

# The Rhetorical Side of Free Improvisation

Cesar Marino Villavicencio Grossmann

Universidade Estadual Paulista, UNESP

cevill@usp.br

## **Cesar Villavicencio**

Obtained the Soloist Diploma in recorder at the Royal Conservatory, The Hague. Improviser, researcher and interpreter of baroque and contemporary music. PhD (2008) at the University of East Anglia, UK, with the thesis "*The Discourse of Free Improvisation. A Rhetorical Perspective on Free Improvised Music*". Post-doctoral at the *Universidade de São Paulo* (2012). Teaches at *Universidade Estadual Paulista*, Brazil.

## **Abstract**

The dynamics of free improvised music are analysed through the angle of rhetorical theory that focus on the characteristics of this manner of making music using ethical, epistemological and philosophical concepts. Ideas from Isocrates' "practical wisdom" and "pragmatic ethics", as well as Aristotle's rhetorical virtues and Quintilian's idea of "the good man" are taken into analysis to suggest free improvisation is a musical practice closely connected to the dynamics of rhetorical invention and delivery. Rather than considering free improvisation the unsystematic result of spontaneity as opposed to methodical musical composition, this paper aims to demonstrate that it has a particular style which is maybe connected to the specific characteristics of having its *form* and *content* develop collectively at the moment of performance. This paper will focus on the intrinsic ethos involved in this manner of artistic collective creation, on the philosophical and the epistemological aspects of rhetoric for delivering the musical discourse with consistency and eloquence.

**Keywords:** Free improvisation, rhetoric, philosophy of music.

## **Introduction**

Many aspects have to be considered in creating music using the platform known as free-improvisation. These aspects are related to communication processes that act between those who are participating. When performers work within a specific set of rules, materials and scores, the level of creative interactivity remains in what we call the "interpretation" of the composition. Although the results always bring different levels of spontaneity and improvisation, the interpreters generally expect the outcome to have some sort of predictability. When specific rules and scores are taken out from the artistic activity, as in free improvisation, the interchange between interpreters presents dynamics that are distinct. Given that the kind of communication during a creative musical process can vary from the pure imitation of structures and sounds to more complex levels of interaction between intentionalities, we can speculate that free improvisation brings the possibility of expanding human interaction, since it brings the necessity of creating the musical material itself through the collective.

The sociogenetical processes of free improvisation give interactive possibilities not present in procedures of written compositions. The idea is that, in order to legitimize itself, free improvisation ought to explore broadly the musical possibilities offered by its "freedom" from fixed materials (e.g. sounds brought by exploring the instrument at the time of performance, rhythms and irregularities in tempo that cannot be written, various manners of organizing the musical discourse according to the environment and the perception of the "now", etc.). On the other hand, given that a concern with communication is inherent to all good music, and that in free improvisation the level

of interaction goes deep into the creation of the musical material itself, it is possible that attaining ethical balance could be useful for achieving more consistent interactivity and eloquent delivery.

This paper will present ideas rooted in several rhetorical theories that present ethics as a cornerstone for consistently creating and delivering the discourse to an audience. Departing from Aristotle's ideas on *virtues* and *vices*, issues related to *decorum* will be presented. Also the important idea of relative time involved in the Greek concept of *kairos* is going to be discussed as a useful concept for objectively contributing in the building of a musical discourse in cooperation. Finally, the concept related to "the good man" brought by Isocrates and Quintilian is discussed.

### **A Rhetorical Prism**

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle presents the idea of virtues (*arete*) as being of two kinds: intellectual and moral. Whilst intellectual virtues would require experience and time, moral virtues would be the product of habit closely linked to the idea of *ethos* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a14-bi). According to Aristotle, we develop virtues by ways of practice; a musician learns music by practicing music. Moreover, a musician becomes a good musician by practicing music well (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a14-b4 and b6). Virtues are connected to the idea of proportionality, an action closely linked to *logos* which, based on experience, allows us to choose a point between deficiency and excess. This selection of the desired proportion between "not too little" and "not too much" needs to feed from a perception of the environment (*evidentia*) so as to rationally consider actions which can achieve the desired effects. Isocrates calls this *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in which a symbiotic relationship exists between rational thinking and knowledge based on *ethos*.

