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The Aesthetics of Imperfection Reconceived: Improvisations, Compositions, and Mistakes

ABSTRACT

Ted Gioia associated the “aesthetics of imperfection” with improvised music. In an earlier article, I extended it to all musical performance. This article reconceives my discussion, offering more precise analyses: (1) The aesthetics of imperfection is now argued to involve *open, spontaneous response to contingencies of performance or production*, reacting positively to idiosyncratic instruments; apparent failings in performance, and so on. Perfectionists, in contrast, prefer a planning model, not readily modified in face of contingencies. (2) Imperfection is not toleration of errors and imperfections, as Gioia assumes, but a positive aesthetic, as in Japanese *wabi-sabi*. Imperfections can become new styles or kinds of perfection—and so true imperfectionism is a *constant striving for new contingencies to respond to*. (3) A subtler, more complex relation between composition and improvisation is proposed, in which both have *broad* and *narrow senses*. Composition involves (a) works, usually desk produced and notated; or more generally, (b) putting things together in an aesthetically rewarding form. Thus, *improvisation is a (broad sense) compositional method*. (4) Improvisation and composition are interdependent; both involve structure and spontaneity. (5) Imperfectionism is an *aesthetics of performance*—of compositions as well as improvisations. Improvisation is no riskier, or prone to mistakes, than performance of compositions.

I. THE AESTHETICS OF IMPERFECTION AS SPONTANEOUS RESPONSE TO CONTINGENCIES

In a precursor article, I argued that the opposition between the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection offers a fruitful framework for looking at certain aesthetic questions in the performing arts (Hamilton 2000). That opposition was illustrated by the debate between Ferruccio Busoni, the defender of spontaneity, and Arnold Schoenberg, the compositional determinist.¹ Schoenberg emphasized the autonomy of the composer-genius in the creation of masterworks, which, he insisted, required the complete subservience of the performer. Busoni, in contrast, found virtues in improvisation and in the individual contribution of the performer-interpreter:

Notation ... is primarily an ingenious expedient for catching an inspiration ... notation is to improvisation as the portrait is to the living model. ... What the

composer's inspiration necessarily loses through notation, his interpreter should restore by his own. ([1907] 1962, 84)

Busoni defended his practice of transcription—the arrangement of a composition for a medium different from the one for which it was originally composed—arguing that “Every notation is ... the transcription of an abstract idea. The instant the pen seizes it, the idea loses its original form.” The purity of the improvisation is one step less removed from the locus of artistic inspiration.

For Schoenberg, in contrast, there is only gain in working up an improvisation into a crafted composition. He rejected Busoni's claim that improvisation has artistic priority: “the portrait has higher artistic life” (quoted in Stuckenschmidt 1977, 226). The interpreter is the work's servant: “He must read every wish from its lips” (227). The interpreter must not express his own individuality; he becomes “a parasite on the exterior, when he

could be the artery in the circulation of the blood” (227). Busoni’s imperfectionism is humanistic, focusing on the moment or event of performance, while Schoenberg’s perfectionism emphasizes the timeless work—thoroughgoing perfectionism assumes a Platonic conception of abstract sound structures. An aesthetics of perfection is also implied by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Platonic account of music and score in the *Tractatus*. (1922, 4.014)

Neither Busoni nor Schoenberg referred to the “aesthetics of imperfection”—a term apparently coined by jazz historian Ted Gioia, who assumes “imperfection” in its ordinary negative sense. On his view, to be spontaneous, improvisers take risks that cause imperfections. Improvisation has inevitable flaws, but compensating advantages:

Errors will creep in . . . in form [and] execution; the improviser [pushes] himself into areas of expression which his technique may be unable to handle . . . the finished product will show moments of rare beauty intermixed with technical mistakes and aimless passages.

My earlier article regarded imperfection more positively than Gioia, recognizing the interdependence of improvisation and composition; it also suggested that “imperfect” implies “unfinished.” That final suggestion now seems wrong.² I now develop a *positive sense of imperfection*, reconceiving the aesthetics of imperfection as an *open, spontaneous response to contingencies of performance or production*, that aims to create something positive from apparently unpromising as well as promising circumstances. Perfectionists, in contrast, favor a planning model, not readily modified in the face of contingencies—which they regard as at best something to be tolerated.

I now argue, against Gioia, that “imperfection” is not a means to an end, but contributes to the value of the whole. Thus, the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* involves object-specific appreciation, acceptance, ageing—a mark on a bowl enhances its value. My “reconception” also involves new thinking on mistakes—understanding imperfectionism’s view of mistakes, helps us understand imperfection’s positive value. Since imperfections can become new styles or kinds of perfection, true imperfectionism is a *constant striving for new contingencies to respond to*.

