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Between Freedom and Fixity: Artistic Reflections on Composition and Improvisation

Ziblat Shay, I.

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Author: Ziblat Shay I.

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hasBara

1. Introduction

My composition *hasBara* deals with notation and improvisation as two contrasting elements. The musicians are asked to orient the performance away from the notated ideas by improvising or, in the opposite direction, by gradually “surrendering” to the guidance of the score. The reflections I present here are based on one essential difference between notation and improvisation: while the former contains explicit directions for a performance – composed material which implies a certain musical fixity – the latter remains undefined, unexplained, “blank.” Improvisation, in the context of this work, should be understood as a compositional void, left open for the creation, in real-time, of unforeseen musical elements. This particular combination of undirected improvisation and notation, between which connections are formed during the performance, brings in an additional perspective to the freedom-and-fixity theme: a musical space which is shaped by notation, and “warped” by the gravitational force of freedom in its purest and most abstract form.

The role improvisation plays in *hasBara* is very different to the role it plays in [*Untitled*, 2012]. In that piece, the electronic soundtrack presents a reference point which is absolutely fixed and around which fields of freedom are woven. In *Modo Recordar, Modo Olvidar*, to make another comparison, the improvisations are supposed to be a direct continuation of the notated material: after the players have assimilated the notated ideas, they are required to improvise in a given “style.” In *hasBara*, on the other hand, the musicians are asked to move away from the notated material, towards indeterminacy – precisely what the notation does *not* convey. A similar situation is described by free-jazz musician Ornette Coleman, who observed that “the jazz musician is probably the only person for whom the composer is not a very interesting individual, in the sense that he prefers to destroy what the composer writes or says” (Coleman in Derrida, 2004, p. 320). Although not intended to be performed by jazz musicians, *hasBara* also calls for the destruction of the composed material – the process of de-composition (or the “melting down” of notation, see image below). Here, improvisation can be understood as a way to “summon” freedom by introducing extrinsic ideas to a composed structure, in the same way as Coleman’s jazz improviser challenges the role of the composer.

[IMAGE: Excerpt from the score of *hasBara*, in a version arranged for ensemble Champ d'Action.]

Rather than starting with *hasBara*, I begin this chapter with a musical example that will help to put the focus on the concept of improvisation (Part 2): the album *Bass Duets* by Peter Kowald (1999) provides an impressive example of the relationship between freedom and fixity within the context of free improvisation. The participating musicians manage to exhibit constant innovation and an intense instrumental and performative drive, side by side with musical consistency: in certain moments, the music has a more stable quality, for example when the improvisers seem to agree on a certain recognizable musical path or theme. I will approach improvisation by addressing this idea of the

preservation of certain musical features, which (at least to my ears) demonstrate a more static state and in which the music is subject to fewer changes rather than a flow of new ideas. The idea that free improvisation inherently relates to fixity as much as it does to freedom will provide an exposition of some of the ideas that will be discussed later in relation to *hasBara*.

In Part 3 I will discuss the scholarly views on improvisation of Gary Peters, Richard Barrett, Marcel Cobussen, and Erlend Dehlin. Here, the chapter will follow a more philosophical approach, by discussing such concepts as the absence of any pre-existing framework in free improvisation and the inherent openness which allows the musicians to keep continuously moving forward, searching for new ideas. As suggested by improviser Joe Morris, “if pioneering a creative frontier is the goal of a musician, how does he avoid stopping at one place in that frontier? How does he continue the search? Is it possible to maintain a perpetual frontier?” (Morris, 2012, p. 1). The notion of freedom expounded here resonates with the “perpetual frontier,” a perspective which defers fixation and, as such, can provide an endless source of inspiration.

In Part 4 I will discuss *hasBara*. Reflecting on a documented video of the performance (by ensemble Mutu) and on the score, I will explain how I attempted to interweave the aforementioned concepts and viewpoints into this composition. I will discuss the role of improvisation in this work and how the musicians are supposed to navigate between the improvised and the notated parts. The musical identity of *hasBara* is based on the links between the undirected improvisation and the notated ideas, and I will examine how that identity comes through in the performance. The chapter will be concluded with a short reflection (Part 5) on the topics discussed and suggest directions for future works that could continue and develop the ideas presented here.

2. Musical Context: Peter Kowald’s *Bass Duets*

The album *Bass Duets* features three separate contrabass duets played by Peter Kowald with, respectively, Barre Phillips, Barry Guy, and Maarten Altena. In discussing the bassists’ free improvisations I will elaborate on the ideas of fixity and freedom and highlight the ever-evolving interrelations between them. This focus provides an important background because of the specific character improvisation takes in *hasBara*, namely an undirected, “blank” musical element. Approaching *Bass Duets* as an outsider – a listener rather than a composer or player – provides the opportunity to observe certain musical ideas from a distance, and to form arguments which I will use later in the chapter.