Bringing this rhetorical thought to the intricate creative environment of a group of improvisers may shed some light on manners to adopt in order to pursue with effectiveness the common goal of bringing good music to the public. The unique characteristic of free improvised music is to depend on the elaboration of a musical discourse through the interaction of the collective. If the interaction is taken as the main determinant of this practice's aesthetic results, it seems coherent to affirm that much would be gained if the focus were on how musicians behave during the composition of music through the process of creation. Having no pre-specified materials does not *per se* mean that there are no rules. Rules may come from a

different angle, the angle of the intrinsic ethics of the process. From a rhetorical point of view, music created without ethics could result in a message that is superficial, that is only manipulative, solely concerned in pleasing the ear.

This article will ponder the possibilities of gaining more insight on the practice of free improvised music through rhetorical ideas that point to the necessity of reaching a balance between *delectare* (to delight), *movere* (to move) and *docere* (to teach) in a performance. Here, *delectare* can be related to the strategy built upon logical thought (*logos*), *movere* calls for a preoccupation with the emotional message (*pathos*) and *docere* can be associated with ethics (*ethos*), since it is a concern with passing information that aims the intellectual enrichment of the listener; a kind of generous pre-disposition to collaborate with other's well-being.

Furthermore, Aristotle's virtues known as *latinitas* (purity), *perspicuitas* (clarity), *evidentia* (proof), *decorum* (propriety) and *ornatus* (ornamentation) also come to contribute with more angles of thought. Purity refers to a control upon the elements necessary for being apt to do the action. In the case of oratory, mastering syntax, grammar and vocabulary was expected. In music we could think of the ability to control your instrument technically and the ability to create forms using sounds and time. Once you have *latinitas* you can master *perspicuitas*. *Perspicuitas*, or clarity, is the ability of building the discourse logically with the intention of being intelligible. *Evidentia* calls for a perception that measures how well the action reaches the emotions in the public. *Decorum*, a controlling principle in all rhetoric, asks for adapting the discourse to the conditions of the moment. And last, *ornatus*, refers to variations in aesthetic qualities that could be employed during the delivery. Naturally, a separation of those virtues is made simply for pedagogical purposes, since they work influencing each other during the process. One unique quality of free improvisation, for example, is that it is possible, through the use of *evidentia*, to allow the audience to influence the music composition itself. For instance, it is very well probable that perceiving boredom in the public may induce improvisers to move musically somewhere else during a presentation.

### **Content and Form**

Among the characteristics that are *sui generis* to free improvisation is the relation between content and form. Different from other music styles, in free improvised music content (*res*) and form (*verba*) act symbiotically. The manner in which a

musical idea is manifested aesthetically can very possibly guide the elaboration of further content and vice-versa. Of course this happens in all musics, but the consequences of this symbiotic relationship in free improvisation can be, by far, the most radical.

Interactive aspects during a performance involve two main angles of appreciation: a) one that is more superficial, such as the appreciation of the aesthetic results of sounds and rhythms and b) one that has more depth, which consists in an observation of the dynamics created by the interaction of intencionalities. Consequently, the ways the contents are perceived may reveal possible tendencies in the aesthetic transformation of the performance and the observation of this metamorphosis may influence the treatment of forms. As Robert L. Scott writes:

“[C]reating situations as decisive and deciding among alternatives are not the concern of rhetoric exclusively; seeing possibilities and making decisions are not sequential steps in the sense of first all of the one and then all of the other but rather repeated phases that may be constantly enriched in rhetorical interchange. It is precisely in understanding how human action is *decisive* that rhetoric makes its contribution to knowing. (Scott 1976, 261)

We can also consider this process through an epistemological angle. As Scott mentions:

Seeing in a situation possibilities that are possibilities for us and deciding upon some of these possibilities but not others must be an important constituent of what we mean by human knowledge (Scott 1976, 261).