This article draws on Wittgenstein’s later discussion of language games in its analysis of aesthetic concepts. It also follows Eric Lewis’s “prac-

tical guiding principle” that “the thoughts of musicians concerning their own creative activities must be taken very seriously” (2019, 10).³ I particularly attend to what musicians say about the contingencies that they work with: instruments and acoustics of varying excellence or idiosyncrasy; apparent failings, errors, or mistakes in one’s own performance or that of colleagues; or more generally, age and infirmity. Different art forms have contrasting parameters; in ceramics, for instance, there are unintended or unpredicted results in firing or glazing process. Tony Buck of improvisers The Necks comments:

Quirks in instruments or technologies [can] produce surprising or unpredictable results . . . broken-down drum-kits have idiosyncrasies that are great to exploit . . . If [the room] has weird quirks, and we’re obliged to do a certain [composition], and it’s not going to work, we still have to do it. But [improvisers] can . . . respond to site-specific circumstances. (quoted in Hamilton, forthcoming 2020)

Jazz vibraphonist Gary Burton, who retired recently following heart surgery, explained, “My playing reached a peak a few years ago and was now moving downward.” Improvisers such as Lester Young, Lee Konitz, Sheila Jordan, and Susana Baca, in contrast, respond creatively to age and infirmity.

There are perfectionists and imperfectionists in all areas of music making and art, and their artistic attitudes lie on a continuum. The perfection/imperfection opposition involves *multidimensional* continua. One can be a perfectionist in some respects, but not in others; Keith Jarrett is an imperfectionist concerning spontaneous improvisation, but a perfectionist concerning the instrument. Dave Brubeck criticizes perfectionist improvisers—jazz musicians who rely on the safety net of learned patterns and “[strive] for perfection,” whose playing “will lack vital involvement with the moment of creation.” It should be stressed that spontaneity is at the level of particular performance—that is, improvisers can practice for the spontaneous effort. It must also be stressed that individual performers lie on a continuum between perfection and imperfection. These attitudes of perfection and imperfection are neither correct nor incorrect but reflect contrasting artistic values.

Many commentators assume that the perfection versus imperfection debate concerns the

merits of improvisation versus composition—notably Gioia (1988). However, as my earlier article argued (2000), his concept of imperfection, associated with jazz and improvised music, should be extended to all kinds of musical performance. The aesthetics of imperfection embraces improvisation *and* composition; it is an aesthetics of *performance*. Comparing improvisation with *performance* of compositions, rather than with composition as such, reveals the reciprocity of composition and improvisation—imperfection, in some positive sense, is seen as an intrinsic good.

I return to aesthetic imperfectionism directly in the final section; first, I address alleged contrasts between improvisation and composition, in light of the aesthetics of imperfection.

II. BROAD AND NARROW SENSES OF COMPOSITION AND IMPROVISATION, AND THE WORK CONCEPT

The development of improvisation is intimately connected with that of the composer–performer divide—but the nature of improvisation and composition is not obvious. I now argue that both have *broad* and *narrow* senses. Narrow sense composition is the production of works, usually notated; broad sense composition means putting things together in an aesthetically rewarding form.⁴ Thus, improvisation can be a method of (broad sense) composition; there is no music that is not composed, in a broad sense. My suggestion is that the distinction between broad and narrow senses is implicit in the language game involving music and the performing arts.

II.A. *The Modernist Story of a Composer–Performer Divide*

Notation probably began as a mnemonic device, to remind performers of music already fixed. Western medieval notation did not specify pitch—not because it was left open, as in some of John Cage's scores, but because performers did not need reminding. But notation transcended its mnemonic origins, becoming a driving force in music's evolution. Hence the familiar *modernist story* of a *composer–performer* divide in Western music—a story that I qualify without rejecting it. This divide developed with the advent of staff notation from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. *The composer* became a desk worker rather than performer, their compositions defined by the score. Prior

to this divide, one could say, all musicians were performers of their own work, and perhaps that of others—troubadours might have played each other's songs. Scholars of medieval church music debate whether there existed even a limited canon of noncontemporary works—the “work concept” evolved only with the notion of composer as desk worker. (In literature, the work concept appeared much earlier.)⁵

The desk worker model assumes a concept of the *musical work*, therefore—“work” meaning “artwork.” “Art” here has a capital “A”—autonomous art in a public arena, normally with a unique, named creator, arising with a *modern system of the arts*, involving an overarching concept of art, or of artworks (see Hamilton 2007a, chap. 1). In the pre-Renaissance West, and non-Western cultures, in contrast, art is nonautonomous—subsidiary to nonartistic activities, religious, military, or social. Paintings, sculptures, and musical pieces that are now regarded as artworks were not so regarded.⁶

According to the familiar story, the work concept expressed Western music's *increasing portability*—not the much later Sony Walkman revolution, but the repeatability of compositions in different locations and times, by different performers, and in that sense standardized. When Bach was Kapellmeister at Köthen, he wrote for a particular location and set of performers, without thought for portability; performers were expected to embellish and elaborate. Bach's compositions have *become* works. A work, strictly understood, may be inspired by or commissioned for a particular occasion, or particular performers, but is not limited in performance by this. There are obvious parallels with developments in other arts, related to art's growing autonomy, and commodification—notably the portability of framed paintings.⁷

As the familiar story stresses, with the development of the work concept came a decline in what is usually called improvisation. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were great improvisers; in early nineteenth-century Europe, professional keyboard players and composers—and many amateurs—were trained to improvise. As composers' authority grew after the mid-nineteenth century, a Romantic *ideal* of improvisation supplanted improvisation in public performance—composers still improvised in private, but “improvisation” acquired pejorative connotations

of lack of discipline or planning (see Gooley 2018). Berlioz was one of the first Western composers not to be an instrumental performer, though he conducted. As composers wrote more elaborately, orchestrating for a larger range of colors and sounds, scores became increasingly prescriptive, limiting performer input—though any system of notation requires interpretation. That at least is the familiar story. Classical musicians, up to the present, continued to improvise in the organ loft, in schools, and for dancers—activities underrecognized and underappreciated.

