



Conducted Improvisation: community building practices

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Title. Conducted Improvisation: Community Building Practices

Abstract. This presentation proposes to address significant aspects of Conducted Improvisation, briefly describing the basic structure of methods of this practice and pointing how strong it can be on building communities, elucidating ideas like confidence and shared responsibility.

Keywords. Conducted Improvisation. Conduction. Soundpainting. Ritmo y Percusión con Señas. Community.

Título. Improvisação Conduzida: práticas de construção comunitária

Resumo. Este artigo propõe abordar aspectos significantes da Improvisação Conduzida, descrevendo brevemente a estrutura básica de métodos da prática e apontando o quão potente eles podem ser na construção de comunidades, elucidando ideias como confiança e responsabilidade compartilhada.

Palavras-chave. Improvisação Conduzida. Conduction. Soundpainting. Ritmo y Percusión con Señas. Comunidade.

The focus on Conducted Improvisation has increased in recent years¹. Maybe we could consider nowadays as a historical landmark for these musical practices. Studies on this topic are getting more and more common. In 2015 we published two dissertations about Conducted Improvisation in Italy and Brazil. Having experience with this kind of music as musicians and as conductors, we're interested in the power of Conducted Improvisation practices to break down cultural barriers and grow communities through playing music.

With this paper we want to explore the term “Conducted Improvisation”, coined by other researchers but never related to a whole group of practices. The second aspect that we

¹ The studies, the academic research (e.g., DUBY, 2006; STANLEY, 2009; COIMBRA FARIA, 2016) and the publications (e.g., DEANE, 2021) on this topic around the world are concentrated in the last fifteen years. Also the manuals reflected this trend (THOMPSON, 2006-2014; VAZQUEZ, 2013, VERONESI, 2017).

want to address is how the practices of Conducted Improvisation can provide tools that can be used to build and enhance communities.

1. Conducted Improvisation (s)

“Conducted Improvisation”² is a definition that refers to an improvisation practice where a group of improvisers is led by a conductor through signs and/or gestures. Some examples of practices can give us instances to support this idea:

- Lawrence “Butch” Morris (1947-2013) elaborates a practice that he calls “Conduction”, with approximately 70 signs and gestures. The Conductor use a baton and is seen as part of the ensemble given the structure³.
- Walter Thompson (1952) is the creator of “Soundpainting”, a language with more than a thousand gestures. The Soundpainter is seen as a “live composer” and uses his whole body to give the directives. Soundpainting can be performed by musicians, dancers, painters, actors and any other art discipline⁴.
- Santiago Vazquez (1972) is the creator of “Ritmo y Percusión con Señas” a language of gestures mainly dedicated to conduct improvisations with rhythm and percussion⁵.

² “‘Conducted improvisation’ (‘improvvisazione eterodiretta’, in Italian, according to Salvatore’s 1997 neologism [...]) is a form of organized musical improvisation wherein the figure of a ‘conductor’, who delivers instructions to the performers, mainly using gestures and graphic scores, is established.” (MARINO, SANTARCANGELO, 2014). So to refer to the whole categories of this performative arts we use, in general, the term “Conducted Improvisation” or “Conducted Improvisation Music/ Musiche Improvviate Condotte” (PERONI, 2020). Sometimes “Directed Improvisation” (“Problemas de Performance em Improvisação Dirigida” [PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p. 24]) was also used to refer to the same definition of “Conducted Improvisation”, which is now in our opinion the best option to use.

³ “Conduction is based on a lexicon of instructions called directives: visual analogous representations of musical sound, which the conductor conveys through signs and gestures, and to which instrumentalists respond with musical content.” (Lawrence “Butch” Morris, in VERONESI, 2017, p. 42). For a complete overview of *Conduction* see VERONESI, 2017.

⁴ “[T]he universal multidisciplinary live composing sign language for musicians, actors, dancers and visual artists. Presently (2016) the language comprises more than 1200 gestures that are signed by the Soundpainter (composer) to indicate the type of material desired of the performers. The creation of the composition is realized, by the Soundpainter, through the parameters of each set of signed gestures.” (Walter Thompson, in COIMBRA FARIA, 2016, p. 36). For a complete overview of *Soundpainting* see THOMPSON, 2006-2014.

⁵ “Rhythm with Signs is a sign language for conducting the rhythmic aspect of musical improvisation of any group of instruments and any musical level.” (VAZQUEZ, 2013, p. 9). For a complete overview of *Ritmo y Percusión con Señas* see VAZQUEZ, 2013.

