improvisation, namely the active use of certain rules and conventions. As Dehlin (2008: 91) puts it, “under certain circumstances improvisation may *involve* following formal models, in which case the model of technical rationality becomes an instrument rather than a paradigmatic restraint jacket”.

Conversely, the question of whether given sets of rules, conventions, norms, or structures are or should be strictly followed or if they can and should be used as *tools* to create something new can also be posed. Especially in complex and unexpected situations, one cannot not improvise: “improvisation can be thought of as an *attitude* or as a *method of practical thinking*, which in a given instance considers spontaneity and context superior to tradition and system” (Dehlin 2008: 220, emphasis in original). It may simply entail acting wisely based on contextual considerations, to make systems, rules, routines, and norms *work*. It is in this sense that I argue, against Butler, that there is no natural or categorical separation between improvisation and constraints in practice. In any given instance, the one in fact entails the other.



Photo No. 2. Savana

The Danube: Improvisation Beyond Anthropocentrism

Looking out over the river Danube, I sip a freshly ground coffee at my favorite café *Savana* while reading Gillian Siddall's and Ellen Waterman's introduction to their edited volume *Negotiated Moments. Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*. The first sentence already makes clear their objective: bringing improvisation back to "where it lives: in our bodies". Although I certainly agree that musical improvisation is "ineluctably embodied", I have great difficulties with the possessive pronoun. To situate improvisation first and foremost in the human body turns the whole context within which I am asked to read the ensuing chapters into an anthropocentric paean in which the ruling human mind is all too easily replaced by the ruling human body.



Photo No. 3.

Fundamental (perhaps even fundamentalist) criticism on anthropocentrism comes from scholars such as Levi Bryant and Graham Harman, two of the most prominent advocates of New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology. In *Immaterialism*, Harman criticizes the tradition in which society is viewed "as a self-contained realm where humans did all the acting and objects were passive receptacles for human mental or social categories" while "the vast majority of relations in the universe do not involve human beings" (Harman 2016: 6). In much the same way, Bryant, in *The Democracy of Objects*, defends a "decen-

tering of the human”. Objects should no longer be treated merely as vehicles for human contents, meanings, signs, or projections. Instead, humans are *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, *implicated* in other beings; assemblages involve humans, but they are always entangled with all sorts of nonhumans without which such assemblages could not even exist (Bryant 2011: 20-40).

To connect this attack on anthropocentrism to the discourses surrounding improvisation has been one of the main topics of my recent e-pub, *The Field of Musical Improvisation*. Although (improvised) music is of course an (almost) exclusively human affair, the question is justified whether here too the input of nonhuman *actants* could and should be emphasized more at the expense of a centralized role of the musicians. *Negotiated Moments* contains an instructive chapter by Pauline Oliveros in which she at first seems to build her argumentation completely in line with Siddall and Waterman’s, that is, shifting theoretical emphasis from human mind to human body: “In my long experience as an improviser, there is a gradual release of cognitive control and an increasing willingness to trust the body to respond appropriately [...] improvisation is not only cognitive but thoroughly embodied” (Oliveros in Siddall and Waterman 2016: 75-6). However, gradually her focus shifts towards two other actants, technology and acoustics. Concerning the first, she describes in more or less detail how her instrument, the accordion, can be manipulated, that is, interacting with all kinds of computer software; regarding the latter, she recalls her collaboration with trombone player Stuart Dempster in the Cistern at Fort Worden, Port Townsend, where the reverberation time is forty-five seconds and the indirect sounds resonate as intensely as the direct ones. The improvisations made in this cistern are improvisations *with* the cistern; this music is not (only) made by Oliveros and Dempster but a direct result of the interactions between the music instruments and the acoustic properties of the place: “I have learned that the effects of different spaces are as important as instruments in the making of music” (Oliveros in Siddall and Waterman 2016: 82). In this quote, the musicians are prominently absent, subsumed by the main actants, space and instrument, and Oliveros has moved beyond anthropocentrism.

Studio 6: Composing and/as Improvising

Studio 6 is a Belgrade-based instrumental ensemble, consisting of young and talented Serbian musicians plus the renowned British composer-musician Richard Barrett. The ensemble, founded in 2012, excels in performing experimental pieces by a mostly younger generation of composers, improvisers, and sound artists, and actively collaborates with composers and free improvisers alike.

