

Free Musical Improvisation, Dionysus, & Nietzsche's Ontology of Becoming

AJ Kluth | December 21, 2011

Thus the Dionysian is seen to be, compared to the Apollinian, the eternal and original artistic power that first calls the whole world of phenomenon into existence - and it is only in the midst of this world that a new transfiguring illusion becomes necessary in order to keep the animated world of individuation alive" (BT 25, 143).

According to the perspectivist philosophy developed by Friedrich Nietzsche, the human concepts of *logic* and *reason* are false constructs; artificial terms, boundaries, and, structures introduced into the heterogeneous sea of becoming. Humanity has invented these constructs, he argued, as a system whereby humans, unable to cope with the reality of a world in which all events (phenomena) are continually in the process of coming into being and passing away, assert what he calls the "Will to Power" in order to communicate and control our environment. One of the ways this Will to Power expresses itself is as a "Will to Make Same" wherein humans construct systems by which to name, generalize, and count as phenomena which are, in reality, irreducibly unique events. The false world we construct - though useful - separates humanity from the reality of radical becoming and passing away and creates a rift between experience of the real and man's "safe" constructed world. Nietzsche argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that one of humanity's best methods by which to access this "real" world of radical becoming and passing away is through the phenomena of music. More

particularly, what he referred to as a Dionysian music. I will show that, among musical traditions, the relatively young tradition of free musical improvisation best manifests Nietzsche's idea of a truly Dionysian music and expresses his ontology of becoming and time. This is not due to a particular musical aesthetic such as consonance, dissonance, or form, but due to its propensity to foster annihilation of individuality in its practitioners, its reflection of the Nietzschean concepts of creation and panpsychism, and its temporal nature of becoming and passing away. In the freedom of free musical improvisation, we can recognize the world as Nietzsche does, an experiment of aesthetics or, the "[E]ternally creative primordial mother, eternally impelling to existence, eternally finding satisfaction in this change of appearances!" (BT 16, 104).

The Apollinian and the Dionysian.

In Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (which bears the suggestive subtitle, *Out of the Spirit of Music*), he suggested two modes of understanding which, though seemingly opposite, are complimentary parts of a chiasmic unity, mutually necessary and expressive of human experience. The tropes reflecting these differing modes he identified as the Apollinian and the Dionysian. The Apollinian tendency is one toward form, order, and representation (observable in language, sculpture, and informing the Will to Power as *Will to Make Same*) whereas the Dionysian is one of change, annihilation, and ecstasy (observable in music, dance, and the Will to Power as *Pathos of Creation*). Nietzsche's Apollinian and Dionysian forces are not imaginary metaphysical concepts but immanent realities; they are "artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*" (BT 2, 38).

Throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche argued that the dominant Western idea of the individual as a bounded, masterful self, is overly bound in the Apollinian tendency toward form and control and does not allow humanity a balanced and full experience of life. The Dionysian man, he tells us, is expressive of this fullness:

[H]e has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way toward flying into the air, dancing. His very gestures express enchantment. Just as the animals now talk, and the earth yields mild and honey, supernatural sounds emanate from him, too: he feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted, in ecstasy, like the gods he saw walking in his dreams. (BT 1, 37)

The nature of reality, Nietzsche argued, is not ultimately one of forms, logic, or phenomena, but of a great sea of heterogeneous events constantly in the process of becoming and passing away. This idea is an echo of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus' belief of the illusory nature of permanence and the reality of all things/events being in a state of radical flux. The aforementioned Will to Power as the Will to Make Same is then a human assertion to generalize these unique events, reduce them to phenomena, and ultimately manipulate them. Nietzsche does not qualify this Will to Power as Will to Make Same a necessarily negative or evil thing, rather he attests to its usefulness. An unbalanced focus on Apollinian structures and forms, though, leaves humanity aching for chaos, for poetry and myth. All music, then, is a salve to the ache caused by the emptiness of Apollinian forms and as manifest in the Will to Power/Will to Make Same. What then, is Dionysian music? What kind of music best embodies this

attitude of radical Heraclitan becoming? Early on Nietzsche looked to the music of Richard Wagner as a model of Dionysian music as he perceived in Wagner's radical use of harmony a repudiation of the tyranny of forms and an appeal to "becoming". In the century of musical history since the harmonic and structural innovations of Wagner, other composers and performers have continued to search for a music which allows freedom, annihilation, and ecstasy - Dionysian music.

