

## EMPATHY IN IMPROVISATION

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When two or more humans make music together, that togetherness comes in degrees of interpersonal density and depth. It can range all the way from being thin and shallow, in the sense of being largely empty of interpersonal contact or relevance, to being so rich with interrelation that expressivity and experience become shared – that two or more voices become one without their individual autonomy being lost. In this chapter, I consider this latter kind of togetherness in improvisation, which is arguably the closest (most proximate) and fullest kind one can encounter between musicians. I argue that such togetherness fundamentally requires empathy: mutual empathy between the musicians, and empathy towards the emergent joint music, resulting in the joint experience of an emergent additional, interpersonal entity – a shared voice.

Many accounts of improvisation draw attention to the social dimension of group performance, praising the ethical potential of collective improvisation. Yet the very capacity by which dialogue – ethical interpersonal encounter – is reached (when it is), is often obfuscated by evocations of the broad cliché of “chemistry,” or relegated to efficient and respectful territorial negotiations, or plainly ignored in accounts that implicitly take asymmetric relationships for granted (in presuming the roles of soloist and accompaniment may shift yet persist as a duality). What is often side-lined or squarely remains out of view is the immensely rich psychological dimension and potential of improvisation, as it offers itself to those in dialogue. This occurs even where dialogue is centrally considered, as in Bruce Ellis Benson’s important *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (2003). In “Being Musical with the Other,” the closing chapter of the book, Benson’s key concept to describe relationality is responsibility, with no mention of empathy; however, a central passage implicitly acknowledges this capability as core to dialogue:

On the one hand, as composer or performer or listener I open myself to the other when I feel the pull of the other that demands my respect. On the other hand, my openness to the other cannot be simply a complete giving in to the other, for then I am no longer myself and am instead simply absorbed by the other. Thus, a dialogue can only be maintained if there is a pull exerted by both sides.

(Benson 2003: 170 f.)

While Benson identifies dialogue as a central issue and value, then, what is meant by “openness to being pulled” remains in dire need of unpacking, and the *personal* nature of the dialogue is curiously muted. It seems clear that both “openness” and “pull” are metaphors that imply references to psychological involvement; however, here as elsewhere in general, the experiential dimension of

interpersonal phenomena is rarely reflected upon further, or a matter of detailed research. Hence, musical togetherness remains little understood.

My aim in this chapter is to elucidate (mutual) empathy as being a key capacity for dialogical musical encounter, contributing to a better understanding of improvisation in its ethical potential. Empathy is not the only aspect of course, but it is a precondition for responsiveness and responsibility not to go astray, and, thus, for the magically bonded playing that marks profound interpersonal musical encounters. I shall show how empathy, combined with a set of other human capacities, is at work at the detailed level of (variously successful or failing) dialogical musical action within a series of artistic experiments aimed at questioning and deepening an established dialogical relationship. In conclusion I put forward the thesis that opportunities arising from mutual empathy are what primarily gives group improvisation its substantial interhuman potential. I start with a brief introduction to the key concepts involved and some of the central work that has been done on these concepts and our understanding of them.

## 1 Empathy and Related Concepts in and Beyond Music

While the word “empathy” is ever present in the media and in vernacular conversation, it appears only sporadically in academic writings on music, for example when Andy Hamilton writes that

improvisation makes the performer alive in the moment; it brings one to a state of alertness, even what Ian Carr in his biography of Keith Jarrett has called the ‘state of grace.’ This state is enhanced in a group situation of interactive empathy.

