



## Musical Improvisation as Action: An Arendtian Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Panagiotis A. Kanellopoulos  
University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece

*Men are free—as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom—  
as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are  
the same.*

Hannah Arendt (2006/1968b, 151)



As Jacques Attali (1985) has asserted, ‘Music is more than an object of study: it is a way of perceiving the world. A tool for understanding’ (4). More recently, Christopher Small (1998) urges that we conceive of music-making as a process that constructs models of ideal relationships.<sup>2</sup> For Small, performance creates relationships between participants as an embodiment of relationships created between sounds. A basic premise of this essay is that music education practice is a form of—a broadly conceived notion of—political practice insofar as it creates situations where specific meanings are produced, attitudes built, identities shaped, and hierarchies of musical and social values constructed.<sup>3</sup> Every music education practice expresses, and at the same time constructs, particular conceptions of the meaning of music, of concrete musical practices and their interrelationships. It also plays a significant role in the construction of particular relationships between music and wider cultural practices. Music education teaches children how to *order* sound by *ordering* the body (Bergeron 1992).<sup>4</sup> It creates a wide range of hierarchical relationships among participants in the educational processes; among different modes of musical experience; among various forms of musical knowledge; and among different musical practices (Kingsbury 1988). But music education ‘transforms social hierarchies into academic hierarchies’ (Johnson, 1993: 23) not only through its various institutional configurations, but also through the minute actions that constitute learning, creating, and performing music.<sup>5</sup>

Adopting this perspective as a starting point, I address the political character and the political role of improvisation as a vehicle for constructing particular modes of human agency, of human relationship, and of relationships among children, music, and knowledge.

This effort is motivated by my desire to explore the potential role of improvisation in transforming music classrooms from places where knowledge is transmitted to open contexts for acting and thinking—an orientation that can form a basis for political thinking, and for politics defined as ‘the collective, reflective and lucid activity that arises starting from the moment the question of *de jure* validity of institutions is raised’ (Castoriadis, 1997, 112).<sup>6</sup>

Although it is but a first step in this direction, this essay seeks to construct a view of improvisational practice as a kind of political or communicative *action*, in the sense given to these terms by Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Drawing parallels between improvisation and Arendt’s ‘revelatory and aesthetic concept of action’ (Kalyvas 2004, 321)—describing, in other words, the experience of improvisation as a practice that is based on principles that parallel those of Arendtian action—might help us construct a theoretical perspective on the role improvisation might play within music education practices actively concerned with the advancement of the democratic imperative: practices committed to the pursuit of freedom, equity, and plurality.<sup>7</sup>

#### IMPROVISATION IN MUSIC EDUCATION

In contemporary industrial and post-industrial societies, musical improvisation (whether specific to jazz styles, or improvised music more broadly) has often been viewed as a force of liberation, as a practice of reaction against discriminative, alienating, competitive, individualised social and artistic contexts<sup>8</sup> (Benston 2000; Litweiler 1984; Radano 1993; Robinson 2005). Free improvisational practices from the 1960s onward sought to link musical practice to social values, creating musical practices that might function as active cultural critique of the dominant capitalist ideology.<sup>9</sup> As Durant (1989) has written, ‘It is precisely the relations between music and other levels of social formations which improvisation, perhaps more than any other aspect of music-making today, investigates and disrupts’ (254).

Improvisation can not easily be framed under pedagogical approaches that demand clarity of aims and objectives, approaches that view knowledge and skill acquisition as linear and progressive processes. Since music education is still dominated by what Regelski (2002) refers to as technological conceptions characterised by *methodolatry*, the place and role of improvisation in music education has been rather ambivalent. Currently reigning instructional paradigms view classroom experimentation with suspicion, and are preoccupied, as Kushner

(2004) writes, with ‘fine-tuning the engine of “curriculum delivery” and the grinding machine of student achievement and classroom control—“what works” is what rules’ (12). Control, secure predictions, and linear pre-determined development rather than experimentation and respect for students’ own ‘voices’ are the values on which methodolatry rests (Kushner 2000, 2004). This state of affairs has been described as ‘reactive nihilism’ (Bowman 2005), a state where musical values are reduced to arbitrary objects for technocratic, instrumental instruction, where knowledge is reduced to technical know-how, and where teaching is reduced to the transmission of predetermined skills and rules. Where critical questioning of the foundational aspects of music education practices is largely absent, there is little interest in or room for the conception of improvisation as a transformative experience. As Kushner (2004) argues,

For all but a few, there is a tension between the musical canon and music improvisation. Learn to master ‘playing by the dots’ and all but those few are virtually incapacitated in constructing music as they go along – they have been inducted into a relationship of dependency.  
(11)

The use of improvisation in music education contexts was initially a reaction against an authoritarian, reactionary, and competitive music education context that favoured skilled-based instruction, worshiped the ‘great musical past’, and aimed at promoting those innate geniuses that would continue pursuing ‘Greatness in Music.’<sup>10</sup> Thus, in those early days of creative music education improvisation was a tool for exploration, a way of getting back to the roots of music through first hand experience in the act of musical creativity. It was also a way of connecting music in schools with the open programme of the avant-garde experiments of the 1960s, which problematised the notion of composer-as-authority and the relationship between composition and control, and which sought to blur distinctions between music and noise, randomness and order, intention and reception, ‘highbrow’ and ‘low’ forms of musical culture. The work of Paynter (1992), Schafer (1965, 1986) and others has been guided by convictions that unless children experiment, improvise, and compose, music education is on a false track. Paynter’s credo was that composition always begins with improvisation. The concern of such composers/educators was not only to discover children’s creative potential

but also to find fresh and innovative approaches to sound exploration. Through these attempts, it was believed, children would develop openness toward all music.

As the current trend to privatizing education finds both growing economic support and philosophical justification,<sup>11</sup> so too does its attendant conception of knowledge as a measurable commodity. This knowledge commodity requires both tools for its ‘objective’ measurement and the institutional means that render *distinction* – to use Bourdieu’s (1986/79) book title – possible, legitimate, and ‘natural’. In such circumstances the place of improvisation in education can become quite problematic and is easily turned into a mere tool for ‘creativity’ in the service of the technocratic educational ethic. For improvisation to become a flourishing practice and an edifying experience within music education settings, teachers need to resist glorification of the past, to be prepared to follow messy pathways of present-tense exploration, and to trust their students’ potentials to enter into improvised dialogues *from the very beginning*. They need as well to become comfortable functioning as co-musicians rather than as instructors, learning how to follow the students’ intentions and preserving openness, both in musical actions and discussions.

Recently, there have been attempts to use improvisation as a tool for the improvement of skills, guided by an instrumentalist view of education. Silberman (2003), for instance, proposes that improvisation may be a means to more effective ear training in atonal contexts. The use of improvisation in solfège training (Dos Santos & Del Ben 2004) is another example of this instrumentalist orientation, one in which improvisation is yet another ability, one that helps the student to learn ‘how to deal with the uncertainty of the moment, to be able to recover oneself, re-establishing the musical flow in an organized and coherent manner’ (274).

