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The Constitutive Role of the Recipient in Improvisational Co-Creation Processes: A Theoretical Exploration from Phenomenological and Ontological Perspectives

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Abstract

Western music aesthetics have traditionally marginalized the listener as a passive recipient, reinforcing a hierarchy that obscures the collaborative nature of musical meaning. Integrating phenomenological-ontological and constructivist-epistemological perspectives, I challenge this invisibilization by proposing a relational, triadic model of creation comprising the improvising subject, the sonic event, and the listening subject. In this investigation, I theorize "who listeners are"—the function they serve within the improvisational process—by demonstrating this through the functional evidence of "what they do." Phenomenological findings identify the listener as a constitutive co-creator whose reception and engagement are essential to objectifying musical actions. Constructivist analyses further demonstrate that sound attains the status of music only through the listener's active actualization, imaginative continuation, and audiation—a dense web of cognitive, emotional, social and cultural processes. By operationalizing this imaginative doing—specifically through processes of audiation and projection—as the performative foundation of ontological being, I establish the listener as a prerequisite for the actualization of the musical phenomenon. Ultimately, without this constitutive act, the sonic event remains an ontological non-event. Consequently, I advocate for a paradigm shift in music education: moving beyond production-centered models and toward cultivating receptive creativity. By integrating practices such as deep listening, this perspective foregrounds listening as a central site of musical creativity and co-creation, recognizing the listener's- agency as integral to musical authorship and meaning-making.

Keywords

Improvisational co-creation, phenomenology of music perception, constructivist epistemology, critical music aesthetics, musical ontology and agency, embodied and situated listening

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Who creates music, and what defines its essence? This ontological question has long driven debates about the nature of musical existence. Beyond physical sound waves, this inquiry investigates music's ontological mode of being: can it exist if it is not perceived? Within European traditions, this question has predominantly been answered in a monological manner: the composer is situated as the true creator of the work, the score as its normative authority, the performer as a dutiful medium, and the listener as a passive recipient. This discourse constitutes a historically sedimented "regime of truth" (Lorenzini 2015, 2016) that organizes how musical creation and reception are conceptualized, taught, and institutionalized.

To elucidate the cultural foundations of Western art music and the hierarchy inherent within it, Bruno Nettl (1992) employs the metaphor of a "music building," where the names of the "Great Masters" are inscribed above entrances, akin to deities (138–39). This structure signals a regime in which the composer's sovereign authority and the score's normative status dictate every aspect of musical life. Nettl further reveals that the systematic invisibilization of the listener and the disciplining of the performer are enacted through a rondo-like social ritual. Likening the orchestra to a "factory" or "army," Nettl (1992) demonstrates how individual agency is sacrificed to the elite dictate of the score and conductor-as-general (150–52). Within this structure, the listener occupies a subordinate position and serves as a passive recipient. This creates a historical irony: the aesthetic ideal of "pure" contemplative listening has systematically marginalized the listener as a creative agent.

This paradigm positions the musical work as an autonomous, pre-given object, rendering the listener ontologically subordinate—a consumer whose receptive agency remains overlooked. Foundational figures such as Igor Stravinsky (1947), Aaron Copland (1957), Arnold Schoenberg (1958), Paul Hindemith (1961), Nelson Goodman (1968), E. T. A. Hoffmann (1989), and Roman Ingarden (1989) reinforce this discourse, creating a structural tendency to render receptive creativity invisible. This structure is not merely theoretical; it has concrete implications for music education, shaping curricula in which improvisatory and listener-centered practices are marginalized.

Hoffmann (1989) constructs the image of the "true artist" as someone who completely dissolves into the created work, avoiding any trace of personal influence (37). This formulation is not neutral: it disciplines interpretive practice by framing personal initiative, spontaneity, and situational responsiveness as potential threats to the work. Stravinsky (1947) labels even the smallest deviation from the composer's will a "betrayal" or "criminal assault," effectively

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stabilizing the composer as a quasi-sovereign authority to whom performers owe moral and quasi-juridical obligations (125). Similarly, Ingarden (1989) characterizes notation as "imperative symbols" possessing moral force, suggesting that the work issues commands that must be executed correctly (25). This imperative structure contributes to an epistemic devaluation of performance and reception, relegating them to secondary sites of meaning production.