(Hamilton 2000: 183)

Detailed discussions of the role of empathy in musical perception and musical practice are sparse. Within the aesthetics of music, Jerrold Levinson’s (1996) persona theory of musical expression and Roger Scruton’s (1997) account of musical understanding refer to empathy in passing as bearing on how one comes to hear personal expression as part of the listening experience; only Kendall Walton (2015) has unpacked the notion and made it a central aspect of his aesthetics (I shall return to his understanding below). Music psychology offers a single edited collection *Music and Empathy* (King and Waddington 2017), the volume combining chapters from music psychology, performance research, and pedagogy. Some of them are remarkable, such as those of Matt Rahaim (2017), Anthony Gritten (2017), Felicity Lawrence (2017), and Caroline Waddington (2017), yet none of these concern improvisation directly. Even the voluminous *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (Lewis and Piekut 2016) has merely a few passages that discuss empathy, the most substantial being that of Gary Peters (2016: 449–53), who is sceptical of empathy, presupposing that “empathy desires [an ontological oneness] to be preserved rather than created [by empathy].” (I am in turn sceptical of oneness being ontological, but this point would need elaboration elsewhere; in any case, the “ecstasy experienced when such empathy seems – in those fleeting moments – to have been attained” [2016: 453], in what I argue is one of we-ness, of shared emotion, rather than a state of ontological oneness.) Related understandings of interpersonal musical phenomena from ethnomusicology, sociology, phenomenology, and performance research exist, such as entrainment (Clayton 2019), tuning-in (Schütz 1976), responsibility (Benson 2003), responsiveness (Sparti 2016), and perception-action cycle (Linson and Clarke 2017), yet do so without discussing the phenomena in terms of empathy. A excellent account is Georgina Born’s, whose concept of microsocialities differentiates between relational art, socially engaged art, and further forms (Born 2017: 39), is aware of four planes of social mediation (2017: 43), allows for a complexity of musical object (Born 2017: 44), and is sceptical of idealisations by Schütz (1976), Small (1998), and Attali (1985) (Born 2017: 45). Born is, thus, looking at the same aesthetic coin

concerning the relationship between collectivity and individuality within the ensemble (e.g., Born 2017: 48) from the side of social aesthetics and in terms of agency and mediation, as opposed to the aesthetics and phenomenology angle I offer here (cf. Peters 2017; 2020a; 2020b).

Outside the musical context, empathy features in Gestalt-psychologist understandings of aesthetic perception. Empathy is really only reflected upon to any sophisticated depth in the philosophy of psychology, such as the philosophy of emotion, and in ethics – yet rarely within the context of art or artistic practices.

But what is empathy? Empathy refers to the basic human capacity of arriving at a *feel* for another's psychological state. We seem to have a knowledge of what another person feels, knowledge of what it is like for them in their current state. Edith Stein, in *The Problem of Empathy* (1989), conceives of empathic perception as *sui generis* (1989: 11): we become aware (*gewahr werden*) of what the other feels, but we can never be entirely sure, and, therefore, need to sustain the process of becoming aware, correcting our knowledge on the way (Stein 1989: 84–7). This is an important early insight into a characteristic of empathic knowledge: it is *uncertain*. Somehow I come to know, or believe I come to know, another person's psychological state, affects, feelings, moods, emotions, attitudes, etc., and this impression can vary in degrees of accuracy and conviction (I can be very sure, I can be almost sure, I can have an inkling, I can always be mistaken). Just as importantly, the knowledge is one of *their* state as it differs from mine. Third, the knowledge comes in the form of an experience (I do not merely have a thought or theory about it, I *feel* a state that is not mine).

The third aspect bears some relation to (emotional) contagion. Contagion names the phenomenon when I come to *be in* a state perceived in another, involuntarily, and holding no active belief about it. I pick up the state (or what appears to be a state) by way of an unwitting, preconscious imitating/resonant response. During this experience, I am not interested in the other person's state as being *theirs*; I am not concerned with them as an individual person, I don't want to know more about their state; rather, I immediately act out of the new, imitated state I am in. I am, thus, not sure whether the person remains in this state, nor do I enter a dialogical setting: the relation remains asymmetric. It is characteristic of contagion that I do not reflect upon the state. As was said, I might not even be conscious of my replication, less even of its accuracy. Instead of checking to see whether what I "caught" was an accurate match, it is my own response I pay attention to immediately.