What is Dionysian music?

Nietzsche noted a lacking of myth and poetry in music from the Baroque and Classical periods which he likened to a turn which occurred in music of late Greek Tragedy. This music fell to the "restlessly progressing spirit of science" (BT 17, 106), and was robbed of its propensity toward poetry and myth. "[P]oetry was driven like a homeless being from her natural ideal soil" and no longer expressed the inner essence. Nietzsche laments this New Dithyramb as it is not representative of the reality of radical becoming, but of an Apollinian propensity to forms and static being. He noted of the content and artificial "being-ness" of the New Dithyramb a "wretched copy of the phenomenon, and therefore infinitely poorer than the phenomenon itself" (ibid, 107). Musical aesthetics during Medieval, Baroque, and Classical periods continued to bear out this appeal toward phenomena in its propensity to Apollinian ideals of order and form. What Nietzsche heard in Wagner's music and artistic thrust was a breaking of traditional patterns of order to create a music which was ultimately non-imagistic and non-referential to "being-ness" - a music which made manifest reality's radical nature of "becoming". Philosopher Christopher Cox describes the radical nature of

Heraclitan becoming manifest in Dionysian music in his essay *Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music* (2006, 500):

The Apollinian celebrates the human artist and hero, while the Dionysian celebrates the individual artist's dissolution into nature, which Nietzsche calls the "primordial artist of the world" (BT 5; cf. 1, 8). The Apollinian is a gallery of "appearances," "images," and "illusions," while the Dionysian consists in the perpetual creation and destruction of appearances. "In Dionysian art and its tragic symbolism," Nietzsche writes, "nature cries to us with its true, undissembled voice: 'Be as I am! Amid the ceaseless flux of appearances, I am the eternally creative primordial mother, eternally impelling to existence, eternally finding satisfaction in this change of appearances!'" (BT 16, cf. 8; WP 1050).

Post-Nietzschean efforts which could be called Dionysian music.

While Wagner's music reflected a Counter-Enlightenment attitude which broke with arbitrary and artificial aesthetics of order and form, a number of composers since have attempted to stretch or break conventions in art music still further. Viennese composer Arnold Schoenberg, in attempt to create a radically different musical aesthetic, threw away conventional harmony with his serialist approach in order to break the Western ear from its learned structures of beauty. Of Schoenberg's attempt to re-imagine the beautiful, abstract painter Wassily Kandinsky noted some retention of form and harmony and said, "Here Schoenberg clearly feels that the greatest freedom of all - the freedom of an unfettered and unconditional art - can never be absolute. Every

epoch is measured by a certain amount of this freedom. The greatest genius can not exceed these boundaries, but this measure must be exhausted to its fullest extent each time" (30). Schoenberg's serialism, though seeking great expression and freedom, was rife with form and structure rather than melody and annihilation. If it succeeded in rousing listeners, it is not due to an appeal to "becoming", but to its novelty and violation of acculturated musical expectations. Leonard Meyer, in his seminal work on music cognition, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, would refer to this as a violation of "...the law of affect, which states that emotion is evoked when a tendency to respond is inhibited ..." (22). The practice of recording, re-purposing, and re-assembling of musical and "found" sounds in Pierre Schaeffer's *Musique Concrète* was another fascinating move in the direction of breaking formal conventions and violating listener expectations. But perhaps one of the most famously experimental composers, John Cage, has also been the most articulate of his ontological concept of music which greatly mirrors Nietzsche's idea of a truly Dionysian music. Though he claims inspiration from the *I Ching*, the following quote from an interview could have been him reading straight from Nietzsche. Addressing questions regarding the Western habit toward logic and the constructed "real", he retorts:

The real. You say: the real, the world as it is. But it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes! It doesn't wait for us to change...It is more mobile than you can imagine. You are getting closer to this reality when you say as it "presents itself"; that means that it is not there, existing as an object. The world, the real is not an object. It is a process. (Cage, 80)

Cage's embrace of chance and denouncement of logic clearly echoes Nietzsche's understanding of reality as radical becoming, irreducible uniqueness, and events not as "either/or" but as "both/and" simultaneously becoming and passing away.