II.B. *Improvisation and Composition in Their Broader Senses*

To reiterate, I do not reject the familiar story, but wish to qualify it, placing it in a broader context. In particular, there is a question how one should describe the situation before the composer–performer divide. In the third through fifth editions of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Henry Colles describes improvisation as “the primitive act of music-making” ([1927] 1954, vol. II, 991)—contrast the complete reversal of this view found in the most recent edition (below). Roger Scruton refers more neutrally to “the emergence of ‘works’ from a tradition of spontaneous performance” (1997, 111)—what Jim Samson calls the “ancient art of improvisation” (2008, 46). But the immense diversity of musical traditions puts such claims in question, as Laudan Nooshin’s critique of the traditional opposition of improvisation and composition shows.

Nooshin would not, I think, deny something like the familiar modernist story of Western music, but disputes the terms in which it is usually expressed. Improvisation, she argues, is “a term which . . . emerged in the context of European art music [as a] consequence of the development of notation (and thus the conceptual division between performer and composer)” (2003, 248). But by the late nineteenth century, it had “become a marker to distinguish between the creative processes in [Western art] music (which had notation and was therefore art) and other musics (which generally did not and therefore were not)” (248). Thus, for one latter-day imperialist,

Indian music is almost entirely a matter of improvisation. Art . . . never can be [improvised] . . . Indian music has

yet to suffer the pangs of [artistic] birth [and] must boldly proclaim itself on paper, in black and white. (Nichols 1944, 134–136)⁸

Leo Treitler comments that musics outside the Western notated tradition were often regarded as improvised, in the negative sense of something unprepared and unforeseen, “the exception to something . . . more grounded” (1991, 66). Nooshin summarizes this negative view of improvisation as “absence of notation equals non-cerebral, which . . . equals non-art” (2003, 246).

In recent decades, that negative view has been transformed into something more positive, but more subtly Eurocentric. As Nooshin comments

improvisation had served partly as an arena to play out Western representations of the primitive and untutored “other”; now this orientalist trope was turned on its head and improvisation came instead to represent . . . [what] was perhaps being lost in modern Western societies. (2003, 250)⁹

However, she continues, “Despite a growing appreciation of improvisation as a kind of composition, the dualistic discourses have remained with us” (254), as we fail to recognize the lengthy training of many improvised traditions (251). Bruno Nettl challenged the idea of improvisation and composition as opposites (1974), but one must still insist that improvisational and compositional elements are found in all music (Nooshin 2003, 256).

Nooshin is right—what writers failed to grasp is that improvisation is a kind of composition. But a residue of the traditional view, that composition in the narrow sense is the highest kind of musical creation, perhaps remains in her account. A further step is needed—one must distinguish *specific* and *more general senses of composition* and *improvisation*, a distinction implicit in the language game involving music and the performing arts.¹⁰ To reiterate, there are two senses of composition:

1. In music and performing arts: composition is opposed to narrow-sense improvisation—composers are mostly desk workers who produce works, usually notated.
2. More generally: composition involves putting things together, in an aesthetically pleasing form, which improvisers as well as desk composers do—essential to any artistic activity or performance.

For free improviser Keith Rowe, “There is no such thing as non-composed music. You can never get away from some form of composition” (quoted in Olewnick 2017, 134). Philip Alperson argues that “A musical performance . . . always involves formative decisions about how a piece shall sound, i.e., decisions about [its] form or composition” (1984, 20). They are referring to composition in the broad sense.

The distinction between broad and narrow senses explains why some improvisers refer to *improvisation as a compositional method*—funding bodies contrast their work with that of *paper composers* who produce scores. As Tony Buck comments, “it’s no longer a dichotomy of improvising and composing . . . improvisation is a methodology for composing, just like serialism, or rhythmic inter-locking” (quoted in Hamilton, forthcoming 2020).

Improvisation as a compositional method involves:

1. Spontaneous composition
2. No repeat performance of the composition—rejection of the work concept, of a *fixed and repeatable* composition.

These features are separable. Scelsi’s improvisations were transcribed by Tosatti and others, and published as Scelsi compositions. (Tosatti’s role has been much debated.) This is “improvisation as a compositional method,” but not in the free improviser’s sense. Scelsi intended his improvisations to be transcribed and published as compositions; in other cases, improvisations have been performed as if they were compositions, without the improviser intending this. Thus, Jean-Yves Thibaudet performs Bill Evans improvisations, and George Russell based a composition on Miles Davis’s solo on “So What.”

Improvisation also has specific and more general senses:

1. In music and performing arts, improvisation is opposed to composition—it is an approach to performance that does not involve prior deskwork or non-notated composition.
2. More generally: improvisation is opposed to “using an established method.”

