

The Golden Age of Non-Idiomatic Improvisation

FYS 129

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Various Quotes

These slides contain a collection of some of the quotes largely from the musicians that are studied during the course.

The idea is to present “musicians in their own words”.

Vijay Iyer

**American Pianist
& Composer
(b. October 26,
1971)**



Iyer on Active Listening

The fundamental claim of this thesis is that music perception and cognition are embodied, situated activities. This means that they depend crucially on the physical constraints and enablings of our sensorimotor apparatus, and also on the ecological and sociocultural environment in which our music-listening and -producing capacities come into being. I argue that rhythm perception and production involve a complex, whole-body experience, and that much of the musical structure found in rhythm-based music incorporates an awareness of the embodied, situated role of the participant.

The claim that music perception and cognition are embodied activities also means that they are actively constructed by the listener, rather than passively transferred from performer to listener. In particular, the discernment of entities such as pulse and meter from a given piece of music are not perceptual inevitabilities for any human being, but are strongly dependent on the persons culturally contingent listening strategies.

Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African American Musics, Vijay Iyer, PhD Dissertation, Abstract, Technology and the Arts, University of California, Berkeley, 1998.

Iyer on Attributes of Music Not Found in Language

Although groove is a highly subjective quality, music that grooves can sustain interest or attention for long stretches of time to an acculturated listener, even if "nothing is happening" on the musical surface. A prime example is James Brown's music [CD2], which frequently has precious little melodic or harmonic material and is highly repetitive, but would never be described as static. The fact that groove carries enough weight to override other musical factors in certain kinds of musical experience suggests that the traditional linguistics-based viewpoint does not suffice in describing the entirety of music cognition.

Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African American Musics, Vijay Iyer, PhD Dissertation, Chapter 3, Technology and the Arts, University of California, Berkeley, 1998.

Iyer on Active Listening

It was also made clear in this exchange that music can be viewed as a consequence of active listening; it is, at some level, through informed listening that music is constructed. Placing the skillful listener in such an active role explodes the category of experiences that we call listening to music, because it allows the listener the improvisatory freedom to frame any moment or any experience as a musical one. The improviser is always listening; the listener is always improvising.

Iyer on Roscoe Mitchell's Conception of Music

At one point in the course of a weeklong studio recording project, he [Roscoe Mitchell] guided his nine piece group improvisationally through the sculpting of an introduction to one of his notated pieces, titled "this" and based on a poem by e. e. cummings... Exploring the available options, he asked percussionist Vincent Davis to tap on a wood block, and then to hit a gong. Then he asked guitarist Spencer Barefield about the sympathetic strings on his acoustic guitar, and had him strum them by way of demonstration. Next, he asked percussionist Gerald Cleaver to try a few tremolo dyads on the marimba, first with hard mallets, then with soft ones. He asked to hear these sounds again, one by one, and then in sequence, presumably to compare them, I thought. Then, casually, Mitchell said, "All right, may I please hear that much music again?"

This request hit me hard, because it hadn't dawned on me that what was happening during this process even was music; I had unconsciously dismissed it all as precompositional timbral exploration. But Mitchell knew we had crossed the line into music: a series of human sound events, intentional sonic gestures in organized succession. Of course it was music; how could I have thought otherwise?

In that instant, I learned something profound and difficult to explain. It struck me how the rawest sonic materials and the most primal human acts can be heard as compelling, even beautiful music. I saw that music need not be understood simply as the execution of preordained gestures, and that it can be viewed as a process of inquiry, a path of action, an exploratory, intimate sonorous exploration/construction of the world...

Why Roscoe Mitchell is Important, Vijay Iyer, Table & Chairs, 2013.

Iyer on What Jazz is

And that's closest to what jazz is for me: an expressive and critical take on reality, at once tough and fragile, culturally and historically grounded yet perilously unstable, miraculously existing in the most unlikely circumstance and simply devastating in its effect on one's worldview. The kind of musical experience I crave is the kind that makes me wonder if I even know what music is.

Iyer on Expectations from Music

When I hear mastery without risk, I feel ripped off.