While waiting for lunch – *gibanica, proja* – prepared by *baka*, I listen to Tamara Basarić’s “Superionic Water,” a title which refers to a (theoretical) phase

of water under extreme heat and pressure, which leads to both solid and liquid properties. Solid and liquid – I cognize a similarity with improvisation, taking place in a perpetual movement between fixity and freedom “that sweeps one and the other away” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). After listening to Basarić’s piece, I move on to the concert/installation “Intimate Rituals”. In contrast to all other pieces on the Studio 6 website, this one makes no mention of a composer. Is it (therefore) improvised? A collective “instant composing”? And is “Superi-
onic Water” (therefore) not improvised? Is there any music making that doesn’t contain traces of improvisation, elements that are not predetermined, set in advance, thought through? And, conversely, is there any improvisation that has no traces of predetermination, fixation, careful preparation?



Photo No. 4. Ensemble Studio 6 including Richard Barrett

I meet Barrett and the harp player of Studio 6, Milana Zarić, in the wonderful backyard café Ljutić close to Belgrade’s city center to talk about the role of improvisation in their music. Barrett: “My involvement in combining notation and improvisation did not begin with taking notated composition as a default position and ‘opening up spaces’ for improvisation within it, but instead from free impro-

visation as a starting point, using notation not to *restrict* it but to suggest possible directions or possible points of focus for it.” He makes an interesting comparison with the work of Francis Bacon in which it is not always clear whether some elements of his paintings are the result of painstaking and precise brushwork or a rapid and seemingly spontaneous swipe. Barrett: “I realized that I have been looking for a very similar kind of perceptual interchangeability between pre-planned and spontaneous actions in music. This is not a question of making notated compositions which ‘sound improvised’ and/or improvisations which ‘sound composed’. I do not think methods of composition have, or need to have, such a simplistic relationship to what is heard.” What specifically interests Barrett is the question regarding what kind of listening is invoked when it is unclear which of the two – composition or improvisation – is in operation, either because they are taking place in rapid alternation or simultaneously in different voices; how does this not-knowing-for-sure affect the listener’s experience? Barrett plays hide and seek with the differences between notated and non-notated music on the basis that these differences are not very (or not at all) obvious in terms of overall sound.

This brings me to the question of what difference it makes for the musicians of Studio 6, all of them trained in playing composed as well as improvised music. Zarić first of all explains how the quality of listening and sensitivity of response, necessary assets for free improvisation, have helped them to become a tight unit when performing composed music, not least because they regard themselves as “creative interpreters”, alongside the composer. What is key for Zarić is the aspect of responsibility; the clear distinction between detailed complex notation and free improvisation, evident in much of Barrett’s music, is so successful because it makes apparent when the composer takes responsibility and when this is left to the musicians themselves. Zarić: “In my experience, the really relevant issue here is whether the composer *trusts* the decisions that players make during freely improvised parts. As far as I am concerned, trust is a vital component of mutual music making. It should not be restricted, and the composer needs to let go of the notion of being in control and making decisions during improvised sections for the piece to really work on several levels, intellectually, viscerally, and emotionally [...] S/he should trust that the musicians will be sufficiently influenced by the score in order to remain in the same ‘style’ while improvising.”

She even sees a certain similarity between improvising and playing in a classical orchestra, performing a 19th-century symphony: similar to a composer, rather than somehow trying to control every musical detail, the conductor should be able to trust the musicians’ abilities and imagination, “because a musical piece is created at that moment by all parties concerned; it is born out of their communication”.

Zarić points out another aspect of how performances of composed and improvised music mutually influence each other. On the one hand, her experience in playing a great variety of classical and modern repertoire provides her with ideas that can be deployed while improvising. Rather than storing and rehearsing specific improvising techniques “and then drawing from that, like water from a well”: “technical abilities, the ability to listen, the ability to restrain yourself and be very subtle, or to unleash something energetic, or aggressive, or emotionally exploding – these are all skills that are practiced in more traditional repertoire that can be further tuned in improvised settings.”

On the other hand, improvisation deepens her understanding of her musicianship: the relationship with her instrument, the possibility to try out new timbres and techniques as well as exploring the opportunity to function as co-composer, co-author, co-creator.

Električni Orgazam: Improvising and/as Composing

While strolling through the urban neighborhood of *Skadarlija*, I listen on my mobile phone to an old album of the Belgrade-based rock band Električni Orgazam: *A Um Bum* was released in 1999. The harmonically simple but powerful tune of “Nemoć, bes i očaj” (powerlessness, anger, and despair), at slightly over eight minutes by far the longest track on this album, bashes my ears and interacts strangely with the soundscape of Belgrade’s bohemian quarter, today consisting mainly of shoes touching the cobblestones, clattering of cutlery, laughter and conversations arising from the guests of the many restaurants, and, in the distance, the faint sounds of a traditional brass band.