In cases like these, the political role of improvisation—its broad potentials for advancing the democratic imperative by questioning and challenging the dominant educational ideology is neglected. Malcolm Barry (1985) has argued that the concept of music education as a means to an end, and of improvisation as form are incompatible. ‘The moment it becomes a means to an end, education in improvisation becomes static: it becomes an art *manqué* – and it dies’ (Barry 1985, 175). A distinction is made here between improvisation as technique, and improvisation as form or process: that is, as an open approach to musical creation in performance, a mode of thinking and acting that is not bound or constrained by particular stylistic confines of improvisational techniques. To operate

within the realm of improvisation-as-form (or ‘improvised music’) is to engage in a mode of performance:

This performance mode can be thought of as an open condition that has not yet been programmed with a specific text, such as the rules of a particular musical style or tradition . . . . In fact, it’s the recognition of this level that makes possible a meeting through improvisation. (Hodgkinson 1999, 48)

The notion of free collective improvisation designates a mode of performance that does not aim at emulating particular musical styles, but strives to experiment with sounds, techniques and ways of sound organization, beginning from the simplest and most modest idea and proceeding to explore sounds and relationships among sounds and musicians *in situ*, ‘as if for the first time’ (Prévost 1995, 3).<sup>12</sup>

In what follows I will try to outline a perspective that may help conceptualize free collective improvisation as a process that involves molding and shaping particular musico-social relationships, particular ways of being together in and through music. This perspective will be informed by Arendt’s notion of *action* as she explores it in *The Human Condition* (1998/58)—a notion that emphasizes the importance of action for freedom, equality, and democratic practice. I hope to show that free improvisation may be thought of as a form of *action* in the particular and significant sense given to this term by Arendt.<sup>13</sup> I will also argue that this helps illuminate both the potentials and the contradictions that permeate the practice of improvisation.

#### ARENDR’S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

For Arendt, human practices that function on the basis of an intimate relationship between means and ends belong in the realm of “work.” In Aristotelian terms, *dunamis* is a means which produces an end product; being dissociated from *energeia*, it transforms the latter into *ergon*—thus, Arendt’s notion of work comes close to the Aristotelian *Poiesis*. Arendt draws a sharp distinction between action and work. Action is what gives voice to the human propensity for freedom, whereas work creates constancies and regularities: It produces objectivity and stability, organizing the material and intellectual aspects of life. ‘Work,’ explains Taminioux (2000), ‘manages to build a world endowed with permanence and solidity’ (166). Work redeems labor: that is, it frees people from the traps ‘imposed by the

necessities of survival' (ibid. 169). Human practices and social institutions which produce tools and artifacts are the results of work, erecting a world of durability, thus resulting to the redemption of labor. 'The redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication' (Arendt 1998/58, 236). Work binds people together through their participation in the creation of institutions and common social practices. Yet, work leads to alienation, and impersonality: 'Work is not the activity of an irreplaceable individual but of anyone who meets the overall qualifications and possesses the talent and know-how for such and such type of production' (Taminiaux 2000, 166). Work focuses solely on the relationship between means and ends, thus bereaving humans of the possibility of personal meaning. '*Homo faber* could be redeemed from his predicament of meaninglessness . . . only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech' (Arendt 1998/58, 236).

Action relates to what Arendt calls 'the "web" of human relationships' (ibid. 183), the subjective world of in-between which, 'for all its intangibility, . . . is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common' (ibid. 183). Action creates and transforms this web of relationships through its core quality, which lies beyond the mean-ends logic of work. Through action, humans act '*into* the world of human relationships, changing them as a result of its appearance' (Kharkhordin 2001, 467). But Arendt makes a bold assertion: action is of virtually no use, that is, it serves no purpose at all. Action is a *performance* whose *telos* lies in nothing but the performance itself.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, a life may be termed human only to the extent that it creates a free space for this "useless" and utterly distinctive form of activity. This is the only possible locus of freedom. In Arendt's (2006/1968b) words, 'Freedom does not appear in the realm of thought at all' (144). Arendt 'conceives *freedom* not as a mysterious inner capacity (the "free will" of the philosophers) but as the act of *being free* manifest in the performance of action within a context of equal yet diverse peers. Freedom truly exists—has the fullest phenomenal reality—only during action's performance' (Brunkhorst 2000, 181). Arendt's conception of freedom centers 'on the universal human capacity for initiation' (ibid., 188). Being free to make new beginnings is what marks her notion of "natality," which is 'the existential condition of possibility of freedom' (ibid. 188). According to Levinson (1997), for Arendt '[n]atality stands for those moments in our life in which we take responsibility for our situation by refusing to become passive vectors of social forces' (439).

Arendt conceives action as the realization of the human capacity for freedom. Freedom is an inherent condition of action, not a contingent feature of certain forms of social organization, nor a condition of consciousness. ‘The act of being free’ can only be conceived as occurring within the public space. Thus, there is no sense in which action can be an isolated, or *a-social* act, and this entails that action is by definition communicative and thus political—*feeling free*, is *not* an issue related to freedom (Arendt 2006/1968b, 144-47).<sup>15</sup>

The Arendtian conception of action contains a particularly important (for the aims of the present paper) meaning. Let me explain: Whereas both art and science are considered by Arendt as human endeavors within which people might realize their potential for freedom, ‘her interest is to find evidence of freedom in activities that “traditionally, as well as according to current opinion, are *within the range of every human being*”’ (Kateb 2000, 148, italics added).<sup>16</sup> Arendt seems to hold both a ‘grand’ and a ‘modest’ view of action. There are moments in *The Human Condition* where she talks of action as a heroic act: As Kateb (2000) indicates, ‘Arendt thinks that political action has to be something memorable. It exists to be memorable, to become the stuff of stories immediately after it is done, and the stuff of history on later generations’ (133).<sup>17</sup> However, Arendt also sees action in everyday dialogue, when people address publicly issues that concern the foundations of human life and society. Brunkhorst (2000) explains:

Arendt’s fundamental example here is a group of citizens perceiving a common issue from different (and sometimes contradictory or incompatible) perspectives. The outcome of the argumentative deliberation of such a plurality of agents is the full disclosure or illumination (in the Heideggerian/Greek sense of *aletheia*) of the matter in question. (180)

Thus, by trusting each and every human being’s potential for action, her conception of the latter is essentially egalitarian. One should not look only within the institutionalized forms of human expertise for signs of action. Nor should one think of action as an exclusive possibility that is open for ‘specially’ creative people.