Martha Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), has given a closely related account of empathy. For her, empathy "designates an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, whether that experience is happy or sad, pleasant or painful or neutral, and whether the imaginer thinks the other person's situation good, bad, or indifferent" (2001: 302). Further, it "is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer" (2001: 327); and "empathy may be inaccurate" (2001: 328). Note that while Stein speaks of awareness, i.e., some form of recognition, Nussbaum characterises it as an act of reconstruction involving the imagination. (Kendall Walton's rich discussion nevertheless treats empathy more like a single act of introspection and projection [2015: 9 ff.] than a process of approximation and continued perceptive interest, implicitly not accounting for the possibility of error, which is why I refrain from further discussing it in the present context). Nussbaum's definition draws attention to a fourth crucial aspect of empathy: it does not (yet) contain a judgement about the felt state. Nussbaum, thus, decisively distinguishes empathy from compassion, differing from "psychologists and psychoanalysts [who] sometimes use the term 'empathy' to mean some combination of imaginative reconstruction with the judgement that the person is in distress and that this distress is bad" (2001: 302). This distinction is of essential importance as, without it, contagion, empathy, sympathy, and compassion are easily conflated. For instance, even in Michael Slote's remarkable account, empathy, much like contagion, involves "having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves" (Slote 2010: 15), yet, much like sympathy, it "doesn't involve a felt loss of

identity". This apparent contradiction between taking on and, at the same time, not taking on another's feelings remains uncommented. Phenomenologically, however, one can feel the empathised feeling of another *as that of another*, while retaining one's current feeling. Not to account for this would be to miss the real possibility of identificatory *choice*. Without the above distinction, we would be left without a term for the phenomenon in question (the felt awareness of *another* person's feeling). Hence, we might further overlook the fact that empathy might also be part of an *antipathetic* relation: in *schadenfreude* (malicious joy) someone empathises with someone else in order to not only intellectually enjoy but to *savour* that person's misfortune.

In empathy, then, I sense the other's state without taking it on. This was the main difference from contagion: the other's state does not (yet) become mine; I do not recognise it as *my* state, nor do I act out of it as being my state. The state (at first) remains the other's and my interest is turned to and focuses on the quality of the other's state: "Am I getting it right?" "Is it changing?" The sense of the other person's state that I appear to be getting is as important as it is puzzling. It is marked by a paradox: I seem to experience the quality of the state, or what I take to be the quality of that state, without taking the experience to be *my* experience. I experience something that I do not experience. Is this genuinely paradoxical, or is it an antinomy?

In voluntary acts of vivid imagination one can palpably imagine being distressed, or content. These are states I know from myself, and I can bring similar knowledge to what I perceive in empathising with another. This is sometimes called mental simulation and seems to match what Nussbaum calls "imaginative reconstruction." Crucially though, the empathetic act is a *response* to what I perceive, and what I know to be a mere (active) perception of another's *actual* state (and I do not know how accurately my perception matches that actual state). That is, empathy isn't a projection (like simply imagining another person's joy, lust, irritation, mischief, or suffering), but names my capability of assuming a feeling other than my own current one and striving for accuracy in this. Contagion unwittingly shifts one's state, whereas empathy has the structure of a question.

## 2 Empathy in Improvisation? Experiments in Straining the Shared Voice

With this family of concepts in mind, what are the phenomena at hand during actual improvisation? In Peters (2020a) I looked at a detailed setting of establishing and reached (peak) dialogicity, arguing that, via mutual empathy, a shared emotional narrative was worked out through joint action; here, I will give an account of a series of experiments that explored the stability/borders/dissolution of dialogicity artistically, i.e., in concrete musical practice, by challenging it.