Photo No. 5. Front cover of *A Um Bum*

What attracts my attention are the rather long instrumental solos, which have almost disappeared in today's rock music. Especially the interaction between synthesizer and guitar – the play of question and answer, the one sometimes imitating the other – gives me the impression of listening to an, at least partly, improvised tune; raw and unpolished, “Nemoć, bes i očaj” sounds almost like a jam session. This is confirmed by Gile, frontman and co-founder of Električni Orgazam: the tune was improvised live in the studio during the recording of *A Um Bum* and never played live afterwards.² Gile stresses this last point and repeats several times that the band is not improvising during performances: “We do improvise, but mainly when we make new songs. We don't do it on concerts; maybe just our guitar player sometimes plays a bit of a different solo.” For Električni Orgazam improvising means “trying different things [...] trying different approaches” when creating new music, which primarily takes place during rehearsals or while working in a studio. Here, improvising becomes an aspect of composing; said differently: for this band, composing is essentially improvisational in nature. Although improvisation does not seem to have the supposedly premeditated character nor the permanence of a composition, the two meet in the process of creation: improvising becomes composing, composing becomes improvising. Or, the process of composing, that is, the process of working and reworking, begins at the point of improvisation, perhaps evolving into something that could not be anticipated in advance (Benson 2003: 55-6). As such, “Nemoć, bes i očaj” became an unrepeatable composition, generated during a jam session in a studio, while the red light was on. The version on *A Um Bum* became the final version, a fixed version, simply because it was never played again afterwards.

Knez Mihailova: Rethinking Improvisation

Sitting on the terrace of *Restoran Kolarac* on *Knez Mihailova*, I listen to the soundscape dominated by two buskers playing accordion, construction work further on, multilingual conversations of tourists and locals coming from or going to *Kalemegdan*, the incidental clicking of high heels on the pavement, and cutlery touching plates. John Cage, R. Murray Schafer, and others taught me to listen to my environment as if it was a composition; however, I prefer to call it an improvisation as it is, literally, an un-for-seen contrapuntal assemblage of sounds.

² All information from Gile comes from email conversations with the author in the first days of October 2017.



Photo No. 6. Restaurant Kolarac

After a while I take an old Dutch newspaper from my backpack and start reading an interview with a film director explaining the ingenuity of Martin Scorsese's 1990 blockbuster *Goodfellas*. She describes her favorite segment in which the main character Henry is sitting at a table with his gangster friends and gets the feeling that one of them is laughing at him. "You think I'm funny?" this guy keeps repeating. The atmosphere changes, and the spectator doesn't know how this will end: will they start a fight? Will one of them draw a gun? It is this inscrutability what makes this scene – which is "completely improvised" – so strong and thrilling (Toma 2017).

I stop reading. The scene, described above, is "completely improvised" – what would that mean? Perhaps the scene was not a part of the original script but came into existence when the actors were working on the movie set; perhaps they were rehearsing, trying out some things, and they all got enthusiastic about the results; perhaps the script was not exactly followed, but the actors decided to continue anyway; etc.

Whatever this interviewee meant by the phrase "completely improvised", she makes a fundamental distinction between what the actors seemed to be doing – improvising – and what they were supposed to do – executing or performing, which of course always already contains interpretation. And, of course, interpretations vary between more or less following rules and, consequently, more or less improvising. The boundary between the script's constraints and improvisation is blurry: scenes may start out as proactive improvisations, continue as pre-established actions, and perhaps end up as reactive improvisations. Often, in artistic productions, a balance is negotiated in situ – not as a static one-time

decision, but as a living, emerging process; this process is in itself determined and organized by improvisation.

Contrary to the Dutch film director, I prefer to regard improvisation as a process of thinking-*in-and-as-action* that characterizes and permeates human acting. Also in opposition to her dichotomous thinking, I see no reason why improvisation should be made into some exceptional attribute: improvisation only rarely pursues the unfamiliar, as in the most extreme cases of free jazz, for example; plans, scripts, systems, and manuals are not followed blindly but most often used as sources of inspiration – they are improvised upon and adjusted to fit contextual demands.