What renders communicative action crucial and particularly meaningful is that it is a moment where human thinking departs from personal interests: to act communicatively means to talk, to think, and to develop a practice that goes beyond one’s personal aspirations (Kateb 2000). At the same time it entails delving into a communicative *performance* whose outcome is not known or knowable in advance. It is also a performance where the distinction between means and ends collapses: action is thus *irrevocable* or *irreversible*. What is done

cannot be undone, as the performance of an action is both the aim and the means for its realization—which, as we shall see, creates some interesting contradictions. Most importantly, however, is Arendt's insistence upon the *spontaneous* nature of action:<sup>18</sup> to act means *not* intending to achieve a clearly calculated purpose, *not* being in conscious and full command. This insistence sheds a special light on her idea of freedom. As we have seen, Arendt draws an inextricable link between freedom and action, which, according to Brunkhorst (2000), amounts to a significant departure from the predominant Western philosophical view that to be “truly free” requires being “in command” (181). In Arendt's words:

This specifically human achievement lies *altogether* out of the category of means and ends . . . In other words, the means to achieve the end would *already be the end*; and this ‘end’, conversely, cannot be considered a means in some other respect, because there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself. (1998/58, 207, italics added)

For Arendt, action without a name has no sense: the performative character of action, in which means and ends are united, gives voice to individuality. Acting ‘provides an opportunity to communicate who we are, to manifest that style of action and traits of character that makes us distinctive’ (Euben 2000, 156). Or again, in Arendt's (1998/58) words:

Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is then indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost . . . Action without a name, a “who” attached to it, is meaningless, whereas an artwork retains its relevance whether or not we know the master's name. (180-81)

Human action is what enables people to begin traveling a personal pathway, thus leading to the redemption of work. This beginning ‘is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself’ (Arendt 1998/58, 177). Through action, ‘the human condition for individuation can be realized’ (Kristeva 2001, 76). It allows for the emergence of discontinuities and irregularities that, once expressed, may be pursued. The moment of communicative action is thus a moment that celebrates human plurality: ‘Human plurality, the basic condition of speech, has the two-fold character of equality and distinction’ (Arendt 1998/58, 175). To achieve personal distinctiveness presupposes the possibility of action

within the public space; it is only in the presence of other people, other actors, that one may achieve personal distinctiveness.

However, as indicated earlier, Arendt holds an ambiguous, even contradictory, stance towards action. On the one hand, she regards it as the prime manifestation of human freedom, redeeming humans from the alienating powers of work and fabrication. On the other hand, though, what she describes as action's "inherent unpredictability" (ibid. 191), renders it intangible. Intangibility is an inevitable condition of human communicative relationships and actions 'that go on between men [*sic*] directly, without the intermediary, stabilizing, and solidifying influence of things' (ibid. 182). Here, 'things' should be regarded in a more general sense, as *sociocultural* artifacts, embedded in institutionalized patterns of practice.

Thus, action exists in the midst of contradictions; irrevocability and unpredictability of action are the result of its boundlessness, and of the production of new relationships and reactions:

The human capacity for freedom . . . by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he [*sic*] appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done. Nowhere, in other words, neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man [*sic*] appear to be *less free* than in those capacities whose *very essence is freedom* and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man [*sic*]. (ibid. 233-34, italics added)

Therefore, we are inevitably confronted with a situation in which all forms of 'safety' (which is guaranteed by work) are lost. There is nothing to guarantee the successful 'execution' of an action, exactly because action, as we have seen, can never be merely 'executed'. This entails that 'action almost never achieves its purpose' (ibid. 184)—the sole 'purpose' of action being, as I understand it, human freedom.

Thus, Arendt insisted on the need for a redemption of action. However, redemption from irreversibility and unpredictability is not achieved by yet another mode of activity (as noted earlier, work redeems labor, and action redeems work). Instead, action contains the potential for redeeming itself. The faculty of promising redeems action from unpredictability: 'The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to *make and keep promises*' (ibid. 237, italics added). The faculty of forgiving redeems action from irreversibility:

The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what [one] was doing—is the faculty of forgiving (ibid. 237, italics added).

For Arendt, forgiving and promising are inherent qualities of action, and may potentially guarantee the continuity of action. Moreover, they are inextricably related to plurality; they have meaning only within the public space where action develops: ‘Forgiving and promising enacted in solitude remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one’s self’ (ibid. 237).

#### MUSICAL IMPROVISATION AS ACTION

In what follows, I shall try to draw some parallels between the concept of political or communicative action as theorized by Arendt, and the act of improvisation as it emerges in ‘improvised music’ (see notes 9 and 12). It has been noted that Arendt’s view of action is egalitarian: the potential of action is not reserved for specially gifted individuals operating within the realm of bounded, hierarchical, and institutionalized forms of human practice. This is a first essential principle that Arendtian action shares with improvised music. Brunkhorst (2000) puts it this way: ‘Arendt takes a decisive step away from the model of the legislator-artist that informs the tradition, orienting us towards the intersubjective *praxis* of a plurality of revolutionary actors’ (189). This understanding of improvisation does not privilege expertise over the intimate pursuit of freedom, over heurism and dialogue. It is inclusive rather than exclusive. And it presupposes that all participants act in ways which entail shared responsibility for the creation of the music. Thus, this improvisation ethic seeks (or should seek) to transcend skill-based hierarchies. Prévost (1995) emphasizes the importance of an anti-technocratic view of improvised music-making and its meaning, emphasizing the complex relationship between the emergent sound structures and the on-going molding of human relationships:

When we make music we pour ourselves not only into the materials but also into the social continuum that gives the work meaning. A poorly executed or naive performance which understands and projects the social dimension is greatly preferable to spell-binding technical dexterity which diminishes and thereby harms social objectives. (37)

Thus, it is in what Prévost (2004)—after William Blake—terms ‘minute particulars’ that people may find ways of pursuing a course of musical action that constitutes an act of freedom. Adopting this rather ‘mundane’ perspective on improvisation might allow us to begin finding seeds of free communicative musical action in unexpected moments and in unexpected places. If this possibility proves viable, then music classrooms might become places where communicative action in the form of free musical dialogues can emerge, negating—or, as Kushner (2004) puts it, “falsifying”—the values and practices promoted by current official educational authorities. To put it bluntly: if we cannot have any direct effect on bureaucratic, oligarchic, and centralized democracies (Castoriadis 1997), we could, maybe, develop local modes of music education practice that nurture the emergence of action.

If this has a modest impact on children’s lives, it is no less important. Developing a perspective for doing music *with* children, instead of doing music *to* children<sup>19</sup> might be an important step towards this direction. We will return to this issue in the closing section of this paper, but first we must explore further the possible parallels between free improvisation and the Arendtian concept of action. To do this I want to concentrate on five core features of Arendt’s conceptualization of action that converge with or resemble qualities of free improvisation:

1. Unity of means and ends;
2. Irrevocability;
3. Performative and communicative character;
4. Disclosure of the voice of the agent—equality and distinction; and
5. Redemption.