The sessions to which I refer took place within the framework of my artistic research project "Emotional Improvisation"<sup>1</sup> during an artistic research residency by Simon Rose and Katharina Hauke that lasted from 23 January until 10 February 2018. Katharina Hauke is a Berlin based experimental documentary filmmaker, cinematographer, and vocal performer who had been on a research residency earlier within the project in 2016 with the instrument of her invention, the *mikrokontrolleur*, and was well primed to film the artistic research process (rather than music videos). To actively enter the performance situation as a third – experimentally filming – member of the trio was in fact a particular research focus in some of the sessions. Simon Rose is an extraordinary international saxophone improviser and scholarly author from London who has been based in Berlin for a number of years now and is increasingly working in transdisciplinary artistic settings after many decades of solo and small ensemble practice. My first ever musical encounter with Rose in 2016 marked a culminating point in the research project, as we discovered shortly after our very first sessions that we could readily form a compound instrument and a shared voice that would span entire pieces. A selection of recordings of pieces from the first days convinced Leo Feigin to publish them via his label Leo Records (*Edith's Problem*: CD LR 812, 2017). My continuing work with Rose over three more research residencies refined and confirmed my experience

and understanding of what we reached together and how we did it, and I published a chapter on this understanding including a detailed analysis of one of the pieces in *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, edited by Catherine Laws (Peters 2020a: 17–32), as well as in German in an edited collection by Arnold Jacobshagen (Peters 2020b). During those few residencies and a couple of performances at artistic research conferences, we felt so curiously assured of our interpersonal sense that we decided to challenge our practice via situational interventions, going to our limits to learn more about what enabled our interpersonal connection in the first place. This idea became one of the central research topics of the 2018 residency, and on four of the days we explored a large number of ways in which to – playfully and radically – interfere with our duo proximity, in a series of experiments.

The main location the experiments took place in was the *esc Medien Kunst Labor* in Graz, a venue of current sound and media art productions, exhibitions and performances in one of the narrow streets of the historic part of Graz. The *esc* offers a single space of about 10 × 22 metres and 3 metres in height, concrete floors, interspersed with a number of columns of varying thickness, and almost entirely surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The windows create a semi-public ambience as passers-by on three sides can incidentally glean some of the action inside through the glass, depending on the sunlight outside and their curiosity. Curtains exist to close off the venue entirely from outside views, yet, when drawn aside, the space is filled with enough, largely indirect, daylight to allow for natural light for filming. Simultaneously open and reclusive in varying measure over the course of the day, the half-privacy creates a fascinating open lab environment, in terms of inside-outside visibility and (attenuated) audibility in both directions. The columns are thick as trees, so that even inside the space there is notable visual and auditory obstruction and interference. Next to Rose, Hauke, and myself, Günther Berger (sound recording), Margareth Tumler (notekeeping), and Paula Peters (photos and B-cam) participated in the lab-work at *esc*, mainly documenting and assisting, but also including some explorative microphone handling by Berger. Between and sometimes within two or three lengthy improvisation sessions each day we had group discussions, and on some evenings we reviewed and discussed the recordings of the day (stimulated recall).

The series of experiments spanned about forty pieces and consisted of situational variations to strain, hinder, or make strange our resources of creating improvisational proximity and dialogue. Some of the settings were premeditated, some spontaneous. They included: visual and auditory obstruction (*Curtain* pieces I and II), bodily interventions (*Piano drag*, *Sax under piano*, *Umbilical cord*, *Back-to-back*), acoustic/listening interventions (sax behind my back, sax to column, sax to window), instrumental alterations (sax plus water in *Sax under piano*, reading instead of sax in *Hörspiel*), and mediatization (*Headphones*). While the spatial and material changes – in contrast to a verbal priming – introduced unusual spaces of improvisatory action, the musicality of the actions remained important throughout, as musical cohesion and the finding of the shared voice in and despite the circumstances was the research interest. I shall now discuss a selection of these improvisations in which we coped differently with different impediments, highlighting various aspects that matter to the present question, beginning with the *Curtain* pieces, then going over to *Sax under piano*, *Hörspiel*, and *Headphones*.