Katharina Klement: Sonic Memories of Belgrade

Back home in The Netherlands my mind is, of course, filled with memories of Belgrade: its unbearable summer heatwaves, its rivers, its countless bars, cafés, and restaurants, its historical sites, its poverty but also its wealth, etc. But what about the sounds? What about my sonic memories? Just as photos help to remind me of specific places and events, sound recordings may bring back certain reminiscences. A few days after my return I play Katharina Klement's CD *Peripheries*.³ *Sound Portrait Belgrade*. In 2014 she spent nine weeks in Belgrade

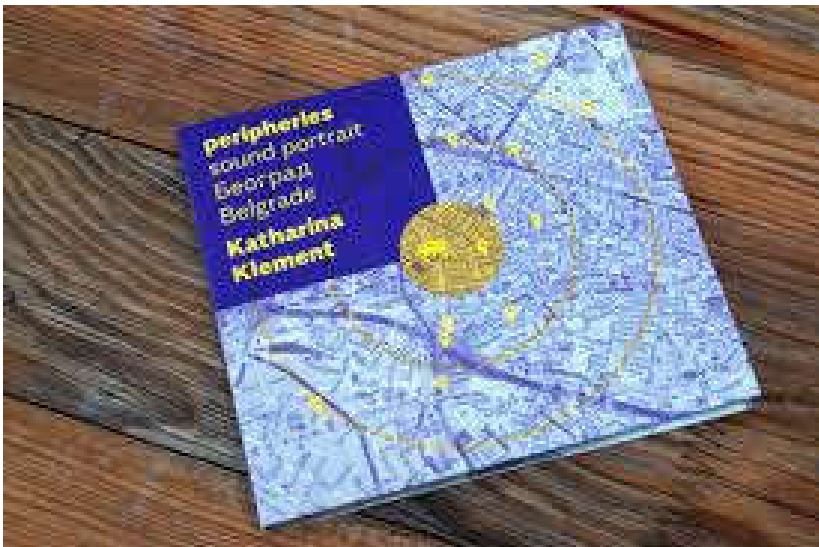


Photo No. 7. Katharina Klement – *Peripheries. Sound Portrait Belgrade*

³ Sound examples are available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel. Please find the playlist here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZt_2SKutBY&list=PLNFG-wrMs0-Xzo9GYGsuBaxxOc6704_IUJ

focusing on the questions, “What does this city sound like?” and “Is it possible to portray it using sounds?” (Klement 2014: 2). This resulted in an eight-channel piece, also available as a stereo version on CD.

In an email conversation I ask Klement about the term “sound portrait”, and she answers that “there are always two perspectives melting in a portrait: the portrayed and the portrayer”, in this case “the city and myself in this city”. Indeed, being a composer, Klement didn’t seem to be satisfied with the presentation of “mere” field recordings. The nine tracks on the CD are carefully composed, although they can simultaneously be considered as a “comprehensive acoustic archive” (Klement 2014: 2).

In the end, the overall structure of *Peripheries* comprises nine pieces, nine “circles” as Klement writes, the first piece, “Entrée”, mainly consisting of sounds recorded in the ring around her temporary dwelling and presenting a “general (acoustic) view of the city’s ambiance” and the second piece, “Induction”, coming from recordings done in the second ring, etc. Together, the nine pieces take us from the Tesla Museum to *Zeleni Venac*, a hub of people and goods; from the Northeastern neighborhood of *Karaburma* to historical speeches by Tito; from interviews with locals to Orthodox churches, *Sava Centar*, countless local pubs, the silent dance “nijemo kolo”, etc. And although the interviews and the recordings of church chants and bells were intentional, Klement stresses the fact that most of her field work had a high degree of spontaneity, simply tasting the city’s atmosphere while trying to be as open and unbiased as possible to the unfolding of the urban sonic environment.

Why did I choose to include a sound portrait of Belgrade into this essay about improvisation? What is the connection between improvisation and sound art based on field recordings? Apart from the rather improvisatory manner in which Klement collected her sonic material, in a more general sense I would like to maintain and argue that improvisation takes place in each act of music making. Improvisation can never be excluded from performance and compositional practices because, instead of being regarded as the invention of something completely new, it should be considered as a “mode of engaging existing structures and constraints” (Landgraf 2014: 11) or as the “reworking of something that already exists” (Benson 2003: 30). Improvisation thus works as a simultaneous process of reiteration and alteration, a process of reworking that can be understood as “a complex feedback process that builds forms out of contingent elements by relating present decisions to past ones” (Landgraf 2014: 146).