### **Unifying means and ends: delving into ‘designless purpose’**

Improvisatory process is not concerned with the realization of a preexisting structure or application of a preexisting technique: it is an act of discovery without aspirations beyond itself. ‘An improvisation has no perfect form to which it can aspire. If a commensurate sense of perfection exists for a free improvisation, then it is clarity of musical perception and execution’ (Prévost 1995,109). The means for a musically improvisatory act and its end-product coincide. In improvising, one embarks upon a stream of musical actions which have no meaning beyond their realization. The music speaks and then disappears. ‘Only in collective free improvisation is the social side of art integrated with the conceptual. The

structure becomes the content: dialogue as interaction, the end as well as the means' (ibid., 80). The concerns that inspire improvised musical action—the momentary creation of a fleeting world in the pursuit of dialogue and experimentation—'fully manifest' themselves 'only in the performing act itself' (Arendt 2006/1968b, 151) and are free from the motives and aims that attend creation of musical 'objects'. 'To be free', Arendt argues, action 'must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other' (ibid. 150).

It is important to distinguish between principles that inform action on the one hand, and goals or motives on the other. What we call 'musical intentions', the act of thinking musically within improvisation, should be regarded as the instantiation of the principles which underpin improvised action.<sup>20</sup> In Prévost's (1995) words, one must be ready to delve into a 'designless purpose' (109) where, 'though [one] cannot predict how or what [one] will play, every note is intentional' (123).

Improvisation thus conceived has important educational implications, for it presents us with a view of learning strongly contrasted with the accumulation of skills. Learning, in the sense of confronting the particularities of improvised performance, of forming musical intentions and pursuing ideas *in situ*, of trusting intuition, of developing the ability to respond to one's own and the co-players' sounds, cannot be pursued outside the realm of performance itself:

Intuitively, the learning and the dialogical processes are accomplished *within* performance . . . The skill of improvisation is the ability to make music without pre-ordained design – *without purpose* other than doing and without expectation. Such a musician does not count on the harvest while ploughing. (ibid. 65, italics added)

Thus, learning to delve into free improvisation is not simply learning to play an instrument so as to respond quickly. It means something else altogether: learning to play intensely while at the same time feeling that 'there is nothing higher to attain than this actuality itself' (Arendt 1998/58, 207). Listen how close to Arendt's thinking stands the following statement: 'The only way to create a meaningful piece of music . . . is to work on the moment and to be prepared to develop, to combat and at times to struggle, in the collaborative effort. Such efforts nourish the music' (Prévost 1995, 123).

This attitude delineates a conception of structure radically different from the one employed in the compositional mode of musical creation, understood as a ‘discontinuous process of creation and iteration (usually through notation) of musical ideas’ (Sarath 1996, 2). Working in compositional mode entails the creation of patterns with the prospect of forming larger structural wholes, and of course these patterns are subject to revisions informed by the wholeness of the piece as it gradually develops. Sarath (1996) argues that the composer experiences an “expanding” temporality’, ‘where temporal projections may be conceived from any moment in a work to past and future coordinates’ (1). To work in this way means to search for sounds with the aim of developing a ‘piece’; it means to operate within the realm of experience Arendt has called fabrication, or ‘work’.<sup>21</sup> In improvisation, however, time is experienced ‘in an inner-directed “vertical” manner, where the present is heightened and the past and future are perceptually subordinated’ (Sarath 1996, 1). Thus, the way the “musical past” informs the “musical future” is very different from the conscious search for multi-layered structural relationships which characterizes composition. Ratté (1997) argues that ‘[t]he special value of improvised music lies in this capacity to make explicit its past in abundant mimetic references, more often than not imaginary. This is an altogether particular way of remembering *and forgetting*’ (31). In this sense, although both composition and improvised musical action organize sounds, their perspectives on musical structures are very different.<sup>22</sup> Prévost writes:

It might be that a ‘composition’ will be created as a result of an improvisation, but the act of improvisation displays none of the characteristics of premediated formulation to which the term ‘composing’ habitually refers. For it is only after the fact of improvising that we could use the term ‘composition’. (1995, 60)

### **Irrevocability**

The performative nature of improvisation entails a special kind of responsibility. Sarath (1996) argues that ‘[t]he fact that the past is unchangeable within a continuous stream of ideas also magnifies the moment at hand as the locus of attention’ (6). The commitment that characterizes improvised performance is the result both of its openness and its irrevocable character. In improvisation each sound is experienced as an unchangeable part of an open performance. Amongst the infinite possibilities for continuation, the sound played at each moment is felt *as if* it were the only one that could have been made. This is the root of

continuation: what is played is an irreversible part of the performance. It is this ‘*as if*’ illusion that makes the experience of improvisation a finite, yet indeterminate phenomenon: experiencing the unfolding of patterns as belonging to a whole, but without knowing what this whole is. As Hodgkinson (2000) puts it, ‘to speak of intention is to emphasise not a kind of consciousness, but a tendency or projection towards a particular result in the immediate future. In each moment what is played is “as if” some particular outcome is going to follow from it’ (30). Irrevocability is, therefore, a fundamental constituent of improvisatory experience: ‘the irrevocability of decisions makes the improviser a particular kind of *presence to the whole*. It makes [her or] him responsible to the whole, not by taking decisions that have the whole in mind, but by being present to the whole, and taking decisions informed by this presence’ (Ratté 1997, 31).

‘Entering’ into the creation of an improvised piece is like getting into a river whose route is forged in the course of ‘swimming’. Upon entering that ‘river’, there is no way of going back. Improvisation presents a special sense of freedom: although there is nothing to shape the course of the music except the players’ acts, ‘[o]nly at the point of making the first sound is the meta-musician free to determine the direction of a music. Once rolling, the only course is to give the performance coherence and develop a sharpened perspective on the nature of the ensuing work’ (Prévost 1995, 109). Once inside the realm of an improvised performance, ‘the momentum of playing takes control of the musician; for once committed to making the music [the musician] is no longer free’ (ibid. 123). And yet, to use Kateb’s words, this ‘submission feels like an expansion, not as a constriction’ (2000, 138). To improvise means to be ‘inside’ a special world of time, to create a musical context where personal responsibility for finding ways forward is critical.