What can be learnt about freedom, fixity, and the network of connections between them from the free improvisations of *Bass Duets*? Throughout the entire album the musicians negotiate fluently between an elaborate sense of freedom and a more stable musical “logic.” On the one hand, the performances are in a state of constant flux, continuously evolving through a series of transformations of the musical material. What appears as an almost inexhaustible stream of ideas, powered by the bassists’ intense instrumental drive, results in a seamless, ongoing musical momentum. On the other hand, a strong sense of musical stability can also be recognized. The musicians seem to know how to restrict themselves to more

confined material, in other words, to specific musical patterns. They remain within these temporarily localized boundaries, exploring them from the “inside” rather than immediately continuing to another area; figuratively speaking, in such moments the musicians know how to follow the rules rather than break them.

It is important to note that both tendencies – the elaborate, ever-transforming freedom, and the more-fixed characteristics – do not contradict each other. Rather, they emerge from each other, in a continuous game of arranging and re-arranging the musical material. A good starting point for listening to the music on this album is indeed by focusing on its fixed properties. The improvisations feature a continuous series of recognizable sound signatures: distinct musical characteristics which set a specific moment apart from the next one (which is not a trivial fact, bearing in mind the somewhat limited instrumentation: only basses). At particular moments of their improvisations, the musicians might focus on a single sound production technique, for example *tremolo con legno* or the “preparation” of the instrument with added objects³⁷ that distort the normal sound (for example, in “B→C”).

[MEDIA: B→C (audio excerpt) played by Kowald and Altena.]

Another way in which the musicians distinctly “color” the improvisations is by focusing on specific musical properties, for example, a certain rhythmic pattern: in “Die Jungen: Random Generators” a perpetual rhythmic pulse is established at the beginning of the improvisation and remains an undercurrent instrumental drive for the rest of the performance.

[MEDIA: “Die Jungen: Random Generators” (audio excerpt) played by Kowald and Phillips.]

The ability of the musicians to “orchestrate” each improvisation to produce distinct sonic results establishes an underlying fixity which is apparent at all times and which plays a fundamental role in the creation of a musical form. The interaction within each of the three duets seems to be supported by this kind of solid foundation: emergent stability and clearly distinguishable musical contexts which are defined by different fixed musical attributes.

³⁷ It is clear that certain decisions regarding the improvisations were not made spontaneously but prior to the performance: for example, the preparation of the instruments with added objects. This is not an uncommon practice among instrumentalists: Barry Guy very often prepares his instrument before or even during improvisation, for example, from 3.05:

[MEDIA: Double bass solo by Barry Guy (video).]

Another example is the album *Handicaps* (1973) by Maarten Altena, in which an old cast (previously used to treat Altena’s arm injury) is used throughout the entire album as a preparation and sound transformation device. The preparation of the instrument, one could claim, compromises the musical freedom since it imposes a pre-defined factor on the exclusively free improvisations. However, I would claim that despite the existence of such restrictions, other values of freedom, which are more important, are not jeopardized. This idea is further discussed later on (see “handicapping” below and Part 3.

Alongside the fixed attributes, the presence of freedom can also be clearly recognized. None of the situations I have described is ever static; rather, the music is in constant flux. While the players dwell within the borders of one fixed musical “zone,” they are also free to explore all possible variations of its content: the material which constitutes that zone. Through the exploration process further “hidden” paths are discovered, unexpected musical idiosyncrasies which emerge from within the material and lead the music in different directions. In this way, the improvisation is created as a ceaseless sequence of disorganizing and stabilizing processes, opening up or narrowing down the musical materials.

It is important to note the musicians’ sensitivity to the innate “potential” of the material: while dwelling on the different variations and derivation which stem from the fixed musical elements, the musicians seem to never overpass the moment in which the potential for freedom gets worn out. Listening to the music, I hear how, once the intrinsic capacity for change within a certain musical zone has been exhausted, a new direction will be immediately initiated. In that sense the investigation of freedom is entangled with an underlined responsibility: not only to extract all the possibilities from the material but also to introduce new ideas, establishing fresh ground ready for further exploration.³⁸

The way in which stability and change emerge from one another can be clearly heard in “Ein Stück ins Blaue-Chops.”

[MEDIA: “Ein Stück ins Blaue-Chops” (audio excerpt) played by Kowald and Phillips.]