In this way, the symbiotic process of free improvisation cannot be a process that follows a sequential and organized set of strategies, but rather a malleable pre-disposition to feed on random directions triggered by the interactivity between performers and their decisions on the available possibilities.

## **Kairos**

In Ancient Greece, time was distinguished between *chromos* and *kairos*. The first refers to the concept of time as measure, as the quantity of duration. The second points to the “right time”, a moment charged with significance. Phillip Sipiora reveals that the use of *kairos* carries a variety of meanings.

“A fundamental notion in ancient Greece, *kairos* carried a number of meanings in classical rhetorical theory and history, including “symmetry,” “propriety,” “occasion,” “due measure,” “fitness,” “tact,” “decorum,” “convenience,” “proportion,” “fruit,” “profit,” and “wise moderation.” (Sipiora 2002, 1).

Bringing an idea of *kairos*, from Gorgia's *Encomium of Helen*, that reveals its interactive characteristics during delivery, Dale L. Sullivan reveals:

In *Encomium of Helen*, three meanings of *kairos* are apparent: poetic timing that produces connections and thus a special *logos*, a point of indecision encountered when competing opinions are presented, and a sort of irrational power that makes decision possible. We might call this respectively the *kairos* of inspiration, of *stasis*, and of *dunamis*, or power. The first *kairos* is located in the mind of the speaker, who forms a *logos* but does not express it; the second is in the audience who have not yet heard the *logos*; and the third is in the dynamic situation occasioned by the release of the *logos*."

(Sullivan 1992, 318-19).

It is important to note that the intrinsic logic, which exists when time is taken as being qualitative, is connected to a perception of the rhetorical situation, that is, the characteristics of the moment when the activity is taking place. We have a *logos* closely connected to an action, or at least a thought aimed to fill a practical situation, that of delivering a "message" to an audience. Isocrates refers to this pragmatic use of logic as *phronesis*, or "practical wisdom". Clearly belonging to a stream of epistemological thought, *phronesis* points to the matter of having to know several possible manners of action within a particular situation in time and choosing the best possible action between the possibilities. Ethics are also involved in this process. Isocrates refers to this ethics as "pragmatic ethics".

One of Isocrates' most important contributions to rhetorical history is his conjoining of *phronesis* or "practical wisdom" and pragmatic ethics within the "situation" and "time" of discourse, an emphasis upon contexts that gives primacy to the kairitic dimensions of any rhetorical act (Sipiora 2002, 7-8).

We can see that due to circumstantial factors of the rhetorical action it is necessary to find manners of dealing with the occasion.

In a sense, then, every rhetorical act becomes a reinvention of theory as well as of the discourse itself. Another way of describing the shaping influence of the ever-emerging present occasion is to treat effective, kairic discourse as a mode of "improvisation" (White 1987, 14).

The process of collective composition in group improvisation seems to be embedded in the characteristics of rhetorical invention, disposition and delivery. Finding the most adequate moment and proportion for creative musical contributions within a group of free improvisers, suggests paying attention to the combination of rhetorical concepts such as *kairos*, *phronesis* and the practical use of ethics and logic.

However, the adaptation of each of the performer's forms and contents to the

available interactive spaces should not compromise spontaneity in the process of building a discourse that aims to be one that is clear, eloquent and persuasive. These interactive spaces require a sense of community building, a pre-disposition to be aware and to interact wisely by bringing actions fed by an equilibrium between *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. That sense of community building may open spaces to facilitate forming a consistent interactivity. It is important to say at this moment that such interactivity ought not to be one that is completely based on agreeable energies, since debate and disagreement, if ethics are followed, contribute possibly in the richest and most powerful manner.

### **The Good Man**

During the important and radical changes that music went through in Western Europe in the mid 1550s, a different way of making music from polyphonic composition was been experimented. Based on speculations on how was the music in ancient Greece, a composer named Vincenzo Galilei (father of Galileo Galilei) thought on bringing manners for creating a new type of music. In his mission to discover how Greeks inflict the great power through music, explained in writings coming from more than four hundred years B.C., Vincenzo had to consult with an erudite in ancient Greek culture. This man was Girolamo Mei, who lived in Rome, and with whom he had a consistent interchange of letters. Letters that survived and that tells us important details about the ideas behind the transformation of music during the second half of the sixteenth century in Italy. In one particular letter from Mei to Galilei, from 1572, the latter brings out the preoccupation of having a kind of music with characteristics that could please the ear. Mei response is one of criticism, saying that this approach was being too superficial. He manifests his believe that this kind of superfluous preoccupation deviates men from fulfilling his duties in obtaining a perfect expression of concepts and affects.