### **Sharing intentions: the communicative character of improvised action**

Improvisation creates a ‘public space’ where freedom may appear, where players and audience search for ways of musical communications under ‘no-rule’. In improvised music, not only is there no ready-made form awaiting realisation, but ‘there is nothing to co-ordinate or synchronise the intentions of the musicians as the music unfolds’ (Hodgkinson 2000, 30). What remains endlessly open is the determination of the musicians to work on the basis of what Prévost (1995) calls ‘heuristic dialogue’ and ‘dialogical heurism’ (3). Heuristic dialogue, as I understand it, refers to acts of discovery within improvisational contexts that

take the form of continuous dialogue between the human body as a thinking mechanism—and producer of sounds—and their investiture with meaning. It is the ‘inner debate’ (ibid., 3) experienced by every improvising musician. Dialogical heurism denotes the struggle between differing personal musical intentions of partners in improvisation. Thus, ‘Inner debate meets outer debate’ (ibid., 3). The irrevocable character of musical acts creates a special sense of listening-in-action:

In improvisation, where sound material does not clearly express a schema, it is the concern for the irrevocability of the part that makes the immediacy of the listening a resource for the imaginative production of differentiations. This concern shows itself, for example, in the spontaneous production of imagined mimetic equivalents to some irrevocable and fleeting event whose identity was, in the heat of the moment, only weakly grasped. (Ratté 1997, 31)

In improvisation the struggle to respond (even by deliberately ‘ignoring’ the co-players’ music) constitutes an act of discovering relationships. Improvising musicians, like all acting humans, ‘need the presence of others before whom they can appear’ (Arendt 2006/1968b, 152). Moreover, the efforts of listeners or audience members to give meaning to what is heard are constitutive parts of the musical event. For these contribute to its transformation from an exploratory activity to a communicative one, from a private enterprise to a public event. They bring into the musical experience a vital ingredient: the exploration of the listener’s response.

### **Disclosure of the voice of the agent – equality and distinction**

In each improvisation the players form their musical identities anew, through reference to each other’s musical acts. Exploring and responding to sounds without the purpose of creating (fabricating) artistic objects is a precondition for the development of dialogue and heurism. As Prévost argues, the primary objective of free improvisation is ‘the practice of human inquiry and the unmediated experience of human relations’ (1995, 108). However, this does not entail that improvisation leads to the creation of ‘ideal’ communities. Equality among participants is no guarantee that the process will work automatically or effectively. Far from it: ‘There are times when some musicians go only for their own thing and there is no way that I can stand out because the person is not really listening to me at all. And very obviously my identity is disappearing in that improvisation’ (Jin Hi Kim, in Stanyek 1999, 47). Since issues of musical communication are always open, without preordained solutions

or strategies, personal responsibility is a central concern. In Arendt's terms, the challenge is to maintain plurality by balancing the musicians' efforts so that equality and distinction are in a constant dialectical process. Prévost puts it this way: A musical practice based on the 'imperatives of heurism and dialogue must first advance a sense of social justice, then nurture it; a justice in which [people] speak to [each other] without fear' (1995, 50).

Improvisation entails a particular approach to and conception of identity: a willingness to forge one's identity through actions that do not aim at demonstrating what one has already gained, but rather at surrendering to the openness of discovery. This is a risky process which can be sustained only when there is 'no fear'. In improvisation, the freedom to act is tempered by the necessity to keep the mind alive-in-the-moment. And no individual can claim full responsibility for the music, since spontaneity precludes being in full command of one's actions. This implies a sense of surrender and at the same time a sense of freedom to act: 'The music makes itself – just as man makes himself [*sic*]. Here are volition, intention, determination, tempered by acceptance of eventuality. Here is definition by action. I am what I am because I do what I do, acted upon and acting upon' (ibid. 112, italics added). Thus, one is playing and at the same time is played by the music. In improvisation one is capable of making new beginnings: of seeking repeatedly to re-discover one's voice through dialogue that aims at nothing but dialoguing. Goldstein (1983) asks: 'What does improvisation ask of the performer that is so different from printed, through-composed pieces of music? . . . perhaps, "who are you?" "How do you think about this moment/sounding?"' (18). As stated earlier, for Arendt, action without a name has no sense. Gavin Bryars has noted that in improvisation 'It's like standing a painter next to his picture so that every time you see the painting you see the painter as well and you can't see it without him [*sic*]' (in Bailey 1992, 115).

### **Redeeming improvisation: promise and forgiving**

We have noted that in free improvisation there is nothing to guarantee co-ordination and successful communication between the musicians. We have also noted that irrevocability goes hand in hand with what Prévost called '*acceptance of eventuality*'. Remember: The improvising musician is free only while making the first sound. In Arendtian terms, a music-making practice '*whose very essence is freedom*' is at the same time a moment where freedom is denied. However, improvisation cannot be redeemed through organizing

principles and modes of action that are alien to what I have called the improvisation ethic. It is the intention to enter into dialogue and discovery of sounds and ways of response that sustains improvisational practice. This—the equivalent to the Arendtian notion of promise—is what redeems the inherent unpredictability of improvisation. Partners in musical improvisation act as supporters, in the sense that they remain faithful and committed to the principles of their practice. Here is an example from a recent interview (after an improvisation we had played together) with a 11-year-old child:

Student: The only thing I realized is that each one of us was playing things that the other did not expect.

Researcher: What do you mean? Can you give me an example?

Student: An example? When I was seeing that you were stuck, what would I do? Would I leave you on your own? No, I would ‘cover’ you.

Here, the intention to delve into a freely improvised duet entails the making of a promise. Within the temporal unfolding of the music we are both responsible for the piece, and therefore our musical acts become acts of help. Improvisation is a distinctive musical act, a distinctive realm of experience that ‘dictates’ that we cannot just step out, stop or destroy the piece. In other words, there is nothing that can ‘save’ the process from collapsing but the promise that one will keep fighting for the best, even at moments perceived as problematic.

This brings us back to the issue of irrevocability. For Arendt, irrevocability is redeemed by forgiving. In improvisation, ‘forgiving’ might mean letting things go, weighing possibilities and problems *without allowing judgment to become an impediment of action*. Judgment-in-action has a special sense in improvisation, where evaluative perceptions of each moment are signals that influence the way forward, as players gradually come to realize the potential of what was played intuitively in a given moment. In fact, what at a certain moment may be perceived as a ‘failure’ often opens up new possibilities for continuation. Listen how two 8-year-old children working on improvisation talk about the notion of ‘mistake’:

Student 1: [In improvisation] You might like what is wrong better than what is right.

Student 2: When you have made a mistake [it does not matter] because anyway you have not thought what to do next, so you can continue [without there being a problem]. For we have not written anything anywhere.