The marginalization of the listener is most explicit in in the writings of Schoenberg (1958). In one of his letters, he claims that the listener is necessary only "for acoustic reasons," since music would not sound good in an entirely empty hall (58). The listener thus appears explicitly as a mere physical necessity, not as a constitutive part of the aesthetic event. Schoenberg regards the audience primarily as a disruptive element to be minimized, whereas Hindemith (1961) conceptualizes the performer as a "transformer station" (37) or "intermediary" who must transmit the composer's intention as unaltered as possible (155). Copland (1957) writes that the performer is a "medium" and "a kind of middleman in music" (159) who "exists to serve the composer—to assimilate and recreate the composer's 'message'" (160). Discursively, such metaphors systematically undervalue performative and creative receptive activity. Goodman (1968) similarly warns that even minimal deviations in performance may jeopardize the identity of a work. Typically, such authority lies with institutions, experts, and canonical structures—not with the varied practices of listening through which the work is constituted anew each time.

The "work-concept"—the idea of music as a fixed, autonomous object—is a historically contingent development emerging around 1800 (Goehr 1992). Before what Goehr (1992) refers to as the Beethoven paradigm, music was primarily functional. Modern aesthetics transformed it into "fine art," institutionalizing score-fidelity and devaluing ephemeral, performative practices in favor of the permanent work (8). This ontology of the pre-existing object stabilizes the classical tradition but imposes what Goehr (1992) calls "conceptual imperialism" on improvisational practices (39). This hierarchy (composer > work > performer > listener) establishes the work-concept as the normative ideal while rendering listeners' creative agency invisible—a configuration that has dominated music aesthetics since the nineteenth century.

From the Middle Ages until the mid-nineteenth century, the development of Western art music relied heavily on practices of "musical embellishment, ornamentation, alteration, and even freer forms of improvisation," as Robin Moore (1992, 62) demonstrated. Building on this history, Robin Moore (1992) identifies a pivotal sociological rupture around 1840: the rapid decline of

improvisation from an essential professional skill to a marginalized practice. This shift established a "tyranny of tradition" that severed the intersubjective vocabulary between performers and listeners (Moore 1992, 79). Driven by nineteenth-century institutionalization, this regime prioritized notation to make music consumable. Canonized works became sacrosanct relics, and improvisation became a sacrilege—akin to painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa. This fixation transformed music from spontaneous expression into a static artifact. Consequently, improvisation remains caught in a central antinomy: it is celebrated as an emancipatory promise of individual agency, yet feared as a pre-artistic threat to authorial control (Moore 1992). This antinomy is not merely a theoretical tension, but the outcome of a deliberate pedagogical shift.

Within this framework, improvisation occupies an ambivalent space, reflecting a core antinomy in modern musical thought. As Panagiotis Kanellopoulos (2013) notes, modern understandings frequently frame improvisation as a form of rupture that unsettles the stability and authorial control associated with the autonomous musical work, often evoking anxieties about unpredictability and incompleteness and contributing to its historical dismissal as a marginal or "pre-artistic" creative process (quoted in Siljamäki and Kanellopoulos 2020, 115). At the same time, improvisation—particularly within traditions such as Jazz, Iranian dastgāh, Indian rāga, and Arabic maqām—has been understood as a powerful site of creative emancipation, individual agency, and socio-political expression, where practices of reinterpretation and transformation of existing materials enable musicians to negotiate identity and challenge canonical constraints (Borgo 2004; Tavousi 2021, 2026a). Improvisation thus sits at the intersection of aesthetic suspicion and emancipatory promise.

Piotrowska (2012) traces this historical ambivalence to the nineteenth century, when improvisation was simultaneously lauded as divine inspiration and feared as an indicator of madness. This ambivalence extended to broader sociocultural valuations: while composition was associated with learning, order, and progress, improvisation was often deemed "primitive," "spontaneous," or "natural" and frequently linked to non-European musical traditions, including the music of Sinti and Roma (332). The improviser's emancipatory freedom—the capacity to make real-time decisions over the form of a work—was perceived as a challenge to the authority of the composer. At the same time, the exotic appeal of improvisatory freedom provoked anxiety that it might "contaminate" or distort the "authentic" musical work (339). Audiences and critics oscillated between awe at the transcendent immediacy of improvisation and derision, casting the improviser as an entertainer or spectacle. Piotrowska (2012)

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concludes that improvisation in the nineteenth century occupied a liminal space, representing both the possibility and the impossibility of composition. This marginalization is not merely a logical byproduct of work-aesthetics but a historically sedimented exclusion; scholars including Nettl (1998) identify improvisation as a "neglected art" or mere musical marginalia (1).