The piece begins with two clear musical “statements,” played successively (each one by a different bassist): the first is a wildly expressive, eruptive bowed phrase, played *sul ponticello*; it is followed by a rapid *tremolo* rattle, created by using the wooden tip of the bow quivering between two adjacent strings. The improvisers continue to alternate between these two unmistakably distinct sounds while developing them in new directions: fast tremolo played with the bow *sul ponticello* (starting at 0:30); a percussive, rhythmic pattern on one bass, alongside a calmer melodic gesture, slowly descending in pitch on the other (starting at 1:20); a subtle sounding dialogue between plucked harmonics and soft *col legno* gestures (starting at 1:55); an almost melodic-like bowed part (starting at 3:05); and a development into a wilder bowed part, which somehow refers back to the beginning statement (but this time with an added fast vibrato effect), alongside fast and virtuosic *pizzicato* phrases (starting at 3:50). Although it is possible to describe the distinct (fixed) character of the musical choices, it is clearly the constant changes and transformations which are the strongest elements in *Bass Duets*. In that sense, it is impossible to disconnect concrete manifestations of freedom from fixity at any given moment.

³⁸ A different viewpoint, which regards freedom and responsibility as opposite tendencies, is suggested by jazz musician and scholar Paul Rinzler: “Freedom and responsibility are opposites because freedom explores options and multiplies possibilities, whereas responsibility limits action through obligation” (Rinzler, 2008, p. 58). My view is that responsibility is essential precisely *in order* to preserve freedom – for example, by being aware of the moment where the innate capacity for variation in one musical zone has been exhausted and a “scene change” should occur. It is this kind of responsibility which can make improvisation musically effective and as “free” as it can be (that is, since it is supposedly lacking any pre-existing directions). In a similar way, Marcel Cobussen coins the term responsibility to refer to the musicians’ ability to respond to unforeseen musical situations (Cobussen and Nielsen, 2012, pp. 59–90).

In *Sync or Swarm* (2005), David Borgo, an improvising musician and musicologist, suggests the term “handicapping” for adopting a musical or technical limitation which restricts the area in which the improvisation occurs in order to pose a creative and productive challenge. A similar idea is suggested by Edgar Landgraf, who claims that improvisation is always playing with and within certain constraints: “The practice of improvisation as art celebrates the freedom enabled by the mastering of constraints in a creative process” (Landgraf, 2016, p. 24). The ideas of handicapping also relates to improvisation as a collective notion, as it “may appear to limit individual creativity, [yet] can also remind each participant to focus attention on the collective statement” (Borgo, 2005, p. 25). Handicapping, constraints, limits to individual creativity, and focus on collective statement are all notions which explain how freedom and fixity emerge from each other rather than contradict each other. The exploration of sound material in *Bass Duets* is the very outcome of such self-imposed limitations.

It is important to realize that the terms used in the discussion so far are to a certain extent inadequate to fully describe improvisation if they are taken literally and separately from each other. Both the restrictive nature of the term “fixity” and the limitlessness of the concept “freedom” come to describe different foci of attention rather than absolute performative situations. It is the negotiation, rather than the contradiction, between freedom and fixity which stands at the base of improvisation, the constant oscillation between opening up unforeseen paths and the contraction and stabilization of the musical “arguments.” The struggle to break away from the fixation of the musical material – perceived as a creative and productive notion – will be further elaborated in the next part.

3. Philosophical Context

While the focus so far has been on a concrete music example, in the following sections I will introduce three scholarly viewpoints on improvisation. These can help to better understand the internal processes which exist during improvisation. I will discuss ideas by Gary Peters, Richard Barrett, Erlend Dehlin, and Marcel Cobussen, and create a discourse between their thoughts and my work.

3.1 A Struggle for Freedom

In *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (2009), musician and philosopher Gary Peters outlines a philosophy-based approach to improvisation. Peters’ point of departure is, foremost, conceptual: it does not rely on concrete musical example but instead turns for inspiration to the thoughts of various musicians and philosophers who write about the concept of improvisation. As remote as it may seem from the realities and practicalities of improvisation, I find the narratives which Peters explores significantly inspiring. Peters manages to trace the subtle impulses which stand at the very base of improvisation and that normally remain “hidden” in order to protect the fragility of the improvisatory act itself.