The second sense involves an aesthetics of imperfection: “We did not have the proper

tools/ingredients/instruments, so we improvised.” Thus “I did not have a chisel, so I improvised using a screwdriver,” or “I did not have the right materials to fix the car, so I improvised with WD40 and Blu Tack.” The second sense also yields a deeper response to the music-specific question. Much improvisation *does* use an established method. For instance, Mozart’s improvised cadenzas adhered to the idiom of his notated works; jazz improvisers often use a stock of idiomatic gestures or “licks.”¹¹

Lydia Goehr distinguishes between improvisation *extempore*, “when musicians make up music in performance,” and the “less familiar concept [of] improvisation *impromptu* . . . what we do . . . *in the moment* [when] confronted with an unexpected difficulty” (2016, 460). Goehr notes that *improvisation extempore* has been used to critique the classical work concept, which she wishes to reenergize (459). There are interesting parallels here with the theme of the present article—and its precursor—that works can accommodate an aesthetics of imperfection, which is an aesthetics of performance in general. The sense of improvisation as “making do” underlies my formulation of aesthetics of imperfection as positive response to contingencies. But that is an issue for another occasion.

I now show how these distinctions between concepts of composition and improvisation elucidate their reciprocity.

III. THE RECIPROCITY OF IMPROVISATION AND COMPOSITION

Distinguishing broad and narrow senses of composition shows how improvisation and composition may not be opposites, but can stand in a reciprocal relation. My precursor article argued that composition and improvisation are *interpenetrating opposites*—we now see that broad sense composition has a two-way interdependence with improvisation. As Rohan de Saram comments, “The improvised piece [aspires to] the solidity of a written piece, the written piece [aspires] to loosen itself up like an improvisation, to give itself spontaneity” (forthcoming 2020). That is, (1) improvisations aspire to be compositions (narrow sense); and (2) interpretation of compositions aspires to improvisatory spontaneity, making the composition appear as spontaneously created as an improvisation. (The perfectionist improviser ill-advisedly tries to achieve (1) by rehearsing

their “improvisation,” so that it comes out right on the night.)

Thus, it is wrong to say, as many commentators do, that the work concept expresses the aesthetics of perfection. Works can accommodate an aesthetics of imperfection—which is an aesthetics of performance in general, not just of improvised performance. The fact that both imperfectionists and perfectionists fail to recognize this suggests the residual influence of the “mechanical reproduction” picture of interpretation—a picture that imperfectionists condemn and perfectionists apparently endorse. Thus, as we saw, for the perfectionist Schoenberg, the creative interpreter “becomes a parasite on the exterior, when he could be the artery in the circulation of the blood” (Stuckenschmidt 1977, 227). Video artist/composer Christian Marclay, an imperfectionist, comments half-ironically, “I get [musicians] involved in the process. I’m not one of those fascist composers who says, ‘Play this!’” (Bradshaw 2018). As Rachel Stroud notes, “Performance of notated works is still often seen as diametrically opposed to the spontaneous, collaborative creativity of improvisation . . . classical performers [are] somehow uncreative, destined to replicate stagnant ‘works’” (Stroud, forthcoming 2020). I stress that this view is implausible and do not in any way defend it—but it seems implicit in common views of interpretation, even though proponents of the latter might deny it.

To regard classical performers as somehow uncreative is to fail to recognize the artistry of interpretation; as Adorno suggested, interpretation of the greatest works is inexhaustible (see Paddison 2016). Creative interpreters strive for improvisational freshness—the illusion that a work is being created spontaneously. It is true that among classical performers, Horowitz’s statement is unusual: “a work should never be played the same way . . . I may play the same program from one recital to the next, but I will play it differently . . . it is always new” (quoted in Mach 1991, 119). But metaphors of “bringing to life” or “making it sound fresh” are common. In contrast are classical performers who “perform their CD” live, reiterating their recorded interpretation. Like jazz performers who rehearse solos, these may be enjoyable phenomena of the entertainment industry, but are artistically limited (see Cant, forthcoming 2020). The requirement of spontaneity helps establish improvisation, in its narrow, modern sense, as an art.

Philosophers, Alpers apart, have tended to neglect reciprocity, holding with Gioia that negative features of jazz improvisation are compensated by excitement and spontaneity. Thus, for Francis Sparshott, in improvisation “we make allowances for fluffs, interruptions, squawks” (1982, 255). The result, as we see in the final section, is an aesthetics of imperfection without a positive notion of imperfection. Musicologists, in contrast, recognize reciprocity, without linking it explicitly to an aesthetics of imperfection. Thus, Nicholas Cook (2013) sees improvisation and work performance as interpenetrating practices—in more open Baroque scores, and in Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. Playing a Mozart quartet, comments Bruce Johnson, is an act of collective improvisational performance—intonation and rhythm are nuanced and accommodated within the ensemble (2002, 104)—while for Richard Cochrane, “the practice of improvisation . . . exists in all musical performances” (2000, 140). In *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Stephen Blum almost dispenses with improvisation as an activity separate from composition, describing both interpreting a score, and what is generally referred to as improvisation, as “composition during performance” (2001, 192–193). What these writers are suggesting is that imperfection in the ordinary, negative sense, and in my distinctive positive sense, applies as much to *performance* of a score, as to improvisation.

