

*Excerpt from Jeremy Begbie's chapter in
The Modern Theologians edited by David Ford:*

Musical Improvisation: Church, Spirit and Body

Improvisation, 'the simultaneous conception and production of sound in performance',¹ despite the flurry of interest in it in recent years by musicologists, is treated by many musicians with suspicion, even disdain. Yet the evidence is that not only is there an element of improvisation in virtually all music of all cultures, but that there is scarcely a musical technique or form of composition that did not originate in improvisation or was not essentially influenced by it. This suggests that instead of regarding music which is strictly notated and largely planned as the norm and improvisation as an unfortunate distortion or epiphenomenon, it might be more illuminating to invert that and ask whether improvisation reveals to us fundamental aspects of musical creativity easily forgotten in traditions bound predominantly to the practices of rigorous rehearsal and notation. If it does, any conversation between theology and music must take improvisation very seriously. Moreover, we quickly discover that striking theological overtones emerge in any study of improvisation.² Here we can highlight this by referring to just two fields of doctrine: the Church and the Holy Spirit.³

Much of the recent literature on improvisation has highlighted the implicit social and even political provocations it presents. In particular, it disrupts conventional barriers between 'composer', 'performer' and 'audience', since an improviser is normally all three concurrently. Improvisation seems to offer uncommon opportunities for profitable 'dialogical interrelations' between musicians.⁴ In more formalised concert music-making, communication is interposed by an external agency, the score. By shifting attention to social process rather than the resulting text, improvisation encourages a particular kind of immediacy of personal exchange which is undoubtedly one of its most attractive features.

In this way, improvisation can embody to a significant extent what Alistair McFadyen has described as 'undistorted communication'.⁵ In 'monologue' the individual manipulates or is manipulated: one person treats the other as a means to an end, such that the other becomes self-confirmatory. The other's otherness becomes 'a repetition of a previously privately co-ordinated understanding'.⁶ In 'dialogue' (undistorted communication), the other's particularity is acknowledged such that one allows for the possibility of one's own expectations and intentions to be resisted: 'To recognise and intend the freedom of the other in response is to recognise that the form and content of that response cannot be overdetermined by the address.'⁷ There is 'a readiness to allow the calls of others to transform us in

¹Roger Dean, *Creative Improvisation* (Milton Keynes, 1989), p. ix.

² For example, writers such as Arthur Peacocke have made effective use of the model of improvisation in relation to the doctrine of creation, to illuminate God's free interaction with the world. Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 175ff.

³ For much fuller discussion, cf. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, chs. 7-9.

⁴E. Prévost, 'Improvisation: Music for an Occasion,' in *British Journal of Music Education*, 2/2 (1985), pp. 177-186.

⁵ Alistair McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood* (Cambridge, 1990), ch. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

response.’⁸ This does not mean that we assume the superiority of the other, nor quantitative equality between dialogue partners. Commenting on McFadyen’s work, Francis Watson writes: ‘Something similar is suggested by the Pauline image of the church as body, where the allocation of varying gifts and roles by the same Spirit establishes a formal [not quantitative] equality . . . within a diversity of roles which allows for hierarchical elements so long as these are understood in strictly reciprocal rather than monological terms.’⁹ Very much the same could be said of improvisation, in which there can be growth of personal particularity through musical dialogue. All the skills which promote reciprocal ‘undistorted communication’ - which should characterise the Church as persons-in-communion - are present in a very heightened form: for example, giving ‘space’ to the other through alert attentiveness, listening in patient silence, contributing to the growth of others by ‘making the best’ of what is received from them such that they are encouraged to continue participating, sensitive decision-making, flexibility of response, initiating change, role-changing, generating and benefiting from conflict. Without the mediation of a verbal text and conventional verbal communication, these skills have to be learned in musical modes and thus in a sense *re-thought* and *re-learned*. This may well contribute to freer communication in other fields. There is much to draw upon here if we want to develop a properly theological account of ecclesial freedom which sees it as mediated by and through the other in a process of concentrated dialogical action, where the constraint of others is not experienced as essentially oppressive but as conferring and confirming an inalienable particularity and uniqueness. Not only are modernist conceptions of self-determined and self-constituted individuals questioned, but also the dissolution of self-identity implicit in some postmodernism.¹⁰ Significantly, homogeneity of sound has little place in jazz. ‘Sound in jazz is . . . the slow, expressive vibrato of Sidney Bechet’s soprano sax; the voluminous, erotic tenor sax sound of Coleman Hawkins, the earthy cornet of King Oliver; the ‘jungle’ sound of Bubber Miley’.¹¹

We move to a second area – the Holy Spirit. Improvisation, to a very large extent, entails what the poet Peter Riley has called ‘the exploration of occasion’.¹² Much depends on the particularities of the specific context of performance - for example, the acoustic of the building, the time of day, the number of people present, their expectations and experience, their audible responses as the performance proceeds, and, not least, the music produced by fellow-improvisers. These elements are not accidental to the outcome but constitutive of it. A skilful improviser, in bringing alive the ‘given’ material - whether chord sequence, the agreed shape of a piece, or whatever - attempts not only to be sensitive to such contextual factors but to incorporate them into the improvisation, in order that the improvisation is ‘true’ and authentic to this time and place. Moreover, with its large measure of openness, this particularising process, it is commonly acknowledged, generates an intense sense of anticipation and hopefulness, a sense of ‘wanting more’.

⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁹ Francis Watson, *Church and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh, 1994), p. 112.

¹⁰ Ibid., ch. 6.

¹¹ Berendt (1983), 144. The ethical implications of jazz for modelling ‘desirable social relations’ are explored vividly by Kathleen Marie Higgins, with particular reference to ‘progressive’ jazz and race relations. Higgins (1991), 170-80.

¹² As cited in Dean, *Creative Improvisation*, p. xvi.

At a time of renewed interest in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, this dimension of improvisation may have much to contribute in the search for new conceptualities in pneumatology. The Spirit is the Spirit of faithfulness, of fidelity to the givenness of God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ. But, far from merely replicating this 'given', the Spirit constantly actualises it in a way which engages with and brings to fruition the particularities of each time and place. As is often now said - and here much recent pneumatology is attempting to obviate problematic, and even harmful aspects of the Western tradition - although it is the work of Spirit to unify, to bind people and things together, this activity includes in and with it the recognition and promotion of particularity and distinctiveness. On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit did not create one uniform language but liberated people to hear each other 'in their own tongues' (Acts 2:6, 11). Pentecost was a divine 'exploration of occasion' if ever there were one. Furthermore, this particularising activity is a function of the Spirit's eschatological ministry: to anticipate here and now in ever fresh ways the Father's final, eschatological desire, already realised in Christ (2 Cor 1:22; Eph. 1:14; Rom. 8:23). Particularising engenders hope. Life in the Spirit, therefore, involves a combination of faithfulness to the past, particularising what is received in the present as an anticipation of the future. This is the dynamic of musical improvisation. If it is true, as many urge, that we require models of the Spirit's work which, in hermeneutics take full account of the particularities of the present as well as faithfulness to the apostolic witness of Scripture,¹³ and which in theologies of mission and ministry avoid over-stressing backward orientation to the career of Jesus and the apostolic church, then improvisation has much to offer, given the way in which its disciplined fidelity to a shared tradition and its concern for singularity of circumstance are interwoven within a dynamic of hopefulness.

¹³For an expansion of the improvisatory model in biblical hermeneutics, cf. N. T. Wright, *People of God* (London, 1992), pp. 139ff.