One challenging idea presented by Peters is that of the struggle of the improviser who tries to preserve freedom by fighting against the “demand” of the musical material to become fixed. The full narrative can be described as follows: the improviser begins by playing a first note, interrupting the (relative) silence

which existed until that moment and replacing it with sound. However, beginning also means that a certain decision has to be made: the improviser chooses one single gesture – one out of (at least in theory) an infinite number of possibilities. From that point on, a set musical trajectory, which invalidates the limitlessness of the initial potential of the improvisation, has begun. It becomes an almost deterministic musical path – and therefore, no longer completely free. According to Peters:

The art of improvisation is the art of making something happen and, as such, a liberation from the absence of the work. Silence, stillness, blankness are all valorized as originary aesthetic essences only to be cancelled by sound, movement, or figuration. The problem however, is that once at play with the marked space, the improviser or improvisors risk being enticed or indeed forced into the given structure of the gameplay, thus posing a threat to the positive freedom desired and demanding, in turn, a liberation from the game. (Peters, 2009, p. 26)

In that sense, the very same gesture that initially interrupted the silence jeopardizes freedom – regarding the latter as the opposite of “given structure” – and forces the improviser to struggle to regain it.

It is important to understand that there are two actants participating in this process: on one side, the improviser and, on the other, the musical material. The latter makes certain demands on the improviser as it calls for a continuation: “The absence of art . . . does not demand art whereas the presence of art . . . demands a continuation that is governed by the available mark-making resources” (Peters, 2009, p. 12). Additionally, the musical material is reminiscent of “historical patterns of human engagement and creativity that impose limits on what can and cannot be done on the occasion of the material’s subsequent reworking, whether improvised or not” (Peters, 2009, p. 11). The struggle is then to simultaneously produce more material while sustaining the fluidity of the already existing material (the “inherent tendency” of the material, if one chooses to use a more “Adornian” dialectic).³⁹ The fact that Peters includes the (musical) material side by side with the (human) improviser is essential for the discussion. It establishes a common sphere in which both operate, side by side, affecting one another.

The idea of a struggle between musician and material can be heard in the improvisations in *Bass Duets*. The (relative) stability of the more-fixed moments, constantly broken by new ideas and unexpected turns, can be easily understood in these terms. The “demand” of the musical material, set out at the beginning of the improvisation (for example, by the choice for one particular gesture at the beginning of “Ein Stück ins Blaue-Chops”), marks the rest of the improvisation. However, this does not, of course, completely restrict the freedom of the improvisers; rather, the effort to come up with new, fresh material is the result of the encounter with the “inherent tendencies” of the material.

The idea of a struggle is further explored in *hasBara*. The directions require the musicians to break free from the notated material (in earlier versions of the work I used such instructions as “breaking apart” and

³⁹ Peters enters into a discussion with Adorno, whose philosophical viewpoint relies to a great extent on the notion of inherent tendencies in music.

“melting down” the notated material in order to describe that process). The musical structure is constituted through a process of gradual de-composition, and, while the demand of the material is prescribed (rather than spontaneously formed during the improvisation itself), the players try to disassemble that fixed state by improvising “away” from the notated ideas. The fact that the target remains entirely open (that is, undirected) creates a motion which contrasts with the composed parts.

It would be true to say that this narrative exemplifies nothing more than a particular attitude, and the choice to adopt it here is a personal preference. Based on my experiences both as an improviser and as a composer, I think that Peters’ approach manages to establish a fruitful dialogue between the idea of personal freedom – to choose whatever direction in which to take the musical path – and the existence of the musical material, which, once listened to carefully and sensibly, might call for different directions by submitting its own conditions.

Adopting a perpetual discourse between what is yet to come – that which the improviser has still to mold into a certain shape – and what has already sounded and unavoidably echoes in the space – thus posing certain “demands” – should be perceived as a creative and productive approach.⁴⁰ In the most practical sense, it can be seen as a tool that enables the negotiation between playing and listening. Rendering Peters’ philosophical – and, indeed, personal – views into music would mean an ongoing dialogue between spontaneous innovation and the fixed musical material. The awareness of the tension between these two forces can provide a powerful musical drive and is suggested here as one practical conclusion and a product of artistic research.

3.2 Improvisation and Complex Systems

In *The Field of Musical Improvisation* (2017), music philosopher Marcel Cobussen makes a link between improvisation and the theory of complex systems. The latter is used in various scientific fields to describe the behavior and growth of systems in which a network of different components produces complex – and to a certain extent unpredictable – results. Although each one of the different factors that make up the system might be, in itself, simple, the interaction between all the factors leads to a high degree of complexity.