*In this manner, I believe that the end proposed by the ancient [Greeks] was this: by ways of imitating the nature of the instrument they employed, the voice, and not the softness of consonances that please the ear (in Chasin 2004, 33).*

Mei's concern was with the necessity of developing the human being in a profound manner. In his words: *it is fundamental to observe the satisfaction of the sense of the ear and that of the intellect (in Chasin 2004, 34)*. Such pre-disposition can only

descend into the elaboration of strategies that would follow the basic rhetorical principles explained in this paper, in which wisdom and deeper kinds of knowledge, such as ethics and logic, would be strongly dealt with.

It seems plausible that this very beginning of “rhetorical music”<sup>1</sup> was embedded also in having *decorum* as a ruling principle. Consequently, a preoccupation with the idea of creating “works of art”, as we know them today, would have not been considered. This is also the case in the performance of free improvised music.

The difference between FIM [Free Improvised Music] and written music composition is that the compositional activity of the former is influenced by relationships of group performance, and most importantly by the absence of the concept of perpetuation of the work of art. Contrary to written compositions, FIM’s products do not entail a preoccupation with becoming works for the future (Villavicencio 2008, 10).

The consideration at that time was strongly focussed on the moment and on the ethical qualities of artistic action, the emphasis would have been pointed out to developing wisdom, *decorum*, the virtues and good character.

Although the ruling principle of rhetoric is *decorum*, its study and application is done solely through practice and the development of virtues. “Observing decorum is the main thing about art, but it is also the one that cannot be passed on by means of art (Cicero, *Oratore*, 1.132).

The idea of the good man has always been present in rhetorical documents. In the first pages of the first book of the *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian makes a strong mention in this matter.

My aim, then, is the education of the perfect orator. The first essential for such an one is that he should be a good man, and consequently we demand of him not merely the possession of exceptional gifts of speech, but of all the excellences of character as well (Quintilian, *Institutio*, I Pr. 9-10).

It is expected that a person who is predisposed to follow the path of the “good man” would be open for developing virtues such as tolerance, good taste, courage, gentleness, modesty, etc. These qualities are also regulated, to a certain extent, to the environment. Virtues are not fixed in proportion or intensity, since it is to each one of us to adjust their intension by opening a deep perception of the surroundings.

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<sup>1</sup> Rhetorical music stands for music from the late sixteenth to the mid eighteenth centuries.



Consequently, the sole pre-disposition to develop the good qualities of character, already spreads open the doors for interacting with the environment, which is an essential part for crafting a solid base for the creation of music collectively.

## **Conclusion**

The innate unpredictability of free improvisation makes it impossible to draw any kind of theory that might allow improvisers to control the discourse through previous planning. Even if part of the expertise acquired by an improviser by means of experience could trigger memories that guide the building of the discourse over a path with more chances of success, playing free improvisation will remain unpredictable, unforeseen and pre-destined to always bump into less controllable moments.

It seems coherent to use rhetoric as a guide for adopting consciously constructive manners of interaction, which are not based upon a set of fixed pre-established rules, but on behavioural lines that depend on the qualities of the circumstance. This preoccupation with the present moment could not be more *ad hoc* for approaching free improvised music analytically, since most of its determinant elements are dealt with at the very moment of playing.

In the absence of pre-determined materials, the construction of its music is based upon the interchange of ideas and behaviours. Most importantly, and possibly a determinant factor in defining the quality and style of this music, is the precondition for collaboration and the development of profound ideas about interactivity. An attention to a more developed use of time, ethics and logic would eventually allow opening an appropriate mind-set for performing this kind of music.

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