During *Curtain I* (Peters' hands and piano behind the curtain) we are about 10–15 metres apart, located diagonally across the space. The piano is largely behind the curtain, with its body inside a recess framed by the venue's glass facade, so that I have to slide my hands under the curtain to reach the keyboard. Sitting with my back to Rose, I cannot see and can only faintly hear him – any finer detail of inhaling, breathing, nuances of soft playing does not reach me. With my hands covered, Rose, in turn, can only see my back and hears a muffled piano sound starved of resonance and colour. We improvise a set of three pieces, and the literal and perceptive distance introduced shows in the slight asynchronicity during much of our playing right from the beginning. The beginning of a piece is momentous in its extreme concentration, fragility, unpredictability,

and far-reaching consequences: one creates an opening full of potential. To create this opening together – knowing when and how to begin together – is a skill. During earlier research sessions with Paul Stapleton playing his Bonsai Sound Sculpture during a three-day visit in April 2016, Stapleton and I realised that we had a shared sensitivity for joint closure, effortlessly finding coherent (elegant, surprising, striking, seamless, organic, etc.) endings together; the beginnings however often felt clumsy, distracted, awkwardly disconnected, predictably tentative. We then decided to experiment with beginnings, doing a whole series of a cycle of miniatures named “You begin,” “I begin,” “We begin,” with pieces (gestures, actually) being only a few seconds long. As it turned out, this changed the game, as we not only became able to begin together in various ways, but we noticed that “We begin” would drastically improve the musical quality of our larger improvisations (so much so that this could be thought of as a discovery in itself, deserving a separate chapter). Stapleton and I had completed our shared voice by developing a shared sense of beginning. With Rose, this kind of beginning had been an unspoken given, even in our first encounter back in March 2016. Yet now, separated by curtain and distance, we enter *slightly* out of time, albeit in matching dynamic and attitude. The temporal shift – slight as it may be – between Rose’s first (0:10) and my second and third notes, immediately becomes a point of interest, with us returning to that first utterance three times. In the first return (0:16) I enlarge the distance; the second return at 0:26 (after a short silence) re-enacts the out-of-time beginning (this time the distance is even *slighter*, Rose’s toneless sound is first, out tones set in together), with the third return at 0:34 enlarging the temporal distance further, after which we bring the first shape to a close together (0:42). Three seconds of joint silence. Starting as we (0:45). We missed, pondered, and found the joint beginning together, through the first frail phrase. Sustained notes allow for some blending, a few unisons, a first tonality. After two brief foregrounding gestures by Rose (1:00) and myself (1:06), then both of us (a slow tilting semitone motive with some timbral overlap yet registral distance) until the silence at 1:25, the gesture from the beginning returns, back to being out of time. Distraction (mine) dispels the ties until, after yet another silence, we try hard to match at an increased volume (oddly trying to hear each other better but producing a clichéd group of joint short sonic bursts). I shift to a repeating chord with dynamic variations, yet the curtain muffles my harmonics and resonances and undercuts Rose’s attempts for spectral blending. After Rose’s lone return to an earlier colour of his tone and via a silence at 3:29, we end through my separate ending reminiscent of that frail opening tone colour. Zooming into a recorded performance to this level of detail lays open how we are *trying*, in every minuscule moment and aspect of sound, to create coherence *through* sensing the other’s state as present in both the quality of the sound – i.e., the sensitivity to time, timbre, articulation – and the unfolding composition – i.e., the working sense of structure, rhythm, gesture. Restrictions in sensing the other’s presence in this – like muffled overtones – lead to divergence and fragmentation. It is not just any listening that we apply; we are listening out for the other’s *sensibility*, the other’s nuanced expressive presence. We are trying to listen through to them and, when we succeed, coherence ensues. The second piece or movement of *Curtain I* (starting 3:54) is a case in point: Rose limits himself to timbrally, dynamically, and temporally varied trills, while I limit myself to repeated chords, with strings variously dampened or let to vibrate in shades by the right hand. At 5:21, the atmosphere changes, we both reduce action space even further to sustained repeating notes/chords, and I start to play inside or on the margins of Rose’s sound, finding ways to converge, finding expressive balance, finding a shared voice. Upholding the balance, we build and repeat states of tension (6:30–50 and 6:54–7:28) and release affected through a single note change within the overall sonority and texture. The way we succeed in finding a shared area of timbral interest and uphold the sensitivity to that area creates such strong proximity that the spatial distance and sonic impediments seem completely overcome. In the third movement, the process of tuning in into each other’s sensitivities and area of expressive presence is rather lengthy; I shall refrain from a detailed description in this context.