This theoretical advancement is particularly urgent for higher music education, where improvisation continues to lead a shadow existence in many conservatories (Mäder et al. 2013, 58). To counteract this shadow existence, Nadine Meidert and Roberto Hirche (2025) propose a shift toward "Applied Improvisation" in higher education, viewing it as a fundamental mindset rather than a mere lack of planning. By integrating principles of positive psychology and movement-based learning, they argue that improvisational tools can significantly enhance the communicative and adaptive capacities of both teachers and students within the complex environments of modern universities. Mathias Maschat (2012) argues that a narrow view focusing solely on material and structure fails to capture the "presence" and "aura" of improvisation, leading to its systematic absence even in major contemporary overviews of music aesthetics (3). Consequently, despite its status as a widespread cross-cultural practice, improvisation has yet to be established as a core concept in broader cultural studies or sociology (Kurt and Näumann 2008). Moving beyond music education practices that exclude improvisation requires a reorientation that counteracts this institutional marginalization, as explicitly called for by scholars including Maud Hickey (2009), who advocates for the integration of improvisation to bridge the gap between music, movement, and agency.

Another notable music education example Michael Dartsch's (2014) formulation that explicitly addresses the creative act: "In fact, music lives only as created or re-created; it therefore presupposes creation. Whoever wishes to bring music to life—whether in oneself or for others—must create or re-create it" (81, translated by the author). While this statement rightly emphasizes the performative character of musical practice and the fact that music comes to life only in the concrete act of creating or re-creating it, it nevertheless remains bound to a production-centered paradigm and leaves open who counts as a creative agent in this act in this process. The listener's perspective remains implicitly excluded, as if listeners contributed nothing to the emergence of the musical phenomenon.

This study intervenes precisely at this point of omission, opening a debate on whether musical creation can truly be attributed exclusively to musicians. By problematizing musical production as the sole locus of creativity, the I argue

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that an artificial separation of production and reception fails to account for the conditions under which music exists. This necessitates a model that ontologically centers the listener as a constitutive co-creator—an agent whose listening is the very condition for the musical event's appearance. By transcending the artificial separation of production and reception, I contend that musical meaning arises through a situative, co-creative process.

Accordingly, I propose a paradigm shift toward a relational model that centers the listener's constitutive role. The central thesis is as follows: Music—especially improvised music—does not exist independently of its reception; listeners are not only receivers but co-creators of musical meaning. This implies a revision of the ontology of musical existence: music is constituted not only by sounding events or the intentional act of production but by the reciprocal entanglement of production, perception, and contextual interpretation. From this perspective, music is not an object but a relational event. Accordingly, I propose a model of dialogical partnership with three inseparably intertwined dimensions: the improvising subject, the musical event, and the listening subject.

Rather than sharply distinguishing composition and performance, this model understands improvisation as a dynamic field of mutual interrelation. Music emerges not through the actions of a single agent but through the co-presence and co-activity of all participants. To substantiate this perspective, the study interweaves two complementary theoretical approaches: phenomenological-ontological perspectives and constructivist epistemological perspectives. While the phenomenological-ontological analysis addresses how the listener constitutes an indispensable, co-creative participant in the musical event, the subsequent constructivist perspective examines the specific foundations and mechanisms on which this co-creative agency is based.

Listening and/as Improvisation I: A Phenomenological-Ontological Perspective

A phenomenological-ontological perspective shifts the focus from the musical work as a fixed object to the lived experience of its emergence. Rather than defining music in an abstract, objectified sense, this approach investigates how it manifests to embodied subjects situated within concrete contexts. From this vantage point, the "work" is reconceptualized not as an autonomous entity preceding perception, but as an emergent event constituted through the interconnected acts of playing and listening within a shared temporal horizon.

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Phenomenology emphasizes that meaning is not passively received but actively constituted through intentional acts of consciousness. From this vantage point, there is no "pure" sonic object existing independently of the listening subject; rather, the musical event appears only through the listener's directed attention and temporal synthesis (Schutz 1964). A central concept here is "shared intentionality," which Kanellopoulos (1999) describes as the dual sensation of being heard while actively listening, transforming music-making into a form of collective action and communication of intentions (184–85).

This perspective effectively reverses the traditional Western hierarchy that situates the score or the composer's intention as the ontological core. Manfred Spitzer (2018) observes that even the performance of a thoroughly composed work inevitably involves variations in volume, tempo, expression, and timbre, thereby destabilizing the very notion of a fixed work identity. The same score will never sound identical because each realization occurs within a specific acoustic, bodily, and social context. Extending this insight, no two acts of listening are identical. Each listener hears from within their own horizon of bodily states, memories, expectations, and cultural dispositions. Thus, a single performance is ontologically multiple, constituted differently in every stream of consciousness.