It may seem improbable that interpretation is not recognized as an art—but how else to explain the widespread view that improvisation is riskier and more error strewn, and so more amenable to an aesthetics of imperfection? This is the topic of the next section, which extends the claim that improvisation and composition interpenetrate, by looking at their allegedly contrasting attitudes to risk, and mistakes. We will see that responses to mistakes are part of a broader, positive aesthetics of imperfection, and not simply a negative feature of improvisation to be tolerated.

IV. RISK, ERROR, AND MISTAKE

This section critiques Gioia’s view that it is somehow distinctive of improvised music that “Errors will creep in . . . in form [and] execution.” We now see that risk is present in all performance, but that improvisation and composition approach it from different angles. This section provides further

evidence that improvisation is not simply opposed to composition. They have structural features in common, arising from the logical grammar of mistake, elucidated by J. L. Austin and Wittgenstein.

IV.A. “Improvisation Is Risky”

The common view—that improvisation is riskier—neglects the interpreter’s genuine, if secondary, artistry. Thus, for Alperson, “improvisation [adds] to the conventional musical performance situation a greater element of risk” (1984, 23). Victor Durà-Vilà, comments that “improvisers have less control over their material [which] makes improvisation riskier [than] where the material can be abundantly scrutinized and assessed by the creative artist” (forthcoming 2020). On this view, “The improviser is in the most precarious position . . . creating a musical work anew as it is being performed” (forthcoming 2020). Performing a composition is less risky, it is assumed, because the composer in their study has done the artistic work—the interpreter can fail as craftsperson, but the improviser can fail as both craftsperson and artist.

To reiterate, this view fails to recognize the interpreter’s artistry. Both improvisers and interpreters may produce unstructured, rambling performances. To say that a work is successful is to say that a serious attempt at performance is worthwhile. As conductor Colin Davis retorted, when a colleague criticized a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*, “Yes, but what a work, man, what a work!” (quoted in Hamilton 1993, 186). The work concept can “accommodate” poor performances; one “hears” the composition through them.¹² It might be argued that if one can hear the work through the poor performance, that performance is less risky than a poor improvisation where one hears nothing—but the argument is becoming abstruse.

It is true that imperfectionist improvisation encourages risk, because genuine spontaneity, whether in improvisation *or* interpretation, is risky. Derek Bailey favored the riskier approach of presenting improvisers who have never collaborated: “The best moments that I’ve found in improvisation often happen fairly early in a relationship . . . Later other kinds of things develop and the assumption is that this is an improvement. I’m not so sure” (1996). In another sense, however, im-

perfectionist improvisation is *less* risky. As Tony Buck commented, “If [the room] has weird quirks, and [the interpreter is] obliged to do a certain [composition], and it’s not going to work, [they] still have to do it”—an outcome that improvisers avoid.

IV.B. “There Are No Mistakes in (Free) Improvisation”

Concerning *mistakes*, the improvisation–interpretation asymmetry is also often exaggerated. Recall that mistakes are among the contingencies to which imperfectionists respond positively. The philosophical literature on mistake and error distinguishes *mistakes* from other errors only in that they require background understanding or capacity, and so are in some sense blameworthy; other errors involve epistemic bad luck. Austin’s “A Plea for Excuses” suggests a threefold distinction: accidents, mistakes, and errors that are not mistakes. Austin focuses on the contrast between mistakes and accidents, but comments that “In an accident something befalls: by *mistake* you take the wrong one: in *error* you stray” (1961, 28). Thus, one could say

1. The pianist hits the wrong key *by mistake*, intending to hit another; they had not practiced sufficiently, or their technique was inadequate.
2. They hit the key deliberately but *in error*—the score was incorrect, or they misread or forgot the passage. Perhaps the otherwise excellent Urtext edition contained an inaccuracy—but it was not a cheap, poorly produced score that the pianist could be blamed for using. (“He chose the wrong edition.”)
3. They hit the wrong key *by accident*, as the piano stool shifted—as Austin argued, whether it is an accident, or a mistake depends on how hitting the wrong note came about.

A slip or typo is often an accident, but it is a mistake if it resulted from typing too fast, or reading the transcribed text carelessly.¹³ One is responsible for a mistake, but not for an accident. “You were not looking where you were going!” suggests that it was not an accident, as does “You should have taken a typing course.”

Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* elucidates the concept of “mistake,” although it does not address the

contrast between error and mistake that Austin discusses only briefly. A mistake occurs when someone can reason or observe correctly, but is inattentive or careless, or reasons wrongly: “Can’t we say: a *mistake* doesn’t only have a cause, it also has a ground? I.e., roughly: when someone makes a mistake, this can be fitted into what he knows aright” (1969, paragraph 74). That is, to describe something as a mistake is to say that it is to some extent understandable, because it emerges explicably from the subject’s beliefs or capacities.¹⁴

Being mistaken is like misremembering or misunderstanding—which involve remembering or understanding, and so are not cases simply of *not* remembering or understanding. Being mistaken—in contrast to making an error—involves getting things partly right: the archaeologist recognized a body part with five digits, but mistakenly concluded that it was a hand, not a foot. Similarly, misunderstanding someone’s words involves only a partial failure of communication; if I cannot recognize their language, the result is not *mis*understanding, but complete failure to understand. As Austin writes, I shoot your donkey *by mistake* because I know what a donkey looks like, can recognize yours and mine—but in this case confuse them (1961, 133). Playing or singing out of tune might be a mistake, slip, or accident, but not when perpetually tuneless soprano Florence Foster Jenkins does it—or jazz saxophonist Jackie McLean, whose acidulous style involved playing sharp, perhaps to stand out from the ensemble.