In *Curtain II* (Rose behind curtain) we reverse the spatial situation; there are again about 8–10 metres between us, this time Rose is completely obscured from my view by the curtain, nor can he see me. The curtain now being between us, and with Rose playing in the recess' tiny space against the glass walls, he is engulfed by his own sounds, while mine are at a remove, suffering additionally from passing through the curtain. The duo starts loosely, as two individual players, clearly reaching out, spinning long gestures in the hope of catching enough from the other to still compose together, which leads to a fair success of a joint narrative after minute 4. (A note in passing: As in *Curtain I*, the video montage of two camera positions side by side places us in an artificial visual proximity; yet the oddities at the borders between the images reveal the gap, just as listening to *Curtain I* with headphones reveals the separation of the instrument's sounds that might appear more joint than they actually are when listening back from simple loudspeakers.)

The limitation to small variations within a sustained textural sonority enables us to connect even in cases of greater disturbance and perturbation. In *Sax under piano*, Rose is lying straight on his back right under the piano, with his head close to the grand's back leg. He partly filled his saxophone with water on the spur of the moment. Thus we can hardly hear, and certainly not see, each other: not only is the piano's body between us, blocking, swallowing, reflecting, and dispersing much of the spectrum of his sound (engulfing him), my own playing, in turn, floods my frontal hearing space. The oddly incarcerated scene and the self-inflicted water-blockage (the result of which neither Simon Rose nor I never heard before) prompts me to start with a bodily inhibition: using a technique I first arrived at during a research residency with Bennett Hogg in which we explored unusual relations between imagining and doing, I begin to play a fast, intricate ten-finger broken texture slightly above the keyboard, imagining the sound I would make, but not actually making a sound. Slowly lowering my hands, arms, and upper body, I gradually let the pattern release into sound, so that initially, only the noise my fingers make on the top of the keys are heard, then joint by slowly gathering individual notes. Rose starts with bursts of fluttering noises that turn into bubbling, joint by a low drone-like growl. We jointly enter a highly active overtone-rich texture (although any detailed listening to each other is impossible), which we uphold, submerging and emerging out of each other's sound. Rose unfathomably navigates the extremely gradual changes and shifts between watery tones and crackly noise solely via lip, tongue, and breath control, breathing circularly through the entire piece. Swells in mid- and high register parts of the highly animated texture at matching pitches precede a joint burst into a shriek like sonority. As inchoate as our shared voice is, it brims with recognition, resistance, fear, hope, exhilaration, inhibition. I hear this brooding sound as simultaneously endangered (suffocating, screaming, fluttering) and dangerous (growling, relentless, engorging). Our coarticulations work, we remain in and move through this tense gesture together.

Concentrating our sensitivity on a shared presence in timbral expression (like in *Sax under piano*), or on a shared sense of time (as in *Curtain I*), gives us something to sense the other in, making the connection expressive of character rather than arbitrary or mechanic. Rose and I found this to hold true even in an experiment called *Hörspiel*, in which Rose, instead of playing the saxophone, whisperingly read a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. His prosody and my sparse spacious resonant intervals from the piano (shifting weight between the registers) sufficed to catch each other's sense of time and urgency, leading us to sudden points of precise synchrony and coarticulation (voice and piano sound becoming one) at textual highlights.