And now listen to Steve Lacy:

[Thelonious Monk] was very interested in errors, and when someone made a mistake he would pick up on it and examine the ramifications . . . therein.’  
(Steve Lacy, forward to *Thelonious Monk: His Life and Music*, quoted in Day 2000, 99)

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As Henry Giroux suggests,

Hope becomes meaningful to the degree that it identifies agencies and processes, offers alternatives to an age of profound pessimism, reclaims an ethic of compassion and justice, and struggles for those institutions in which equality, freedom, and justice flourish as part of the ongoing struggle for a global democracy. (2004, 39)

I have tried to construct a way of understanding improvised music as an Arendtian form of communicative action. If what has been suggested is a valid and fruitful way of thinking about musical improvisation, then it may be important for music education and music educators give serious consideration to free improvisation as way of transforming the music classroom into a democratic realm in the pursuit of freedom. This perspective would transform our conceptions of music teaching: not as a process of transmission, nor as a tool for ‘unlocking’ children’s ‘inner’ creativity and ‘expression’, but—to use Wilson’s (2003) words—as the conscious attempt ‘to engender a space of appearances in the classroom within which students’ lives can be illuminated’ (219). My effort rests on a straightforward feeling of hope that music education, this ‘minute particular’, may indeed be able to assume a stance that subverts the current ‘profound pessimism’, leading us away from musical and educational nihilism.<sup>23</sup> Turning music classrooms into places where children create an ethic informed by the principles outlined above might be a real source of hope. Improvisation creates a model of being and playing together that enables children to *act*—and I hope that by now this term has taken that special meaning that emerges as one ‘reads’ improvisation through the eyes of Arendt’s thought.

Improvised musical action might be a way of empowering the children to create an intimate sense of personal meaningfulness in their relationship to music. And creating a meaningful life is one of the most important educational aims (Greene 1995). Moreover, improvisation creates a vision of being together that comes close to Castoriadis’ notion of *autonomous* society. This important philosopher seems to share with Arendt a belief in the

liberational function of communicative action: ‘The time of doing must be instituted so as to contain singularities that are not determinable in advance, as the possibility of appearance of what is irregular. . . . [I]t must preserve or make room for the emergence of otherness’ (Castoriadis 1987, 372). And as we have seen, improvised musical action creates a mode of being together in and through music that encourages irregularity, emphasizes equality and distinction, and enables us to learn to acknowledge (and try to redeem) the inherent contradictions within which it lives.

There are important issues that either have not been addressed or adequately pursued in this study. One concerns the nature of verbal dialogue and discussion within an educational community that practices free improvisation, in the light of Arendt’s emphasis on speech and narrative on the one hand, and her conception of (educational) authority (Arendt 2006/1968a, 92-3; 2006/1968c) on the other. Connected with this is the problem of the relationship of my argument to Arendt’s claim that education is by definition *pre-political*, and as such should be conservative, as well as with her insistence on the instruction into the old as a *precondition* for the possibility of change (see Levinson 1997; also Gordon 2001). Here I can only quote Arendt’s words, leaving the issue open: What does she mean when she writes, ‘Exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world . . .’ (Arendt 2006/1968c, 189)?

Nor have I tackled the relationship of improvised musical actions with ethics, given Arendt’s problematic insistence that action is not and cannot be related to morality (Kateb 2000). A very important issue which has not been addressed concerns the relationship between Arendt’s notion of thinking (defined as ‘the antithesis of thoughtlessness, of accepting things as they are’: Crick 1997, 83) as explored in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* (1978a) and musical improvisation as communicative action. Finally, this essay has not specifically addressed the relationship between musical-improvisation-as-action and Arendt’s conception of the artwork as belonging in the realm of work: ‘Works of art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things’ (Arendt, 1998/58, 168-9). Here, I should only mention that for Arendt the work of art ‘must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world’ (1998/58, 167).<sup>24</sup> It is because of this that, for Arendt, that artworks ‘have a memorial function, preserving human action from the ruin of time’ (Curtis 2004, 303). Moreover, ‘works of art give human

plurality its objectivity, that is, they form the world of objects that mediate the relations between us' (ibid. 303). The constancy of artworks lead to remembrance, and thus fulfills our desire for continuation. The issue here concerns the relationship between improvisation as a form of fleeting action and musical works as "spaces of appearance," that is, spaces of freedom in which human beings are disclosed' (ibid. 303). What might be the ontological status of improvisation within this framework? And which might be the relationships between improvised music and the inheritance of artworks and institutionalized modes of musical practice *within* the realm of education?

Despite these limitations, this essay sought a way of thinking about musical improvisation that might open a fruitful dialogue on its value for education, and on the more general issue of the political role of music education practices in the pursuit of freedom and equity. Risking trivializing Arendt's term, I would say that the essay has sought to create 'thought trains' (1978a, 160): 'conceptualizations that are worthy objects of contemplation, with nonliteral and unpredictable effects on one's soul' (Kateb 1995, 38).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *International Conference on Music Education, Equity, and Social Justice*, October 6-8, 2006, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. Sincere thanks are due to the three anonymous reviewers and Tom Regelski for their insightful and challenging comments. Also to Randall Allsup for his support in the earlier stages of this project; and to Elvira Panayiotidi, Anna Chronaki and Emilios Cambouropoulos for our discussions.

<sup>2</sup> This should not only be regarded in a positive sense. What for someone is a desired set of relationships might be seen by another as constrictive and excessively hierarchical.

<sup>3</sup> The example of notation is characteristic of how specific political values are inscribed into the very core of musical practices. Analytic notation does not just represent sounds: it constitutes a means of advancing authority over sound, prioritizing structure over expressive nuances, detachment over reciprocity, individuality over collectivity, parametric thinking over wholeness of musical experience. Musical practices, canon formation, embodiment and representation of (gendered) hegemonic forms of cultural production are all intimately linked. As sociologist John Shepherd argues, 'Music reminds men of the fragile and atrophied nature of their control over the world. The male fear of women is mirrored in the threat posed by uncontrollable musical experience to the "moral fibre" of the rationalistic scribe-state . . . ' (1987, 151) and so 'the answer has been to isolate those components, pitch and rhythm, which can be objectified and frozen through a "fully analytic" notation' (1987,172). Thus, a music education that centers around the teaching of notation arguably functions as an embodiment of such values, values with significant political parameters.

<sup>4</sup> The Foucaultian conception of music education as a way of disciplining the body by ‘ordering’ it has been borrowed from Bergeron (1992). In her view, instrumental music training ‘involves a physical positioning: the hand, the arm, the fingers, the spine are all marked, positioned, according to separate functions. The Suzuki class (perfect model of discipline) playing in unison demonstrates the eerie power of the ordered body’ (Bergeron 1992, 2). That music education may be perceived as a disciplinary force with direct political consequences is not, of course, something new. It goes back to Plato and his conception of ‘the moral character of the modes’ (Bergeron 1992, 3). Bergeron mentions an eloquent example of the disciplinary logic regarding music, from *The Laymen’s Music Book* by Leopold Stokowski’s first wife, Olga Samaroff. In a chapter entitled ‘Why Scales?’ we read, ‘...but the fact remains, trained musicians do not commit crimes, and men who receive musical training in penal institutions stay out when released’ (1935, 64; in *ibid.* 3). Bergeron argues that Samaroff’s logical leap ‘from the scale to the prison’ might rest on the disciplining structure of large instrumental ensembles where power relations and hierarchically structured roles infuse the musicians with a sense of personal responsibility, leading them to feel accountable for their own performance but also placing them ‘in a network where acts of mutual surveillance serve to maintain the musical standard’ (*ibid.* 4).