In Cobussen’s view, improvisation can be described as a complex system, being an “emergent, self-organizing, and adaptive structure, growing through constant adjustments and readjustments . . . and resulting in a perpetual negotiating between order and disorder, structure and chaos, free and fixed elements, stability and fluidity, etc.” (Cobussen, 2017, p. 84). Free improvisation saxophonist John Butcher agrees, describing improvisation as “an extraordinarily complex matrix of influences, intentions, innovations, visions, idiosyncrasies, habits, and insights filtered and fed through different intelligences into the music of the actual moment” (Butcher, 2011, n.p). Both descriptions highlight several qualities of

⁴⁰ The same idea applies if we replace “improviser” with “composer” and “sounded” with “written.” In that sense, the act of composing could be perceived as an improvisatory process in which the composer negotiates between personal freedom and the demands of the material (see Benson, 2003, pp. 33–76).

improvisation which can be traced also in *Bass Duets*: the improvisers are entangled in a constant game of shaping and reshaping the musical properties. In each moment, the unexpected “cracks” within a certain arrangement of musical elements provide the improvisers with the opportunity to slide towards another arrangement and repeatedly so. A complex system allows for a myriad of factors and possibilities to take part, and, through the interaction between them, the music can fluctuate dynamically. For example, an occasional irregularity in a periodic bow tremolo will emerge into a more elaborate rhythmic pattern and change the character of the music entirely, affecting the actions of the players who immediately respond by “re-evaluating” their path (“Ein Stück ins Blaue-Chops”, between 0:40 and 2:40). In this example, it would be extremely difficult to isolate each and every musical “situation” since the flow of ideas and sound transformations is constantly and rapidly changing. Instead, tracking down the “ingredients” of the improvisation – the materials which the players introduce, each of which might be simple in itself – together with the realization that the interaction between these elements leads to a dynamic, constantly evolving structure might establish a more appropriate perspective.

This creative power is self-generative: instead of being governed by external “regulations,” a complex system accumulates its energy from the interaction between its different components. As noted by Cobussen, “instead of a hierarchical, top-down system that uses a centralized decision-making process based on abstract rules to guide behavior, complex, self-organizing systems are established through a bottom-up processing of a small number of rules by several interacting actants” (Cobussen, 2017, p. 179). This idea of a spontaneous, self-emerging structure may result from the absence of any prescribed musical material upon which the improvisation is based. However obvious this idea might seem nowadays, this was not always the case. As explained by one of the pioneers of free improvisation, AMM’s guitar player Keith Rowe:

One important difference between AMM and the other musicians is this question of repertoire. I don’t think I know of any other group that set out to work without a repertoire before AMM. That was a central part of what we were about, and that’s a very very significant part of what we are about. Much more significant than people realise. A seismic shift in mentality in music. (Rowe, 2001, n.p.)

The importance of this idea is rightly highlighted: the “seismic shift” points towards the essential difference between free improvisation and other kinds of improvisation. The absence of repertoire allows for an emergent complexity of a higher degree than would be possible in the presence of a concrete “regulating” framework, for example, notation.

This idea is one starting point of *hasBara*. Improvisation in *hasBara* stands as an autonomous entity, inherently different from the notated parts. Since no instructions are given for the improvisation, the production of the material does not rely on my compositional “authority,” but exclusively on emergent, self-organizing, and adaptive processes. In that sense, *hasBara*’s improvised parts embody the idea of self-generated complexity, articulated within a composed structure.

3.3 The Genuinely New: Inventing Context Through Improvisation

Richard Barrett, whose notated works are strongly connected to improvisation (some are discussed elsewhere in this thesis), is also active as a free improviser, playing on a set of various electronic instruments. Barrett describes free improvisation as a creative process in which the “framework or model itself is brought into being at the time of performance, rather than being a pre-existent model of whatever nature” (Barrett, 2019, p. 44). In other words, free improvisation can be distinguished from other kinds of improvisation, as it does not only involve innovation *within a certain context* but also *of the context itself* as it emerges during the performance. This is not the case of, for example, the head/solos/head format, which we might encounter in a jazz performance, but a newly created format, which is not based on pre-existent formulas. In this sense, free improvisation can be identified as instant composing, since the liberty of inventing a musical form, on whatever structural or sonic level, is in the hand of the improvisers and occurs during the performance and through the musical interaction. Peters discusses Adorno's "immanent criticism" of improvisation and jazz in order to understand how improvisation could succeed in transcending "pseudo-individualization," which celebrates originality and authenticity but, in fact, "leaves [the improviser] with little more than a stock of clichés, offering no real insight into the complexity or potential of their own practice" (Peters, 2009, p. 78). One could say that Adorno's fundamental criticism is countered by Barrett when he talks about a “framework or model . . . brought into being at the time of performance” – a model of (free) improvisation based on an intrinsic reorganization of the very fundamentals of music, which can be manifested on different levels along the range between individual notes and the entire musical structure.