Did we ever lose an expressive connection completely? Yes. In *Headphones*, an experiment in which both Rose and I wore closed headphones, with sound recordist Vincent Ederle moving through the space using a directional microphone routed to the headphones, we were actually unable to overcome the distance introduced by the mediatation, and produced clichéd, pointless, decentred playing that lacked responsiveness. While the result was not entirely mediocre throughout due to some *solistic* intensity, it was to us a frustrating display of succumbing to

the auditory limitation and distraction and resorting to a conventional “wordy” style, doodling even, and falling short of arriving at a shared expressive character: no shared tonality, no shared timbral space, no gestural coarticulation, no shared sense of time; many notes empty of empathic relation – something Rose and I wanted to forget (despite its usefulness in the research context) and even refused to listen to immediately after the event, as Hauke notes in her research report.<sup>2</sup>

### 3 Lessons from Straining the Shared Voice

Summarising the point of, and insight from, the experiments: what is lacking, or fragile, under the influence of the interventions, is not the basic playing together – we still were – but a substantial and subtle expressive (character) cohesion. We react to the situational restrictions on the duo by resorting to stability, restraint, and limitations in means, choices, and developments, creating a looser weave, so to speak, which is a less expressively lucid one (although it is fascinating with how little intersubjectivity can still emerge if mutual empathy is high: we often find loopholes to each different situational impediments, shifting attention to temporal, or timbral, or gestural action spaces where shared sensibility can still unfold). Constraints in hearing mean that we still listen, but in that too, little is given to us in expressive nuance for us to be able to empathise and build a deep reciprocal connection. We are listening out, but while sounds do reach us, the other’s personal presence – like a partly masked face – reaches us too faintly, thereby narrowing, fragmenting, and incapacitating the shared expressive work. We still take risks, but our sonic offers to the other often go astray, not just in structural terms, but in terms of building areas of shared sensitivity. The work then becomes rudimentarily connected, with an audible lack of shared feel: fewer shared gestures and coarticulations, slower responsivity, increased individual memory work and bodily patterns, narrower timbral work, fainter pulsation, loss of a shared sense of time, arbitrary tonality, rare atmospheric changes, few points of unison, little counterpoint, etc.

In what sense do we hear the other’s expressive presence or affective reality? This is, of course, a chapter in itself; but, in the present context of freely improvised music where sonic qualities rather than conventions of tonal practices play a decisive role, there is abundant bodily expressivity, both in direct ways and in the specific form Peter Goldie (2000: 133–4) calls “adverbial expressivity”: One might hear the other playing *tentatively*, *affectionately*, *brokenly*, *hastily*, *insistently*, *burstingly*, *exasperatedly*, *growlingly*; the sound appears like speaking or singing *calmly* or *shriekingly*, *breathing hastily*, *scratching angrily*, *thumping thunderously*, *whistling feebly*, *sloping mournfully*, *growling threateningly*, *resonating assertively*. (Note that there is no isomorphy between bodily effort of instrumental playing and bodily expressivity as heard *in* the sound; one can make a strained sound without straining, and one can strain one’s hand at the keyboard for a large but unstrained, consonant interval.) The expressive character is related to the action character, of the *instrumental* action, but also of an *imagined* action. This kind of expressivity as heard in the action of the other is, at first, due to spontaneous empathy (what is called low level empathy): we hear – and feel (Peters 2015) – the character in the action. But, in staying turned towards the other – already during the course of an improvisation, but also over a larger extent of time – we grasp a more complex expressivity of the other’s personal character (higher level empathy). Differently put, we learn something about the other at the moment of playing, through the musical decisions they make, not only in material or functional terms, but in affective terms (what experience to stick with, follow up, engage in, or distance oneself from). Finally, there is also an expressivity heard in the overall musical result – the expressivity of what Jerrold Levinson conceives in terms of a “persona,” Roger Scruton called “no one’s,” and I have called the “Musical Other.” In the present case, where the musical course ensues live between improvisers, musical character becomes the place in which the expressivities of players and musical other combine. That is, it is, paradoxically, fictional (as in the musical other’s) and personal (as in his or mine). This is what we play *with* in playing together, this



is what the dialogue – whenever it ensues – is *about*.<sup>3</sup> Affectivity is permanently proposed; then *we* do something with it, venture into its intricacies, explore its paths, conflicts, and contrasts, decentring sympathetically with autonomous integrity. The dialogue is marked by an iridescence between self-expression, character-expression, and developing fiction, as we empathetically follow up, antipathetically resist or block, or sympathetically take on the feeling, together exploring moments of truth, self-revelation, and fictionality in emotional improvisation.