The different aspects that can then be identified inside this large category of single performances are often, even nominal. “It is therefore safe to affirm there are as many grammars as there are ensembles and musical conductors implementing them” (Peroni 2020: 132).

The focus of each of these conductors is peculiar, and the esthetic results are often poles apart. The numbers of gestures, meaning, cultural backgrounds, and musical agency⁶ of the performers involved, are usually different. In this paper, we look more profoundly into the work of three main conductors, but many other techniques are equally interesting to examine⁷.

For example, Conduction and Soundpainting were created around the same period of time, in the USA and it is very interesting to understand how each conductor applied his own ideas to create their specific model of Conducted Improvisation.

What I find really fascinating is how that both, Walter and Butch, developed their systems over the same period of time, and also neither one of them new the other one, or what the other one was doing. And they came to completely different conclusions. (Dino J.A. DEANE, interview in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015 p.150)

Soundpainting uses compositional logic and has the conductor as the main composer, responsible for the success of the performance. In Soundpainting, there is no experience required and it can be applied to any art discipline, with a broad spectrum of possibilities. Conduction has a collective character, considering the conductor as an instrument who supports the group by observing the environment and proposing structure while the improvisers propose content.

[...] [T]he conductor is a tool in the service of the ensemble’s power of music-making, a martyr if you will, whose sounding instrument [...] has been sacrificed for the mute efficacy of the conductor’s baton. (STANLEY, 2009, p. 125)

Here, the idea is to study Conducted Improvisations not referring to the concrete musical text (i.e. the sound, the “idioms” or linguistic context), but only to the “quality” of interaction in performance, which is unique compared to other musical and improvisational contexts. We can try to better comprehend this object of study by searching for invariant features which could be used to define the Conducted Improvisation “category”, :

⁶ “Four aspects of agency are pertinent to performance: causation, intention, skill, and intended audiences. [...] [M]usical performances are activities brought about by human agents with certain abilities and with certain intentions about their activities and beneficiaries.” (GODLOVITCH, 1998, p. 15).

⁷ In our research in Italy we found more than ten original grammar syntaxes. Whether or not inspired by some preexistent practices, they have particular characteristics that make them in fact autonomous.

- **Sharing of the creative responsibility:** each individual (consistent with his own technical, theoretical and expressive tools) is empowered with equal opportunities and responsibilities to contribute to the improvisation.
- **Non-predetermination of the linguistic context:** no axiological reference to a superimposed grammar is available. Before the beginning, you must consider all conceivable ways of expression. As the improvisation goes on and the form develops, the ensemble becomes aware of *group ecology* and its grammar, and its own rules.
- **Knowledge of a shared gestural system:** each participant must share the principles and rules of the gestural system in use. Training and acculturation work for the ensemble is mostly therefore required, in order to achieve a uniform level of knowledge.
- **Has a conductor:** the conductor gives cues to the ensemble who respond in a contextual way, in a cycle of non-predetermined adaptation⁸.

Differently from most free improvisation ensembles, in Conducted Improvisation performances there is a fixed element, the Conductor. That can be a person or an adaptive object/rule that orient and organize the performance through the interaction. The conductor is the manager of the visual and compositional aspects of the musical form. Only the conductor can manage with “memories” (repetition), “orchestration” and time control. In a short formula, we can say that the Conductor can orient the “visual aspects” (CAPORALETTI, 2016, pp. 37-40) of performance. The conductor unifies the group by trying to approximate the multiple ideas created in real time, modelling structural aspects and proposing cues⁹.

⁸ This list is a reworking of the list from PERONI, 2020, pp. 133-134.

⁹ We must distinguish the function and the authority of a “classical” conductor to the one involved in Conducted Improvisation, despite the same word being applied to refer to both professionals. “By imposing, through the authority of his leadership, a language that is both more flexible and in some significant ways more prescriptive than the kind of conducting that is used with either traditional big bands or symphony orchestras, he has provided instrumentalists in either setting with a means of claiming a series of powers that might otherwise prove elusive. These include a power for large sections of the ensemble to move gracefully like a single soloist through intricate structural patterns (think a school of fish) combined with a power of invention and authorship that while present in the purely improvising ensemble is actually intensified and foregrounded within the unique performance constraints of Conduction®.” (STANLEY, 2009, p.125)

2. Building communities through music

Practices of Conducted Improvisation have another main characteristic in common: the ability of *building communities*.

Driven by a common goal - be it musical excellence, the work, or a shared sense of community - the musicians in both ensembles seem to work together like the different organs in a living body, with each individual action taken tuned to and affecting the actions of all others. (STUBLEY [1998], in COIMBRA FARIA, 2016, p. 106)

It is unbelievably impacting and empowering to participate in a session of this kind of improvisation. A feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself. To be successful, the group must build a sense of shared responsibility, taking the best of each participant and empowering every decision in real-time.

