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Leiden
The Netherlands

Expanded inspiration: metric improvisation and compositional tools in contemporary modal music

Liontou Mochament, M.

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Conclusion

The question that triggered this research project was: how can the practice of metric improvisation contribute to the development of both improvisation and composition with regard to contemporary modal music? In other words, does rhythm and the related genre of metric improvisation provide useful tools for developing my metric improvisation performance and composition practices? At first the question (and its answer) seemed self-evident; one can say that the more you practice the better. However, as this project shows, there are ways and methods that can contribute to the goal.

Inspiration is a notion that historically often refers to the divine and the sacred. For example, the Muses –divine creatures of Greek mythology– were the ones that gave the *logos* to the ancient poets. We have nowadays come to reconsider this fact, detaching human creation from both the gods and muses but also from the ‘almighty’ western classical music composer and the figure of the male genius of the romantic era. As explored above, the domination of the work object has given way to an ongoing debate over the boundaries (wherever they may exist) between the improvised and the composed performance. In this research, I propose that there are concrete ways that can contribute to enhancing ‘inspiration’ in metric improvisation and composition. For this purpose, I have researched and analysed metric improvisations of distinguished performers of the 20th and 21st century. My aim was to bring to the surface the intricate rhythmic tools that each of these artists employs to practice and embody them. I manually transcribed improvised performances of Marko Melkon, Udi Hrant, John Berberian, Ara Dinkjian, Kyriakos Tapakis and Tamer Pınarbaşı. I invented a protocol for manual transcription and analysis that works on three different levels. I aimed to identify:

- a. the rhythmic tools used in a melodic/rhythmic nucleus
- b. the phrasing and sentencing structures
- c. the modal movements

I applied this protocol to all transcribed material, something that facilitated the analysis on a micro and macro level, thus providing a tool for future researchers.

The analysis of the metric improvisations by the abovementioned artists was a mind-opening process. Despite the fact that the recordings span almost a century of recorded material, research revealed common models of performance structures and use of rhythmic tools, as well as stylistic and melodic similarities. In addition, this thorough analysis of the material revealed the rhythmic and stylistic ‘signature’ of each artist, providing a decoding method that facilitated the practice. Below, I briefly recapitulate and juxtapose the most significant features of each performer and the ways in which they were incorporated in my improvised and pre-composed processes of music making.

Marko Melkon and Udi Hrant were the starting point of this research. Despite the fact that there were only a few metric improvisations of these two artists, my research showed connections between their metric improvisations to the dance, a fact that influenced their use of rhythmic tools, and resulted in simpler use of rhythm when compared to the later artists. Their models of

improvisation closely followed the *seyir* of the *makam*, and the use of phrasing is mainly based on one to two-bar phrasing and (rarely) four-bar phrasing. In their simplicity, the two examples included in this project highlight the fact that the practice of metric modal improvisation existed in the live and recording scene of the early 20th century. Research also revealed that their presence in the U.S.A. during the mid-20th century has greatly influenced the development of *oud* performance practice in the U.S.A. and, consequently, also internationally. Research also highlighted the lineage of Armenian and Armenian-American *oud* players of the 20th to 21st century, a lineage that started with Agapios Toboulis and continued with Marko Melkon, Udi Hrant and, later, John Berberian, Richard Hagopian, Ara Dinkjian, to mention only a few.

John Berberian's work was a revelation. Through his extensive discography, I chose to transcribe and analyse metric improvisations that depict his fluency in metric improvisational language and his ability to move from the 'traditional' to the contemporary, suggesting new ways and aesthetic approaches. This artistic flexibility is made evident, on the one hand, by the use of simple subdivisions, and on the other by the extensive use of syncopation and grouping – a tool that differentiates him from the older masters. Structurally, Berberian was the first to propose multi-bar phrasing and a multi-bar ascending-descending-modulating ending with a climactic model of improvisation. Finally, Berberian was also the first to introduce the *oud* to electric, rock/jazz bands, and in this sense, he was a pioneer in the fusion of Middle Eastern music with other genres. This has meant that his path-breaking metric improvisation strategies have been more widely disseminated than would otherwise have been the case.

The transcription and analysis of Ara Dinkjian and Tamer Pınarbaşı's metric improvisations brought my research to the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. Their use of rhythmic tools allowed us to see the development of the genre: syncopation, polyrhythms, groupings, rhythmic displacement, subdivisions and varying subdivision flows, and a generally complex rhythmic vocabulary all reveal their great contribution to the progress and development of metric improvisation performance. Structurally, they both use compositional strategies (given that they are both composing for the genre of contemporary modal music) and present multi-bar phrasing, long sentences, modulations, and multi-climax models of improvisation. Melodically, they are both fluent in the *makam*, but they also incorporate the melodic elements of other styles.

Finally, Kyriakos Tapakis, the youngest exponent in this research, gathers almost all the elements of the above artists in his unique style of metric improvisation. For this research, I chose to transcribe and analyse two versions of his metric improvisations from within his own composition, where he suggests the 'ad-libitum to straight' form of metric improvisation. He provides the only case that uses this kind of a structural development in a performance, suggesting a novel approach to the practice. Tapakis's rhythmic vocabulary is extremely advanced, characterised by varied groupings and subdivisions, polyrhythms, rhythmic displacement, and an amazing personal groove. As the analysis of these concrete examples revealed, he also uses harmonic change in metric improvisation, as revealed in the research.

During the first part of the research, I was able to trace and systematise the different ways in which each artist organises and handles their metric improvisational performance practice. I

experimented with the tools discovered and I came to embody them through practice of their recordings, at the same time incorporating the stylistic traits of the artists.

I negotiated questions to do with what creates a personal style, how artists have been influenced, and in what sense the research carried out can trace and weigh up such features. Touching upon aesthetic issues, through research and practice I became able to distinguish between the different styles of metric improvisation.

In addition, through the process of embodiment through practice, I became able to draw on the styles in my own artistic work. This embodiment, together with the further elaboration of the tools discovered in improvisation and in the creation of precomposed works, was the next step in this research. The creative path (Part B) therefore showed the process of experimentation with the discovered tools of Part A – in improvisation, composition and in the dissemination of knowledge. I chose to focus on creating improvised performances that would make the influences of the artists evident, so that I adopted a compositional approach in improvisation. On the other hand, I was able to create pre-composed music through improvisation. In this case, I reflected on the outcome only to find out that I had incorporated the rhythmic and structural tools of Part A in ways that were evident and clearly recognisable. The pre-composed music in this research is a direct outcome of my work in metric improvisation. As the analysis of original works shows, I have employed almost all the rhythmic tools suggested by the artists in their performances. The compositions are also an artistic meta-comment on the research. They range from ‘traditional’ style (*Harman Sokak, Vertigo*) to contemporary modal music style (*Karma, Unsaid*), and seen in retrospect, they constitute my artistic response to the route of the *oud* from the early post-Ottoman era to the 21st century. In this sense, artistic research has provided me with tools and methods to both analyse and systematise a practice and, at the same time, has enabled me to create and further the artistic understanding of the idiom. This research proposes many productive ways to achieve these aims.

Artistic research into the genre of metric modal improvisation is still an open field. For reasons of space different artists and instruments in different countries and genres were not included in this research. Their artistic wealth remains there to be explored. I hope this research provides methodological tools and suggests different approaches for future researchers in the field, and that it will facilitate artists and artistic/researchers in enhancing their inspiration, both in metric improvisation and in the creation of composed material.