The element of Cage's music most representative of Nietzsche's reality is the focus on aleatoric principles as a compositional tool. Although Nietzsche identifies the Will to Power/Will to Make Same as an important and useful means by which humans order their lives, he consistently points to nature not as an accountant, but as an artist and identifies reality as an aesthetic phenomenon of constant creation and dissolution. As noted above, the music of John Cage incorporated elements of chance and moved radically away from conventional structures in music which could be construed as reminiscent of the artificial order of the New Dithyramb. Cage's music flies in the face of the Will to Power as the Will to Make Same as performances of his compositions reflect an attitude of irreducible uniqueness in incorporating the notion of unrepeatability. He thoroughly embraces what he referred to as "an element that has nothing to do with either repetition or variation; something which does not enter into the battle of those two terms, and which rebels against being placed or replaced in terms of... That term is chance" (Cage, 45). Cage's music is deeply Dionysian.

Free Musical Improvisation as Dionysian and Antithetical to the Will to Power as the Will to Make Same.

Moving away from the omnipresent element of the Western musical tradition, composition, I turn now to consider the contemporary performance practice of free musical improvisation. Even more than the experimental compositions of Cage, free

musical improvisation manifests Nietzsche's ideas of radical coming-into-being and passing away, chance, non-referentiality, and unrepeatability. Performances of free musical improvisation are not composed before being performed but are simultaneously composed and performed, and therefore irreducibly unique. The forms and structures of improvised performances are decided upon during performance which can be described not as formless music making, but form-making music. Addressing the potential difficulty of choosing compositional constraints while improvising in a group, musician Ann Farber explains:

Our aim is to play together with the greatest possible freedom - which, far from meaning without constraint, actually means to play together with sufficient skill and communication to be able to select proper constraints *in the course of the piece*, rather than being dependent on precisely chosen ones. (Borgo, 19)

Free musical improvisation is a mirror of Nietzsche's picture of the reality of radical becoming. The immediacy of creation and implicit impermanence of improvised music makes manifest in a human performance practice an apt expression of Heraclitan flux. This tradition, sometimes called "non-idiomatic improvisation" eschews conventional Western forms of harmony, form, consonance, and logic in general in favor of the contextual inclinations of the performers. Growing out of the *free jazz* idiom developed in the 1960s, free improvisation calls on its performers' imagination and virtuosity to create performances which are self-creating, becoming and passing away, and inherently unique (non-repeatable).

Improvisation and Annihilation.

Echoing Nietzsche's statements regarding the nature of true Dionysian music as encouraging annihilation and boundlessness, musician Dave Liebman says of his musical practice, "That's our (improviser's) job, our job is to get out of body, it's to get out of the moment – to be in the moment to such a degree that you're out of the moment" (DL). To Nietzsche, this "out of body," and "out of the moment" experience is a transgression of the Apollinian propensity to individuate, label, and quantify. Speaking of this same experience during improvisation, improviser Evan Parker speaks of the "out of body-ness" or self-annihilation as an important element of his performance practice saying, "The best bits of my solo playing, for me, I can't explain to myself...at a certain speed all kinds of things happen which I'm not consciously controlling. They just come out. It's as though the instrument comes alive and starts to have a voice of it's own" (Borgo, 51). This quote from Parker is reminiscent of what Nietzsche describes in *The Birth of Tragedy* as the only way to true knowledge of art - annihilation in becoming:

Thus all our knowledge of art is basically quite illusory, because as knowing beings we are not one and identical with that being which, as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art, prepares a perpetual entertainment for itself. Only insofar as the genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with this primordial artist of the world, does he know anything of the eternal essence of art; for in this state he is, in a marvelous manner, like the weird image of the fairy tale which can turn its eyes at will and behold itself; he is at once subject and

object, at once poet, actor, and spectator. (BT 5, 52)