As Wittgenstein suggests, when someone makes a mistake, one can describe the faulty reasoning, or inattentive observation, that took them from knowledge to error. What may be termed an *individualist conception* maintains that a mistake is something that infringes one’s own standards. But that is incorrect—mistakes and errors are relative to *correct standards*. (We will shortly see the individualist conception’s limited truth.) The vocal stand-in on the biopic *Florence Foster Jenkins* may sometimes have made the “mistake” of singing in tune. When they sing a phrase in tune, this is a mistake by the standard, *imitate Jenkins*, but not by the standard, *sing the tune correctly*. In the context of making the movie, the standard *imitate Jenkins* is the correct one—whether something counts as a mistake depends on the criterion of success. The common paradoxical notion of a deliberate mistake helps here.

We now apply this discussion to performances involving composition and improvisation. In performing score-based music, there can be wrong notes, and mistaken—perhaps inauthentic—tempos. In jazz, players misread or mishear chord progressions; Coltrane once forgot to repeat a song’s first eight bars.¹⁵ Art Tatum commented, “There’s no such thing as a wrong note. It all depends on how you resolve it” (quoted in Bertinetto 2016, 88). Thus, if a jazz player mistakenly plays the “wrong” scale over the chords, and adjusts rapidly, it is no longer an error—as Charlie Parker said, “You’re never more than a half-step [semitone] from a right note.” (The quote has various versions—apparently, many Parker “quotes” were fabricated by journalists.) Thus, T. Carl Whitmer:

The idea ... must always be kept in a state of flux. An error may only be an unintentioned rightness ... Polishing is not at all the important thing; instead strive for a rough go-ahead energy. Do not be afraid of being wrong; just be afraid of being uninteresting. (1934, 16)

A novice stops after a mistake, a perfectionist conceals it—and an imperfectionist exploits or develops it. As Thelonious Monk complained, following a performance he found unsatisfying: “I made the wrong mistakes” (Feurzeig 2011, 30).

In post-bebop jazz, Parker’s “half-step rule” was reformulated. The notion of “correctness” over a chord progression was expanded, and tones outside the chord’s theoretical function tolerated or encouraged. Post-bebop techniques include “sidestepping” or “sideslipping”—playing a mode or scale a semitone from the stated one, then sliding back—or the less systematic use of outside notes, as in Paul Bley’s remarkable solo on “All the Things You Are.”¹⁶

Free jazzers of the 1960s might acknowledge wrong notes, though without defining them harmonically. Both free jazz and free improvisation—useful but contestable labels—aim to maximize freedom, avoiding explicit grooves and chord changes. Steve Lacy recalled: “In ‘60 [trumpeter Don Cherry] was completely free already. ... He used to tell me, ‘Come on, let’s play’. I’d say ... ‘What tune?’, and he’d say, ‘Come on let’s just play’. And that was new to me” (1974).¹⁷ In fact, free jazz often has a compositional structure; as Adam Fairhall (email communication, 2018) comments, most of its 1960s albums have a recognizable precomposition element. In contrast,

free improvisation—a mostly European development from free jazz—aimed at totally spontaneous improvisation, generally avoiding even a residual pulse.

As Marcello Ruta comments, “Free improvisation can (and possibly necessarily does) use existing musical material. But such . . . material is not programmatically chosen in advance by the performer, who therefore is not committed to it” (2017, 513). For some commentators, it follows that mistakes in free improvisation are impossible. After an improvisation by cellist Rohan de Saram, his colleague from the Arditti Quartet joked, “I didn’t spot a single wrong note!” Pianist John Snijders comments:

It is hard to know what meaning “mistake” has [here]. In a composed piece, a mistake means doing something one is *not supposed to do*. In free improvisation, it seems only to mean doing something one has *not planned to do*. (De Saram, forthcoming 2020; Snijders personal correspondence, 2018)

One could add: “or doing something one thereafter regrets having done.” Composer/improviser Cornelius Cardew developed this thought in a surprising direction: “The only criterion for a sound is: ‘was the player expecting (intending) to make it?’ If not, it was a mistake, and makes a different *sort* of claim to beauty . . . mistakes are the only truly spontaneous actions we are capable of” (quoted in Tilbury, forthcoming 2020). Cardew was probably reflecting John Cage’s comment that “A ‘mistake’ is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is” (Cage 1952, 59).

The free improviser may have no long-term plan, procedure, or set course; but they may do things that they did not intend, which perhaps amount to mistakes. It might be argued that “mistake” implies an established procedure—so in free improvisation, these cannot occur. However, projects like the Portsmouth Sinfonia aside—performers played unfamiliar instruments, as well as they could—free improvisation calls for technical skills, even if these are unconventional. As free improviser Steve Beresford comments:¹⁸

Adam Bohman, who rarely plays a conventional instrument, has to devise his own techniques . . . bowing bits of cardboard and rubbing light bulbs against record racks—there is virtuosity there, but it’s to do with an instrument

that you can’t be trained on, because you just invented it. (Hamilton, forthcoming 2021)

Doing something by accident is not a way of going wrong. But there is a further category of “going wrong”—*poor choices*. Thus, there are three ways of going wrong in pursuit of truth, or in artistic or other practice:

1. mistake or avoidable ignorance, where checking procedures are known and available;
2. error or unavoidable ignorance, concerning novel phenomena without a familiar, agreed procedure;
3. poor choices—including aesthetically poor choices—that do not amount to mistake or error.