<sup>5</sup> For example, ‘traditional’ music appreciation ‘orders’—in both senses of the term—the ear to adopt a ‘disinterested’ stance towards listening, and a disembodied, analytical and hierarchical stance towards music(s), with the teachers being ‘unaware that the assumption of an aesthetic hierarchy and thus the impulse to elevate musical taste has its origins in attitudes and values dictated earlier in history by cultural elites’ (Regelski 2006, 284).

<sup>6</sup> As Castoriadis explains, ‘*De jure* validity, and not simply *de facto* validity, means that we no longer accept a representation or an idea simply because we have received it, and that we do not have to accept it. We require [*exigons*] that one might render an account and a reason for it, what the Greeks called *logon didonai* (the conativity of this idea with the public political control in the *agora* and the *ekklēsia* is patently obvious)’ (Castoriadis 1997, 109).

<sup>7</sup> Here I can only sketch a general outline of the meaning of democracy adopted here. This view has been influenced mainly by Arendt, and Castoriadis—and one should note that Castoriadis’ work is often in dialogue with Arendt’s writings. Both Arendt and Castoriadis ‘raise the same substantive issue: namely, how to think—that is, produce meanings (Arendt) or significations (Castoriadis) for—democratic political action in terms other than those inherited from the Western philosophical tradition and what Castoriadis calls its “identity logic and ontology”’ (Zerilli 2002, 541). For Castoriadis, democracy is not an institution; rather it is a mode of developing human relationships that both institutes and is instituted in the public sphere, and which resists absolutism, power centralization, authoritative discourses, and hierarchal structures. Castoriadis holds that ‘Democracy entails a mode of living according to which one strives to enact the project of autonomy, a project according to which one treats oneself and others not as an end but as a beginning. Castoriadis sets the “constitution” of “new institutions and of new ways of living” against all means-ends logic in politics and every form of technique’ (*ibid.* 544). The influence of the Arendtian notions of natality and action is obvious in this excerpt. For Arendt, the prerequisite for democracy is the existence of the public sphere, a sphere where freedom can appear. But the public sphere is always in search of its foundations, and is based on a conception of freedom as ‘pure *anarchy*, which is emphasized in a too-often forgotten expression of Arendt (in her essay on Broch): “the political realm—that is, the inherently *anarchic* conglomeration of human

beings...” (Arendt 1993, 149)’ (in Herzog 2004, 32). Humans are free when they are in constant and anarchic search—that is, based on ‘the condition of no-rule’ (Arendt 1990, 30)—for the foundations of their freedom and of the institutions they create. Dubiel (1995) argues that for Arendt, the source of power is ‘the community itself’ (18). This horizontal view of the democratic social contract rests upon ‘a reciprocal promise to stand up for each other in the shared knowledge that there can be no guarantee for the integrity of community beyond the bounds of this contract’ (ibid. 18). Most importantly, both Castoriadis and Arendt renounce sovereignty as a prerequisite for democracy and freedom: ‘If men [*sic*] wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce’ (Arendt, 2006/1968b: 163). It must be emphasized, however, that, although Castoriadis’ thinking about democracy is straightforward and clear, the relationship between Arendt’s thinking and democracy is much more complex, and, at times, even contradictory (see Kateb, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> For example, Saul (2003) regards hard bop as ‘a musical facet of the freedom movement—an extension particularly of the idea of direct action into the realm of structurally improvised music’ (6). For a critical analysis of the limitations of the critique of societal power structures expressed through the free jazz movement of the 1960s see Smith (2004).

<sup>9</sup> As Borgo (2002) argues, ‘To define free improvisation in strictly musical terms . . . is potentially to miss its most remarkable characteristic—the ability to incorporate and negotiate disparate perspectives and worldviews’ (167). It should be stressed that ‘the pioneering musicians of the 1960s resisted any strict categorization or methodological, ethical, and aesthetic unity; within such heterogeneity are wide-ranging approaches to the confrontation of hegemonic structures through experimentalism and improvisation’ (Robinson 2005, 31). Lewis (1996) has developed a socio-historical perspective of the conflicting aesthetic orientations of jazz-based improvisation on the one hand and avant-garde experimentalism and indeterminacy on the other (between what he terms Afrological and Eurological perspectives), and their treatment of concepts like spontaneity and memory, tradition and freedom. Moreover, his work provides important insights on the emergence of ‘improvised music’ as conceptualized by European improvisers (for example, AMM, Derek Bailey, and Evan Parker), free-jazz musicians (particularly those associated with AACM), downtown New York musicians such as John Zorn, Fred Frith and Ikue Mori, and ‘post-Cage’ (119) improvisers like Malcolm Goldstein or experimental collectives like MEV. For an account of the different ways in which different free improvisers define, ‘perform’, and experience freedom, see the already mentioned article by Borgo (2002).

<sup>10</sup> *Greatness in Music* is the title of a book by Alfred Einstein (1941); see also Dahlhaus (1983), 9.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Anderson (2004).

<sup>12</sup> Of course, musical improvisation is an extremely complex and widespread phenomenon. Various forms of improvisation exist in musics of the world, and different musical practices incorporate improvisation in a variety of ways (Nettl & Russel 1998). Moreover, there is an ongoing and active debate as to what is meant by improvisation, and its relationship with concepts such as invention, innovation, composition, interpretation, structure, indeterminacy, technique, tradition (Foss 1962; Nettl 1974; Alperson 1984; Treitler 1991; Hall 1992; Monson 1994; Brown 1996; Hamilton 2000; Racy 2000; Benson 2003; Nooshin 2003; Cobusen 2005; Ramshaw 2006). To argue that particular qualities of improvisation parallel those of Arendtian political/communicative action necessarily implies a particular conception of improvisation, which of course is an abstraction, albeit a necessary one. This conception is

based on a distinction I draw between improvisation as part of extant musical forms and traditions, and free collective improvisation ('improvised music', free music, or free jazz)—free in the sense that it does not seek to 'belong' in any particular musical tradition, striving instead for experimentation, and countering hierarchal musical structures and music-making contexts. It must be noted that we are confronted with a serious problem here, for virtually all musical projects not only are embedded in particular socio-cultural contexts but also create their own 'local' histories, their own 'traditions', and therefore operate within various sets of musical, personal and social constraints. For example, adopting a socio-historical point of view, Tucker (2004) argues, 'Even the most experimental varieties of jazz, while they may transform how we hear and think and play and conceive relationships, do so not by transcending culture and history, but by signifying within constellations of historically situated meaning' (245). What must be emphasized is that although improvised music ('free' improvisation) cannot and does not function without constraints, it tries to use as few prescriptive rules as possible and tries to deal with the constraints that arise anew in each performance: 'Music as a time and motion study can liberate us, potentially, from unconscious, culturally acquired responses. . . . The purpose of an aesthetic of dialogue is to explore and create an inexhaustible variety of responses' (Prévost 1995, 36-8). The apparent impossibility of this project does not cancel its potential. Quite the contrary. Hence its educational value.