As Nietzsche suggests, this experience of annihilation is deeply cathartic. Pianist and improviser Kenny Werner calls this during improvisation a “buzz”, similar to that which can be accessed via drug use and which drives him to continue his performance practice. “When I improvise I would say that I am motivated by or attracted to the notes that enhance that buzz, that oneness between me and the instrument,” and that, “I play for that. I certainly don’t play for any sort of artistic standards. I am not interested in the art or the state of the art, I am interested, for myself, in music as a vehicle to reach those states that I used to enjoy so much with drugs” (KW). Werner’s will toward oneness with the void and loss of individualization is reminiscent of Nietzsche’s Dionysian role of music. Another report of this annihilation comes from ethnomusicologist Travis Jackson’s essay *Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African Diaspora*. Jackson quotes an interview with saxophonist Antonio Hart in which he had asked Hart “what was running through his head” while playing. Hart replied saying, “I, you know, I’m gone. When I’m playing, when the situation’s right, I’m usually gone. I’m not even on Earth anymore, you know. I’m really not here...’Cause I’m like in a trance, man. I’m not there” (50). Like the other examples noted, these musicians are all reporting a loss of personal ego, individualism, and sense of self. Evan Parker’s statement above regarding the sense of his instrument of having a “voice of its own” points to another Nietzschean elements relevant to musical improvisation - Nietzsche’s ideas of panpsychism and the auto-generative nature of events.

Panpsychism and Free Musical Improvisation

The aforementioned Will to Power manifests itself not only the Will to Make same, but also as the “Pathos of Creation”. Nietzsche explains that this manifestation of Will to Power is the root of all things but is not substance, form, or energy. This pathos is a “no-thing” which is not nothing - it is an innate auto-generative will to create which pours from the over-fullness, the excess of the chiasmic unity of becoming. Therefore, the generation of perceived phenomena (events) is due to the pressure of over-fullness generated by opposites bound together in chiasmic unity at the root of the real. This creative principle suffering from over-fullness harbors within itself a complicity of contrary values prior to any distinction making. This innate will to create, this “eternally creative primordial mother” is deeply Dionysian and made manifest in the practice of free musical improvisation.

Also worth noting is Nietzsche’s assertion that all things are radically interconnected - that all things cause all things. Rather than being contingent upon distinct and traceable lines of initiation, all things are manifest realities of the Will to Power’s innate quality of self-initiation. Nietzsche scholars Friedrich Ulfers and Mark Daniel Cohen assert Nietzsche’s belief in the panpsychism of all things in their article, *Nietzsche’s Panpsychism as the Equation of Mind and Matter*. Further asserting the interconnected nature of all things - or, more accurately, events - they suggest that the, “Will to Power does not create the material and eventualities of the world but manifests itself as those eventualities and apparent objects.” They go on to say, “events are self-determining and self-directing, or more precisely auto-generative” (4). This assertion that things create themselves out of themselves suggests the existence of a degree of

will in all phenomena (supporting Nietzsche's non-zero concept and refutation of opposites) while simultaneously subverting conventional ideas of cause and effect. Furthermore, this is in line with Nietzsche's statement in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, that "All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored..." Evan Parker's suggestion that he is absent during the performance of his music and that "it's as though the instrument comes alive," is not a unique statement. Many musicians report a feeling of ego loss during improvisation reminiscent of that described by Nietzsche as the stamp of Dionysian experience. There are in this phenomenon of ego loss two events which manifest the Dionysian, the dissolution of the individual, and a degree of innate creative will residing in all phenomena.

Improvisation in relationship to temporal becoming.