It is important to understand that, in this sense, the difference between free improvisation and other kinds of improvisation is not just relative but fundamental: free improvisation involves musical innovation at a meta-contextual level and therefore cannot be reduced to extemporization on a given structure. Barrett's approach resonates with an assertion made by Erlend Dehlin, a researcher whose focus is on improvisation within organization and management theories and who distinguishes between the “granted ambition of creating the *contextually new*; recognizing inevitable variation within emerging contexts” (in the case of “regular” improvisation) and the “granted ambition of creating the *genuinely new*: a unique context of innovation” (in free improvisation) (Dehlin, 2008, p. 225, italics in original). Borgo agrees, asserting that “free improvisation moves beyond matters of expressive detail to matters of collective structure; it is not formless music making but form-making music” (Borgo, 2002, p. 167).

For me, the importance of Barrett's and Dehlin's insights is that they establish free improvisation as a distinct element, inherently different from any other performance process (for example, interpretation of notated parts, or improvisation within a certain style or genre). This “unique” status of free improvisation stands as a conceptual background to *hasBara*, allowing for the juxtaposition of free and fixed elements as contrary to each other. The score allows for a type of freedom which exceeds the original compositional framework and which sets in motion creative impulses that may stretch beyond the scope of pre-existing ideas. Connecting the composed material with the “meta-contextual process” – the

undirected improvisation – is the central challenge for the musicians. The attempt to transform prescribed material into freedom and vice-versa will shape the performance.

At the base of this approach to free improvisation lies the understanding that any combination of musical elements is appropriate and that the acceptance or rejection of different sounds should be based exclusively on the prevailing musical context:

The possibility of improvising the structural-expressive framework of a piece of music comes into being, I believe, as a direct consequence of the realisation that any sound may be combined with any other sound in a musical context. (Barrett, 2019, p. 44)

This last idea is explained by Barrett in a broader musical and historical context. The following passage relates to the music of Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza:⁴¹

It might be noted that the principles on which this improvised music was based are very similar to the motivations behind the development of serial composition a decade earlier – a disciplined avoidance of hierarchy and received assumptions, in order to open up the possibility of discovering and exploring new relationships between sounds and structures. Principles like these [Franco Evangelisti’s “commandments” for the group], along with Bailey’s “non-idiomatic” formulation, may have been necessary at a certain moment in the development of the music, in order to establish a *tabula rasa*, however fictional. (Barrett, 2019, p. 45, italics in original)

This acceptance of *any* possible sound can explain the function that undirected improvisation has within a composed form. In such a context, the improvisation represents the “antimatter” and stands in contrast to the very idea of prescription. Even though the latter description might sound somewhat prosaic, the aesthetics it suggests can be rendered in concrete musical ideas, whether composed or improvised.

Perhaps a useful, if somewhat peculiar, way to describe the role of improvisation in *hasBara* would be as a kind of ritualistic process which is supposed to summon the elusive, sought-after concept of musical freedom by elevating its participants into an ecstatic state. However, this does not mean that the notation in itself should be regarded as a restricting factor for the real-time freedom of the musicians, as suggested by Barrett, whose compositional approach questions a familiar trope: “the idea that including improvisatory features in a notated composition has the intention, or the effect, of ‘freeing’ performers from the ‘tyranny’ of precise notation” (Barrett, 2019, p. 40). The notated content can communicate with improvised materials which might be entirely foreign to any pre-existing context:⁴² different rhythms, sounds, or musical approaches are imported, and this exogenous material mixes with what the score

⁴¹ Rome-based ensemble dedicated to the exploration of avant-garde and free improvisation techniques (founded in 1964). Alongside AMM, they are considered the first experimental composers collective.

⁴² See Richard Barrett’s “lacunae” notation in *Blattwerk*.

prescribes. In the following part I will investigate this particular combination of improvisation and notation and their coexistence as two complementary “themes” within a consistent musical narrative.

4. *hasBara*

[MEDIA: *hasBara* (video), played by MUTU ensemble.]

This last part will focus on my composition *hasBara*, a case study of the role of improvisation within a composed work. I have tried to create a musical narrative which features improvisation and notation as two contrasting elements. The oscillation between them forms the central idea of this piece and sets it apart from my other compositions.

To start the discussion, it is necessary to first observe more carefully how improvisation exists in other works mentioned in this thesis. The comparison to other works will help to demonstrate the particular role improvisation plays in *hasBara*. For example, in *MRMO* and [*Untitled, 2012*] improvisation is confined to more-or-less defined boundaries and, even though the exact notes are missing and the shapes of the phrases remain, to a certain extent, flexible, the overall structure is predefined. This restrains the degree of freedom and keeps the musical characteristic of these pieces pretty much fixed. Conversely, in *hasBara* improvisation does not exist only as content which has to be spontaneously “completed” by the musicians but also requires them to deviate from the pre-existing framework and independently develop both content and shape. In this sense, the borders of the structure as a whole are indeterminate not only to a degree of flexibility (that is, a shape which is “elastic,” but not entirely undefined) but by remaining extensively more open. In *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, Cobussen presents the idea of a field which “develops, expands and shrinks, crosses borders, incorporates aporias and paradoxes” (Cobussen, 2017, p. 50). This description applies well to *hasBara*: it is impossible to define the exact and fixed borders, as the improvised parts have an unpredicted shape and length.