#### 4 Conclusion

In a state of empathic perception, feeling him, myself, it, and us, through the music (as his, my, and our action) the empathic grasp of feeling qualities is what enables us to make our joint actions a joint *emotional* work. This confirms why it makes sense to distinguish empathy from sympathy or compassion in naming the phenomenon of distinctly experiencing the other's expression, and hearing his (or her) state therein. Over and over again, there are distinct moments of choice: do I accept this musical offering as my (and our) feeling, or do I leave it as hers, his, its? Do I work from empathy, or in sympathy? Will this inking grow to a full blown state? And can I hear that I am being heard? Is trust emerging? Do we hold this state together? Where in the landscape of possible affect does reciprocity lead the emotional narrative through and to? What happens when we empathise or even sympathise with uncomfortable musical suggestions? Empathy in improvisation is, thus, the gateway to an intersubjective affective and expressive realm from the mundane to the existential: the inner workings of "chemistry."<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 The "Emotional Improvisation FWF/PEEK: AR188" project was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (2014–19) and involved lab-work and lab-concert performances with twenty-four guest researchers in duo (mainly), trio, and quartet settings with myself: improviser and composer Dr. Bennett Hogg (electronics/violin, Newcastle University), Dr. John Ferguson (electronics/guitar, Brown University), Sabine Vogel (flutes, Berlin), composer and performer Dr. Gerriet K. Sharma (electronics, Graz), Ritwik Banerji (saxophone/electronics, Berlin), Tatjana Bliem (voice, Graz), Magdalena Chowaniec (dance/choreography, Vienna), Dr. Emma Lloyd (violin, Edinburgh/Paris), musicologist and improviser Prof. Dr. Ellen Waterman (flute/voice, St. John's Memorial University), Rachel Austin (voice, songwriter), Dr. Simon Rose (saxophones, Berlin), improviser and inventor Prof. Dr. Paul Stapleton (BoSS, Queen's University/SARC Belfast), composer and performer Stevie Wishart (hurdy gurdy/violin, Brussels), Prof. Dr. Stefan Östersjö (guitars, Malmö), Vietnamese zither-virtuoso Thuy Thanh Nguyen (Dan Tranh, Malmö), Alexander Deutinger (dance/choreography, Graz), Dr. Reinhard Gagel (piano/accordion, Berlin), cinematographer, performer and inventor Katharina Hauke (mikrokontrolleur/voice, Berlin), Dr. Jonathan Impett (trumpet, Ghent), Dr. Bertl Mütter (trombone/horn, Vienna), improviser and composer Dr. Chris Williams (double bass, Berlin), Jadi Carboni (dance/choreography, Berlin), Almuth Kühne (vocal artist, Berlin), and Joshua Hyde (saxophone, Melbourne).
- 2 "*Weder Peters noch Rose wollten in den Listening-/Viewing-Sessions das Video von diesem Versuch sehen oder Audio hören. Sie konnten sich mit ihrem Spiel nicht identifizieren und aus ihrer Sicht war das Experiment gescheitert*" ("Neither Peters nor Rose wanted to see the video or listen to the audio of this experiment during the listening/viewing sessions. They could not identify with their playing and in their view the experiment had failed"); Katharina Hauke, research report of 1.3.2018, p. 15.
- 3 I have in mind what Martin Buber in his *Dialogue* called *genuine* dialogue:

There is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – in which each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.

(Buber 1932: 196; 1954: 214 ff.)

- 4 Research for this chapter was supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF within the artistic research project "Emotional Improvisation" FWF/PEEK:AR188.

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