IV.C. *Mistakes, Errors, Poor Artistic Choices, and Misconceptions*

Those who discern mistakes in free improvisation may in fact be referring to poor artistic choices. There is a continuum between mistakes and errors on the one hand, and poor artistic choices and misconceptions on the other. Brian Olewnick, biographer of free improviser Keith Rowe, reports: “Rowe certainly thinks that not only *can* mistakes be made—they usually are. At an improvised concert, he will grimace from time to time [at] wrong choices” (personal correspondence, 2018). Free improvisers, like anyone engaged in a skilled activity with artistic standards, can make poor choices—though these are not, as Rowe perhaps thinks, mistakes. The existence of aesthetic aims implies the possibility of misunderstanding, expressed through poor artistic choices.

Lloyd Swanton of The Necks explains the trio’s artistic aims, in a way that suggests that free improvisation has no rules:

We’re not pure free improvisers because we have a couple of rules or customs. The first is “one person starts.” The second is that we’ll not hurry the progress of the piece—we’re not going to change until someone’s got an idea. That was a big revelation for us. (Hamilton, in preparation)

The trio perhaps has other rules—“No one ‘solos’,” “Keep things minimal”—which distinguish their music from its origins in post-Coltrane jazz.

For a player to “solo” in jazz fashion would contravene the group’s artistic premise. However, Philip Clark, participant in Eddie Prevost’s free improvisation workshops, contrasts “momentary lapses of technique” with “systematic misunderstanding”:

Some people come for months without real understanding of its purpose—the search for new sounds overriding the necessity to “perform”... They heard what they wanted to play and executed it well technically. But their blinkered idea... never shifted—they [continued] to play Weather Report riffs or Keith Jarrett-like Romanticism. (personal correspondence, January 2019)

“Systematic misunderstanding” involves contravention of artistic premises amounting to conceptual error.

After modernism, classicism with its rules of taste became untenable. But we still talk of aesthetic failings—an off-white jacket and cream trousers do not match, blue and gray go better than blue and green—while remaining alive to style that transcends such errors. When someone puts on a pullover other than the one they intended, they might have made what most people think is the most felicitous choice—an unintentioned rightness—by mistake. Whether it *is* a mistake depends on whether I am the kind of person who cares about dressing fashionably—this seems to be the truth in the individualist conception rejected earlier. If I do not care—or simply cannot afford to—then it is not a mistake. There are errors, slips, poor choices, and misconceptions in improvised music, therefore—aesthetic rather than cognitive. But Gioia is mistaken in assuming that any of these is likelier in improvisation than other kinds of music making.

V. THE AESTHETICS OF IMPERFECTION

We will now see that understanding the imperfectionist’s view of mistakes helps us understand the aesthetic’s positive value. Many readers hold that “imperfection” cannot be positive. But one should first note that “imperfection” is not the opposite of “perfection.” It is like misremembering or misunderstanding—which, to reiterate, involve remembering or understanding, and so are not cases simply of *not* remembering or understanding. Imperfection presupposes background order, functionality, or even perfection, not the

pursuit of disorder or anarchy. But the key defense of aesthetic imperfection is that there is something wrong with the thoroughgoing pursuit of perfection. Jazz pianist Frank Kimbrough contrasts his own approach with the perfectionist entertainer who pleases the public: “It’s not about perfection. It’s not about a show. I don’t plan sets, ever. I’m playing solo tomorrow, and I have no idea what I’m going to play” (2016).

Still the objection persists, “Why characterize spontaneity, creativity, and vibrancy as *imperfection*? Kimbrough said, ‘It’s not about perfection’—he did not add, ‘It’s about *imperfection*.’” That is, “perfection is not the aim” does not imply, “Imperfection is.” But it can be an aim. The Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic prizes, and does not just tolerate, imperfection. To reiterate, it involves object-specific appreciation, acceptance, ageing—a mark on a bowl enhances its value. For Otomo Yoshihide, “If I find something perfect, that’s wrong. Nothing perfect in life” (quoted in Tilbury, forthcoming 2020).

The value of imperfection, in this sense, is a human value—“nothing perfect in [human] life.” For composer Linda Catlin Smith, imperfection involves a “by-hand” quality:

wabi-sabi accepts transience and impermanence ... the object is made by hand, and therefore has the tiny deviations or imperfections left by that touch ... the sense of the lip on the mouthpiece, the hair of the bow on the string, the contact of the mallet or stick or bow. (forthcoming 2020)

She describes a composition’s “subtle variations akin to the imperfections in a hand-drawn picture [and] in the way things change as they age—the paint on the canvas cracks, fabric fades”:

A finished composition [is] fixed on the page. But the resulting performance will always have the by-hand-ness quality ... If I wanted absolute control over the sounding experience I would make an electroacoustic recorded work.