Another essential difference between *MRMO*, [*Untitled, 2012*], and *hasBara* is that in the first two the improvisations are formed as a direct continuation of the notated ideas. The musicians rely on the information prescribed in the score and follow a guided path. The improvisations are always based on the assimilation and absorption of the prescribed information, and real-time musical freedom is achieved only from that point onwards. In *hasBara*, however, the musicians are not supposed to continue the notated music, extending it into their improvisations, but the opposite: the score instructs the musicians to de-compose the prescribed parts. This can perhaps be perceived as the opposite of the traditional notion of interpreting music, whereby musicians are expected to realize the information given by the score and not move away from it. The intention in *hasBara* is to gradually “nullify” the composed material in order to invite new ideas into the composition. Gary Peters’ notion of struggle, in which the musicians try to break away from the tendency or “demand” of the material so as to achieve continuation and preserve freedom, provides a useful description of this process of de-composition.

Lacking any prescription, direction, or even a general shape, improvisation in *hasBara* is a self-governing force, capable of generating musical content by itself. Ideas and decisions are allowed to develop spontaneously, based on real-time creativity and feedback within the group, without any relation to the pre-composed ideas. This results in emergent complexity – dynamically fluctuating textures in a constant state of change. “Anything” can happen, without any restrictions on the content or the character of the material, and, as the recording demonstrates, this kind of openness eventually leads to musical ideas away from the notated material.

However, the core idea of this work is not the independence of improvisation. Rather, it is the connection between two opposite musical poles – undirected improvisation and notated prescriptions – which is key here. After an introductory opening chord, a short notated statement is played repeatedly, while the musicians are instructed to gradually de-compose the material: the notation slowly transforms into free material, opening up to exogenous influences. Later on, the opposite occurs: the musicians are asked to abandon their freedom and come back to playing prescribed material, “surrendering” to the demand of the material to become stable and organized. Improvisation and notation are always linked together, either by “melting down” the pre-composed material or by “collecting” the improvisation back into the pre-defined material.

[IMAGE: *hasBara* (score excerpt).]

The gradual transformation between improvisation and notated material (and back) is something which needs more unpacking. The improvisers use this to generate the musical development – a key element in my work. Anthony Braxton, whose work also oscillates between free improvisation and notation, introduces the term “narrative,” which can also help to explain what is expected from the performers in *hasBara*:

Narrative is one thing that distinguishes the music of the great improvisers, whether it's Charlie Parker or Paul Desmond or Miles Davis; [it] is their ability to understand how to go from A to B in a way that keeps the friendly experiencer's interest from beginning to end. Now, there are many ways to go from A to B with radiance. But certainly, the phenomenon of narrative linear radiance is a component that could be talked of as a way of looking at a solo by Max Roach playing on a Charlie Parker album: the way he puts a solo together, the logic of decision-making. A good story, like a good form, celebrates the ongoing moment in a way that is magnetic. . . . What we're really talking about is how something unfolds and moves into the forward space in a way that holds your interest because of how the musician is setting the propositions up. It's narrative in the sense that, when it's all over, someone can say, “Oh, that made perfect sense,” someone else might say, “Oh, that was a great story, it was complete, it was a multi-veer, and he expanded it in this way and ended it in this way and it kept my interest.” What for me is most important is that it keeps my interest and demonstrates what I'll call fundamental music proclivities. We tend not to want to look at our music in terms of fundamental proclivities, but

even so, it still can be factored. Everything that happens can be factored in some way, and used or duplicated or transformed. (Braxton, 2003, n.p.)

According to Braxton, a musical narrative provides musicians and audience with a clear trajectory, a “logical” musical impulse – the “ability to understand how to go from A to B in a way that keeps the friendly experiencer’s interest from beginning to end.” It is interesting to note that Braxton recognizes in this process not only the improvisers themselves but also “fundamental music proclivities”: the musical material with its own orientation or, according to Peters, its own “demands.” The concept of narrative can also be applied to the connection between composed (and to a certain extent, fixed) ideas and undirected (free) improvisation, as it exists in *hasBara*.