The side effects of Soundpainting alongside developing creativity also include the capacity to link what we see, hear, feel and to express this phenomena in a collective environment. Somehow this experience not only makes us better musicians but better human beings open to the world of contrasting temperaments and situations. (Etienne Rolin, private notes in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p.170).

It's much more than discussing levels of liberty and freedom. It is about working as a collective mind, trusting each other and taking responsibility for individual and collective actions.

Improvisation as remembrance, improvisation as hope and possibility: our point, then, is that musical practices in which improvisation is a defining characteristic are social practices, envisioning of possibilities excluded from conventional systems of thought and thus an important locus of resistance to orthodoxies of the imagination (knowing), of relations (community), and of relations to the materials of the world around us (instruments). (FISCHLIN, HEBLE, 2004, p. 11)

To achieve this sense of collectivity, Conducted Improvisation practices use unique concepts that address human interaction and relationships:

Listening and Hearing¹⁰. To truly hear, you must consciously listen. It is not enough to perceive, one must always analyze, think, feel, trade places with others, before elaborating a good and honest response. The ability to listen is extremely valious, because it directly affects one's life by defining the quality of one's interaction with other human beings. If one knows how to listen, one can perceive much more details and can experience a broader communication.

¹⁰ "Listening has very little definition compared to hearing. Though the two words are often used interchangeably, their meanings are different. [...] I differentiate 'to hear' and 'to listen'. To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically." (OLIVEROS, 2005, p. xxii).

Of course everyone “improvises.” Conversation is the most common form. All the mental states that one experiences in conversation are somewhat applicable to musical improvisation. Often, mostly, one just speaks, hears what one has to say and goes on from there, one is not conscious of thinking, one acts. Sometimes, one’s mind will be preparing a reply while listening to someone else’s statement. This preparation can only be a tendency toward a certain sense, it may be mentally heard in words but will become “phrased” and understandable when one speaks it. Sometimes one knows a lot about the subject at hand and basically “plays-back” what one knows. (Michael Snow, in FISCHLIN, HEBLE, 2004, p. 49)

Directives like “Accompany” and “Pedestrian” from Conduction’s lexicon directly address ways of listening and relating to each other:

[“Accompany”:] The instrumentalist accompanies existing designated information by supporting and or reinforcing it from a sonic (melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic) and/or structural perspective. (VERONESI, 2017, p. 119)

The Pedestrian’s primary concern is to contribute to the overall integrity of the construction in progress [...]. The Pedestrian influences the sonic environment of the ensemble establishing new relationships or nurturing already existing ones and building within them [...]. (VERONESI, 2017, p. 59)

Listening may be considered one of the aesthetic goals of these practices, to the point that some conductors consider it a fault when the conductor itself or the improvisers are not able to listen to each other.

I think I feel I screwed up when I stop listening to the group. This is sort of being in your head, and not listening and trusting. (Evan Mazunik, interview in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p. 161)

Risk and Chance. The responsibility given to each individual must be conscious and autonomous. Risks must be taken, but not randomly. It’s not about chance or luck. One takes the responsibility for their actions.

I don’t think there is such a thing as chance, in improvisation. It is about Intent. And it is about pushing yourself and taking risks. (Dino J.A. DEANE, interview in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015 p.150)

Like in life, in practices of Conducted Improvisation, one’s actions affect the actions of others. It is an environment where all participants are equally responsible for the final expression of the group. Individually it is possible to break rules or detour the context proposed by the group, but all actions must be acknowledged and made with consciousness.

Concerning Soundpainting, or any art form for that matter, it is my belief freedom comes from knowledge... the more defined the rules for specific and chance concepts (gestures and phrases) the more freedom for the performer. In a sense... each gesture in Soundpainting is an empty box, so to speak, it is up to each performer to fill that box with their interpretation of the sign...it is also a challenge to “fill that box” in more than one or two ways... a challenge to each performer to search for new ways of defining their individual art... for me, this is the stuff of freedom. (Walter Thompson, interview in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p. 155)

Conducted Improvisation is also a great tool to stimulate risk-taking situations at the same time that proposes a friendly environment for experimentation and joy.

The conductor stands in a position to disrupt and undermine any conceits of safe playing by placing constraints on the instrumentalist that mitigate against performance habits. That is to say, if “risk-taking” is a characteristic of authentic improvisation, then the imposition of the Conduction® vocabulary and the conductor’s subjectivity and taste paradoxically returns to improvisation its sense of danger. (STANLEY, 2009, p. 114)

Error and Trust. Usually there is no error in Conducted Improvisation. Every unexpected event can be manipulated to become part of the performance. Like in free improvisation performances, a phone ringing in the audience could be the starting point for a piece, or an action taken out of the context by an individual can become the articulation for a new proposal.