<sup>13</sup> I do this being aware of Arendt's (1998/58) argument that of all the arts it is the theater that stands out as the most political, for it directly deals with the issue of human relationships: 'the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art' (188). In a similar vein, Castoriadis (2004) argues that Tragedy emerges together with the self-constitution of democracy in ancient Athens, and that it serves to remind its audience of the impossibility of being in command of the consequences of one's actions.

<sup>14</sup> 'Action in Arendt's sense of the word—following Greek usage, Arendt relies on the term *Praxis*—may be defined as acting in concert with others without the mediation of things at all. *Praxis* is political action par excellence' (Kharkhordin 2001, 467). In this sense, action comes close to the Aristotelian notion of *Praxis*, where *dunamis* and *energeia* are intimately linked (see Tamminaux 2000, 168). According to Kristeva (2001), 'Rooted in the Aristotelian notion of *energeia* [actuality], the term *praxis* applies to all activities that do not pursue an end [*ateleis*] and that leave no work behind [*par'autas erga*] but that "exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself" [Arendt 1998/58, 206]' (71). However, 'Even Aristotle, to whom we owe the distinction between action (*praxis*) and making (*poiesis*), viewed politics as essentially the *means* by which an elite inculcates a certain idea of virtue in ordinary citizens and the young' (Villa 2000, 12). Arendt begins with Aristotle but advances her conception of action by placing it into dialogue with the politics of modernity as well as with the modern philosophical conception of human freedom. She never simply uses Aristotle's views of politics and the constitution of Athenian democracy as models to which we should return. Her uses of such sources 'press the past into the service of establishing the strangeness of the present' (Kateb 1984, 149). Arendt borrows the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* (which she refers to as fabrication) and *praxis*, but, contrary to virtually all political philosophers from Aristotle onwards, she pursues 'the *existential significance* of political action itself. . . . providing a philosophical appreciation of the *meaning* of political action in the total economy of human existence' (Villa 2000, 12), *never* defining the possible *content*

of action but painstakingly theorizing on its *form* and the *conditions* of its emergence. (This has given rise to many criticisms [see Pitkin 1981; Pitkin 1999]). Thus, Arendt created a distinctive and at times idiosyncratic, even idealized, conception of action, which entailed a new vision of the political realm and its relation with the concepts of human-ness, freedom, equality, and judgment.

In the field of music education, Thomas Regelski has painstakingly advanced a view of music education as a form of *praxis*, guided by the Aristotelian view of *praxis*: ‘governed by the kind of “doing” called *phronesis*—an ethical knowledge of and for achieving “right results” judged in terms of actual benefits for one’s self or for others’ (Regelski 1998, 28). Further dialogue is needed between Regelski’s Aristotelian perspective and the Arendtian conception of improvisation that I am trying to build, in the light of Arendt’s thesis that ‘the advantages [of action] to the actor cannot be sought, yet do come when unsought’ (Kateb 2000, 144)—the advantages of action being the creation of a distinctive identity, ‘the sheer exhilaration of action and relatedly, the experience of being free’ (ibid. 145). However, these concerns lie beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt begins *What is Freedom?* with the thesis that ‘the phenomenon of freedom does not appear in the realm of thought at all, that neither freedom nor its opposite is experienced in the dialogue between me and myself’ (2006/1968b, 144). For a well-grounded critique of Arendt’s insistence on the exclusion of the faculty of the Will from the political realm, see Kalyvas (2004). Kalyvas bases his argument on Arendt’s redefinition of freedom in *The Life of the Mind*: ‘The “freedom that comes from being liberated” and “the freedom that arises out of the spontaneity of beginning something new” [Arendt 1978b, 203] require rather than exclude each other and ultimately merge into a broader, more complex and coherent notion of political freedom. The liberation of the will from oppression and deprivation, that is, from those obstacles that impede its capacities for novelty becomes an indispensable and unavoidable component of the political freedom. . . . Arendt, regrettably, avoids taking this path’ (Kalyvas 2004, 340-41). However, in my view this does not diminish the groundbreaking consequences that her analysis of freedom (Arendt, 1968/2006b) has for our understanding of the significance of action and the context of its appearance (i.e. the public realm). That ‘there may exist a freedom that is not an attribute of the will’ (ibid., 163) is not something we can just ignore because of our familiarity with the idea of ‘inner’ freedom.

<sup>16</sup> Here, Kateb quotes Arendt from *The Human Condition* (5).

<sup>17</sup> In her words, ‘Action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary’ (1998/58, 205).

<sup>18</sup> ‘This emphasis on spontaneity and unpredictability also led Arendt to break with the old European philosophical idea of the sovereign or “autonomous” subject. This dimension of Arendt’s understanding of the “non-sovereign” quality of freedom has its roots, ultimately, in Biblical sources,’ writes Brunkhorst (2000), 181.

<sup>19</sup> Here I paraphrase Prévost (2004).

<sup>20</sup> Arendt explains, ‘In distinction from its goal, the principle of an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal, it is not bound to any particular person or any particular group’ (2006/1968b: 151). But Arendt is not clear as to how principles emerge in the first place, nor as to how one comes to accept them as a guide for action. Interpreting the relationship between the principle(s) of action and action itself, Kateb (2000) argues that a principle ‘is

best understood as a commitment, whether chosen or assigned, that has a kind of logic to which one submits, but the submission feels like an expansion, not as a constriction' (138).

<sup>21</sup> For Arendt, art brings forth 'something tangible and reify human thought to such an extent that the produced thing possesses an existence of its own' (2006/1968b, 152).

<sup>22</sup> For a perspective of improvisation as 'fundamentally interpretative in nature' see Benson (2003), especially pages 133-47. His views fundamentally oppose the ones expressed here.

<sup>23</sup> Here I am referring to all three variants of nihilism (negative, reactive and passive) explored by Bowman (2005). It could be argued that improvisation counters negative nihilism by affirming the here-and-now; that it resists reactive nihilism by countering technocratic instrumentalism; and that it subverts passive nihilism by fostering autonomous judgement and personal commitment.

<sup>24</sup> See also Arendt 1998/58, 187-88, & Arendt 2006/1968b, 152.

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### **About the Author**

Panagiotis A. Kanellopoulos is Assistant Professor of Music education in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of Thessaly, Greece. He received his Ph.D. from Reading University (UK) under the supervision of Tony Kemp. He has published articles in international journals and publications. He is active as a mandolinist, but most of all enjoys improvising with children. His research interests include children's musical improvisations, socio-cultural perspectives on music education, as well as philosophy of music education.