Another point is about the notation itself. What is implied by composed “material,” not only on the path towards or from free improvisation but on a musical semantic level? My score seems to be no more than a rough sketch, an unfinished draft which requires the bigger part to be completed by the musicians.

[IMAGE: *hasBara* (score excerpt).] I have devised the notation exactly for that purpose, leaving out such details as staff lines (thus marking the note heights only relatively), the choice of instrumentation, register, or playing technique, as well as other structural considerations (for example, how many times Part A should be repeated during the process of deconstructing the material and arriving at free improvisation). On the other hand, small “hints” that point towards more specific expressive details are notated (for example, “light, airy, improvise in a major scale”), calling for focused attention from the performers. In his description of Cecil Taylor’s work, Alexander Hawkins writes:

Instructions were often delivered in such a way (cryptically, speedily) that instrumental sections within the ensemble would find themselves negotiating and deciding among themselves how to interpret them; in other words, they were forced to organise themselves and decide on a course of action, within the overarching structure of mutual enterprise. (Hawkins, 2018, n.p.)

With an established sensitivity not only to how the improviser creates but also to the essential interactions within a group of improvisers and finally between performer and musical instructions, Taylor understands the potential of these instructions as a presentation of both fixity and freedom. My work follows these lines, creating a self-organizing collective unit which will engage in the acts of negotiation and interpretation as guiding principles. In a second performance of this work by ensemble Mutu (this time without my participation as a player), I was happily reassured that such “cryptic” notation works well. The particular balance between the relative impreciseness of the notation, the undirected improvisation, and the presence of explicitly articulated ideas proved to be successful, in the sense that the performance expressed my ideas as much as the musicians’ own ideas without the one overshadowing the other. This strengthens my conviction that any other group of musicians, even without my participation as a performer, could articulate my initial plans as a composer.

Watching the video recording, it is clear that the instruction to move away from notation towards a (more) free state forced the group to be aware not only of the score but also of the spontaneous impulses which emerge during the performance. The responsibility to link the realization of the score and the real-time invention of new material, on the one hand, while also being aware of the balance between individual actions and the overall activity within the group, on the other, forces the musicians to find an effective equilibrium between freedom and fixity. *hasBara* does not only contain both improvisation and notation but provides a true link between the two – a connection which I sometimes find lacking in other works. In addition, oscillating between notation and undirected improvisation has proven to be useful while working with only classically trained musicians; I noticed that the collective improvisation pushes them beyond their (often-encountered) inexperience with improvising.

5. Conclusion

hasBara presents an encounter between notation and improvisation, which forms a specific musical narrative. Notation and improvisation are juxtaposed as two contrasting elements, and the tension between them is particularly highlighted by the distinct nature of improvisation: it is presented as the antithesis of notation – an attempt to move away from the notated material.

The decision to highlight the contrast between improvisation and notation did not come because I believe in any inherent opposition between the two but as a way to add a distinct musical perspective to the already existing knowledge about their combination. By suggesting this particular narrative, I have tried to create a situation in which notation and improvisation can dynamically coexist, while the inherent possibilities of each of them are maintained. While the improvisation remains entirely free, the notation can still convey the information I wanted to communicate to the musicians; and between the two, unforeseen situations can emerge during the performance. Departing from the notated parts, the musicians establish their own, self-formed musical paths – even though it is clear that this exploration will be unavoidably affected by the composition. The attempt to avoid the fixity of the material – the stabilization of a deterministic musical path – leads to a constant process of destabilization, which I regard as musically creative and productive.

hasBara thus presents another angle on the freedom-and-fixity encounter. Creating links between improvisation and notation forms the main task for the musicians. They have to simultaneously operate on two levels or different playing modes: improvisation, by spontaneously generating new material and constantly forming and re-forming musical interconnections, and the realization of the score, by making sure the notated ideas can be correctly carried out. The result relies on both the performers' and the composer's input, and integrates these two channels of information organically, as necessary parts of the work. The main conclusion to be drawn from this chapter is that there are two ways of looking at improvisation: it can be seen as independent musical activity, driven by a struggle between change and stabilization, which allows structures to emerge and develop through a process of constant readaptation; or as part of a network that also includes pre-established elements. This twofold approach reveals

improvisation as a powerful, inherent force – which can exist alongside other creative forces – in music and, indeed, in any other human endeavor.

One last question which should be discussed is what could come next? Which directions would it be interesting to explore in order to create new pieces? One almost obvious direction would be to create a situation in which improvisation can feed back into a composed framework and alter its content. Practically speaking, this will involve a perpetual re-organizing of structure and material by creating a continuous process of interweaving free materials with composed ones. Developing ways of achieving this through notation is an interesting challenge which can provide a direction for future works.