Music, while lacking substance and appearance, does by definition occur in time. Addressing this unique characteristics of music as a medium, theorist David Borgo (2003) said, the "ability of music to symbolically express paradox and its temporal organization may explain why it is so often linked with transcendental states across various cultures" (6). The transcendental state he refers to is the same one I have above called annihilation or dissolution of the individual. The common concomitance of free musical improvisation and this transcendental state is, I suggest, a product of the close relationship of what we traditionally label as the different concepts, "becoming" and "time". For Nietzsche, the panpsychism discussed above can be described as a psychical quality *Empfindung*, or feeling. *Empfindung* "pervades the stuff of the world" to various degrees, "and is present down to the most essential components of the

real” (Ulfers, Cohen 3). In Nietzsche’s concept of the relationship of time to becoming, this *Empfindung* is closely related to - if not self same as - what we perceive as time. Ulfers and Cohen suggest that sites of *Empfindung* can be thought of not only as the vague concept of *feeling*, but also instances, or, “atoms of will” which are indivisible and discrete, unconnected but not unrelated. The temporal continuity of reality as we perceive it, which is an ever-changing becoming rather than a static being, is then the continuity of perception of related but different time atoms. The Will to Power as “Pathos of Creation” (*Empfindung*) manifests differently from quanta to quanta and is perceived continuously as time itself. According to this ontology, the creativity of the Will to Power in fact creates the world anew in each indivisible time atom. The universe of each individual time atom is a new universe and we are, then, being born again at every moment! John Cage intuitively incorporated planned instances of chance in his compositions in order to allow and reveal this creative nature of the Will to Power, but it is the nature of free musical improvisation which best manifest’s the Will to Power’s extemporaneous manifestation as becoming/time. Highlighting the necessarily temporal nature and indivisibility of the practice of free musical improvisation, I’ll again quote Evan Parker, who’s kinesthetic and irreducible concept of improvisation is directly analogous to Nietzsche’s concept of becoming/time:

There’s an analogy with the spokes on a revolving wheel. Everything’s in motion, the rim of the wheel is supported by the spokes, but when the whole thing is turning you don’t see the spokes any more. If the thing didn’t have that speed of rotation, it would make sense to count the spokes and think about them one at a

time. But the whole point is to get the thing revolving and the spokes are only there to enable the rim of the wheel to turn. There's some kind of equivalent of that in the music. You could, you can, after the event, slow the thing down and look at how all the pieces fit together. But the whole point is that the pieces fit together that way in order to generate the speed of movement which *is* the music. ...The music is not what you hear in analysis, it's what is there in the real time of performance. (Borgo, 54)

Summary.

A Nietzschean Dionysian music, then, is that which subverts the Will to Power as Will to Make Same, is radically becoming, irreducibly unique, and unrepeatable. As demonstrated, the burgeoning tradition of free musical improvisation fulfills these requirements. While not balanced by Apollinian forms as a tradition that might best suit humanity's need for both order and chaos, free musical improvisation does offer humanity an aesthetic position from which to peer into the "chasm of oblivion [that] separates the worlds of everyday reality and of Dionysian reality," and by which to experience the "rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence..." (BT 7, 59).

Works Cited

- Borgo, David. Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005.
- Borgo, David. "Between Worlds: The Embodied and Ecstatic Sounds of Jazz." *The Open Space*. Volume 5, 2003.
- Cage, John. For the Birds: in Conversation with Daniel Charles. London: Marion Boyars Ltd., 1981.
- Cohen, Mark Daniel and Ulfers, Friedrich. "Nietzsche's Panpsychism as the Equation of Mind and Matter." *Nietzsche on Consciousness and the Embodied Mind*. Ed. Dries, Manuel. Oxford University, In Press.
- Cox, Christopher. "Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music." *A Companion to Nietzsche*. Ed. Pearson, Keith Ansell. Blackwell Publishing, 2006.
- Jackson, Travis A. "Jazz Performance as Ritual: The Blues Aesthetic and the African Diaspora." *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*. Ed. Monson, Ingrid. New York, Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. On the Spiritual in Art. New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, For the Museum of Non-Objective Painting 1946.
- Liebman, David. Personal interview. 15, November 2008.
- Meyer, Leonard B. Emotion and Meaning in Music. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1956.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music." *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Ed. Kaufmann, Walter. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.
- Werner, Kenny. Telephone interview. 30, October 2008.