The Soundpainter and the group by the very nature of the language develop a mutual trust. Performers become comfortable with the basic Soundpainting concept that there is no such thing as an error except stopping when you make one. In a Soundpainting composition a performer never stops, even if they make a mistake - they assume the error and work with it. The Soundpainter often uses the error as a jumping off point for the next direction of the composition. The philosophy in Soundpainting that errors do not exist creates an open environment where new adventures can be realized. Once a group is comfortable with this philosophy, trust is not an issue. (Walter Thompson, interview in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p. 159)

Being all together on the spot, and having to deal with the moment, the participants also must build up a sense of trust and fellowship, sharing responsibility on each other’s wellness and “contributing to the overall integrity of the construction in progress” (Lawrence “Butch” Morris, in VERONESI 2017, p. 59).

Conduction is really sociology. Because you’re asking a lot from people. You are asking them to really give everything they have to you. And to trust you. That you’re not gonna let them crash and burn, or be embarrassed. There’s so much trust involved in Conduction. (Dino J.A. Deane, in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p.153)

Being in the moment. This can be one of the most complex concepts to understand and apply. It is related to one’s capacity of being present to the instant moment, by getting rid of one’s thoughts. We believe that one can only have a true and authentic action/reaction if absent of preconceptions and/or predeterminations. In a session of Conducted Improvisation, participants must maintain a clear mind, to be able to take action in the real moment, breaking their own ego and not having expectations.

[...] if you do this system [Conduction] correctly, by not having an agenda, and surrendering to the moment, the music writes itself, and no one is the composer, and yet, everyone is the composer. (Dino J.A. Deane, in PELUCI DE CASTRO, 2015, p.153)

Some of these concepts can also be found in free improvisation or free music practices, but in the case of Conducted Improvisations it is possible to apply the concepts to a wider group of people at same time. Being the central point, the conductor gives the cues that centralizes attention and brings everyone from their minds to the real moment.

To deeply comprehend the power of Conducted Improvisation in building community through music interaction, we need also to see how the cognitive medium of the ensemble works. In a Conducted Improvisation performance every gesture, sound, and interaction are not predictive, and everything can be new compared to one's expectations. In other words, "the lack of a predetermined linguistic system makes it possible for the improvisation process to actually begin free of any known and shared generative model" (PERONI, 2020). This model is an underlying reference that orients and organize the improvisation, that rests inside the performer's and conductor's mind¹¹.

The self-shaping nature of Conducted Improvisation performances — a "forming form", according to Pareyson (1988) — prevents it from needing a specific base model to rely with predefined parameters that determine a priori the performances tempos, structures and aesthetics; at the same time, this creation is not totally spontaneous and unregulated, seeing that a conductor guides the performance during the whole act.

We can see Conducted Improvisation performances as a complex system where the single elements act both separately and collectively based on a shared ecological motivation¹². This fluctuation between the model, and the real musical act is one of the main things that can transform the Conducted Improvisations in community building practices. It is a very productive and interactive process where one can adapt to many situations of different "technical levels".

4. Starting from the network

The field of Conducted Improvisation today is full of unsolved questions and a lot of research to be done. The first stage of our research, which began in parallel in 2015 in Italy and Brazil, was to document and collect experiences and testimonies from the main protagonists of

¹¹ According to Vincenzo Caporaletti we use the term "generative model" in the tration of the study on improvisation (i.e. H. Roberts, Bruno Nettle, Bernard Lortat-Jacob, Jeff Pressing, Peter Van Der Merwe in CAPORALETTI 2016, pp. 168-169, footnote 40).

¹² For more information about the modelling of the Conducted Improvisation creative process see "The spunto-situation system: on atmosphere-based, self-shaping model" (PERONI, 2020, pp. 134-141).



Conducted Improvisation in our countries and around the world. These are initiatives that have made us personally touch the complexity of this field of study and, at the same time, the pedagogical, artistic and musical value of the conducted improvisation. From these assumptions, the idea of creating a network between musicians from all over the world was born by those who, in their own way, work with Conducted Improvisation. The practice has a big potential of building communities, so we have to use this in our favor and look forward to creating our international and collaborative network, also applying those musical concepts to our academic research. By doing this, we hope to contribute to solving a small piece of the big puzzle of human interaction and foster the research of building communities through music.

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