It should be stressed that before the digital age, all artifacts had this “by-hand” quality. A visit to a railway museum shows that the coachwork and cab instruments on steam and early diesel locomotives were made by hand, using plates and rivets. The finish is crude compared with current molding and Computer Numerical Control manufacturing;

individual locomotives of the same pattern or type have noticeable differences in their details.

David Lloyd offers a powerful objection to aesthetic imperfection, when he distinguishes (1) tolerance of imperfection, (2) artistic exploitation of imperfection, and (3) imperfection as an aim. He argues that imperfectionism is unstable. Exploitation, he argues, supports an aesthetics of imperfection only in a weak, parasitic sense: “A genuinely independent aesthetics of imperfection requires the identification of imperfections that bear aesthetic value in their own right.” Guitar feedback was an unwelcome technical disturbance, that became a signature of improvised rock. What was originally, and in most genres still is, regarded as a flaw or imperfection in the sound has become a virtue or perfection. If improvisational art forms are being inappropriately evaluated as compositional forms, Lloyd argues, then instead of seeking an unstable aesthetics of imperfection, one should “fully recognize improvisation’s distinctive features as virtues fit for aesthetic appreciation in [their own] terms” (all quotations from Lloyd, forthcoming, 2020).

Lloyd is right to argue that what was imperfect can become a new style or aesthetic—another kind of perfection. The conversion of errors into felicities is a familiar artistic process. Like guitar feedback, vinyl appliqué effects in glitch electronica began as straightforward imperfections—surface noise or tape hiss. Antares Auto-Tune was originally a device to correct a singer’s errors in pitch, but after Cher’s 1998 hit “Believe,” producers used it as a sound effect, deliberately distorting vocals—creating some of the crassest subgenres in the history of commodification. A mark on a Japanese bowl becomes a felicity, just as for Charlie Parker, a mistake is converted into a rightness. One might argue that the elderly Lee Konitz is not the player he used to be, but in his hesitations and imperfections, we recognize our frailty and humanity. More positively, we may discern a late style, like late-period Lester Young or Bud Powell. It is a narrow aestheticism that rejects such considerations in artistic evaluation.

I would argue that imperfectionism is not unstable, however. A process can become predictable. Derek Bailey’s broken guitar string, or The Necks’ silent waiting at the start of a performance, began as contingencies, but became expected. But the true imperfectionist always seeks new contingencies, constantly striving for spontaneity—as,

indeed, may a true artist. My opening definition of imperfectionism was an open, spontaneous response to the contingencies of the performing situation. In response to Lloyd’s objections, this definition should be developed: imperfectionism is a *constant striving for new contingencies to respond to*. Perfectionism, in contrast, is a mode of entertainment or a mode of classicism. But to pursue this issue takes us into questions of art and entertainment, and classicism and Romanticism, that are material for another occasion.¹⁹

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1. The "debate" consisted of Schoenberg writing marginal comments in his copy of Busoni's ([1907] 1962) book.
2. Hamilton (forthcoming 2020) discusses the notion of imperfection and the unfinished work.
3. Since my (2000) article, there have been some very useful discussions of the aesthetics of improvisation and imperfection. As well as Lewis (2019), I am indebted to Goehr (2016) and Brown, Goldblatt, and Gracyk (2018), chap. 10.
4. Some composers work at the piano; some jazz composers do not produce notated compositions.
5. Its appearance is contested, see Goehr (1992).
6. Young (2015) defends an opposed view of the system of the arts. The arguments of Kubik (2017) suggest that the modernist picture is due for agonizing reappraisal.
7. Easel painting, the dominant pictorial form by 1600, "unlike an altarpiece or a fresco . . . has no fixed place . . . its frame serves to separate it from its surroundings, allowing it to be hung in almost any setting . . . taking the form of a commodity, easel painting accords with [commercial] bourgeois society" (Barker 2012, 6).

8. This is Beverly Nichols, the well-known cat lover and socialite.

9. The orientalist trope is targeted in Brothers' magisterial (2014).

10. This is a development of G.E.R. Lloyd's (2009) distinction between broad and narrow cultural concepts.

11. The opposition between spontaneous improvisers such as Konitz and Lester Young, and "hacks" who use licks—and the cases in between—is a leitmotif of Hamilton (2007b).

12. As Alperson comments, "we listen past the 'mistakes' and attend to the actual development of a work" (1984, 24).

13. As the presenter comments, when someone types 1950 rather than 2005, "that's a mistake rather than a typo." www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0002hyq, at 1:45.

14. "In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind." Wittgenstein (1969, paragraph 156); discussed in Hamilton (2014), chap. XX.

15. On a recording of Sonny Clark's "Sonny's Crib," he forgets the repeat of the first section of the tune, but rapidly resumes with where he should have been.

16. Sonny Rollins, *Sonny Meets Hawk*, www.thekevin.com/2015/02/paul-bley-on-all-things-you-are.html.

17. See also Weiss (2006, 50).

18. The "world's worst orchestra" became a cultural phenomenon; see Cairns (2004) and Hamilton (forthcoming 2021).

19. Thanks for comments: Andrew Cooper, David Lloyd, Lara Pearson, Roger Squires, and referees for this journal.

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