Precisely this last quote from Edgar Landgraf’s *Improvisation as Art* relates very well to Klement’s sound portrait of Belgrade. It is interesting to read from her email how she started selecting and putting together the many recordings she

made during her stay in Belgrade. “I mixed many field recordings, but I also inserted transformations like freezes, and I used synthesized sounds. I made these decisions while listening; I had no prepared score [...] but I was always searching for a connectional idea to build up a form for each piece.” In other words, and this connects to the ideas of New Materialism above, the project came into existence in and through the interacting of several *actants*: the original sonic material; technical issues (“I tried out some plugins and electronic transformations where you never know what is the result”); her listening; the extra-musical (historical) information she had gathered; her artistic taste and experience, informed by her background as a classical composer. As Klement puts it: “I don’t know exactly but I think that, although I was searching for a clear form in the format 8-channel/fixed media, I was improvising a lot in my decisions in front of the loudspeakers, in the studio, while listening to the intermediate results.”

Epilogue

It was my aim to explore Belgrade with my ears, aurally engaging with the city, while simultaneously investigating the concept of improvisation, reflecting on and sometimes questioning certain presuppositions that stick to its framing discourses. I explored Belgrade improvisationally, while the sounds of Belgrade offered me new insights into the topic of improvisation. I notice a parallel in Tim Ingold’s description of medieval readers’ experience of travelling through a text:

The flow, here, is like that of the contours of the land as, proceeding along a path, variously textured surfaces come into and pass out of sight. Thus the ‘stages’ of the composition are to be compared not to steps in the march of progress but to the successive vistas that open up along the way towards a goal. Going from stage to stage is like turning a corner, to reveal new horizons ahead. (Ingold 2007: 96)

I was wayfaring, wandering, roaming through the city, following my ears, haunted on every corner by new aural “vistas”, by unstructured and inchoate ideas on improvisation. I was wayfaring, wandering, roaming through various thoughts on improvisation, haunted on every street corner by new sonic experiences. I improvised on Belgrade, while Belgrade improvised on me ...

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Summary

While strolling through Belgrade in the Summer of 2017, I listen to the sounds of city, meet musicians who are based in this city, and read some literature on improvisation, New Materialism, and continental philosophy. The text consists of seven meditations, seven "stops", and one epilogue in which various aspects of improvisation are discussed.

Meditation 1, "Galerija: An Improvised Soundscape," presents improvisation as an event taking place within the ears and head of a listener who is simply listening to everyday urban sounds, musical and non-musical.

Meditation 2, "Stari Merkator: Between Freedom and Constraints," (re)presents a fictive discussion between the author and Judith Butler's idea of improvisation as being somehow opposed to constraints. I argue that improvisation is always already full of constraints too and, conversely, that predetermined rules and regulations always require a certain improvisational attitude.

Meditation 3, "The Danube: Improvisation Beyond Anthropocentrism," is a brief reaction to Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman's statement that they want to bring improvisation back to where it lives: in our bodies. Using arguments from New Materialism, I state that the discourse on improvisation could benefit from a less anthropocentric approach.

Meditation 4, “Studio 6: Composing and/as Improvising,” consists of a talk I had with two members of ensemble Studio 6, composer and computer musician Richard Barrett and harpist Milana Zarić. In and through their work, they rethink and deconstruct the opposition between composing and improvising.

Meditation 5, “Električni Orgazam: Improvising and/as Composing,” is a sort of continuation of meditation 4, only now with the frontman of the famous Serbian rock band Električni Orgazam. For them, composing is essentially improvisational in nature.

In meditation 6, “Knez Mihailova: Rethinking Improvisation,” I take up the reflection of meditation 2, arguing that *complete* improvisation is actually impossible: each improvisation is always embedded in already existing frames, conventions, traditions, agreements, and rules and therefore never a *complete* exposure to the unfamiliar.

Meditation 7, “Katharina Klement: Sonic Memories of Belgrade,” was first of all meant to make clear that improvisation also takes place in sound art, in composing with field recordings. Klement’s CD *Peripheries. Sound Portrait Belgrade* can be regarded as a nice example of improvisation defined as a process of reworking, a process of reiteration and alteration.

Finally, the epilogue reaffirms the role the soundscapes of Belgrade and its versatile music scene has played in the coming into existence of these thoughts on improvisation.