Improvisation intensifies this dependence, as the event is constituted precisely between bodies that play and bodies that listen, all sharing and shaping a common temporal field. In this state, participants enter what Alfred Schutz (1964) terms a "tuning-in relationship," a shared stream of experience where inner durations align (161). This process fosters the aforementioned shared intentionality, transforming music-making into a collective action grounded in a shared we-experience. In improvisation, this mutual attunement is not merely the background of a pre-composed work; it is the very medium through which musical form, content, and meaning emerge. It describes the process by which participants—musicians and listeners—enter a shared temporal flow in which their "inner durations" (Schutz 1964, 174–77) converge.

David Borgo's (2004) research into jazz substantiates this relationality. He investigated how musical meaning is negotiated through complex cognitive and social processes. In jazz, meaning is not a fixed property encoded by a composer, but a dynamic intersubjective process among musicians, listeners, and materials. Drawing on Huizinga's homo ludens, Borgo describes jazz as play through which participants generate meaning together. Thus, improvisation becomes a shared act of world-constitution. This experience is rooted in the body's spatial orientation; Borgo (2004) introduces "Cross-Domain Mapping,"

noting that metaphors derived from physical domains help musical agents understand abstract musical structures. Descriptions of pitches as "high" or "low" or improvisations as "inside" or "outside" demonstrate that musical understanding is an embodied process rather than a detached intellectual one (Borgo 2004, 8). These mappings reveal how the listener's lived body projects its orientational logic onto sound, constituting musical "structure" through the lens of primary, felt experience (Borgo 2004).

Improvised music, such as jazz or Iranian traditions, intensifies this multiplicity by relying on shared vocabularies—modal systems, rhythmic cycles, and formulaic gestures—learned by both performers and listeners over time (Tavousi 2021, 2026a). These shared resources do not fix the work; they open a field of possibilities. Within this field, performers explore and transform material in the moment, while listeners simultaneously project, anticipate, and retrospectively organize what they hear.

The listener's constitutive creative agency becomes most palpable in the moment of silence: as physical sound reaches a minimum, the listener's creative activity reaches a maximum. A productive analogy emerges here in concrete poetry. Closely connected to mid-twentieth-century concrete art, concrete poetry grants the visual appearance of words and letters equal significance to their semantic content. The arrangement of text on the page—including blank spaces and interruptions—becomes an integral component of meaning (The Art Story 2024). The concept of silence is visually manifested in Eugen Gomringer's concrete poetry. His 1990 ideogram, *schweigen*, exemplifies how spatial arrangement communicates meaning beyond linguistic syntax. (The ideogram is available online via the Museum für Neue Kunst, Freiburg: https://onlinesammlung.freiburg.de/de/object/graphik-gomringer-eugen-schweigen/40E234F0417F0675EADE6B92506BC5DB?slide=0.)

The poem consists of a grid of the word "schweigen," interrupted by a central blank. The "nothing" at the center is not merely an omission; it becomes the focal point of attention, an empty space inviting readers to imagine, project, and "hear" the silence. The poem thus exemplifies a phenomenological insight: emptiness can function as an active call to meaning rather than as the absence of meaning. By placing a blank space at the center, Gomringer relocates meaning production into reception, requiring readers to fill the gap with their own associations. Discursively, this practice destabilizes the traditional figure of the author by refusing to provide a fully determined work. Similarly, in improvisation, silence and "nothingness" are not mere gaps but deliberate gestures that open spaces of potential and challenge habitual modes of listening. Rather than

signalling the absence of music, silence creates a mode of presence that shifts creativity from sound production to the act of perception. Bertrand Denzler and Jean-Luc Guionnet (2020) show that silence and dynamics in contemporary improvisation are treated as material conditions that open spaces of potential, reshape temporal experience, and challenge habitual modes of listening. This creates a musical analogue to the phenomenological "between" of presence and absence (Denzler and Guionnet 2020, 123–29).

The musical event does not cease when performance pauses; preceding sounds resonate in bodily memory while expectations reach into the not-yet. Non-sounding moments thus become privileged sites where listeners encounter their own constitutive agency. Listeners may continue the phrase internally, hear possible yet unrealized resolutions, or reinterpret what they have already heard in light of the newfound openness. This inner continuation is a mimetic act in the sense described by Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf (2003): mimetic processes are not secondary copies of an original but "repeated productions of earlier worlds" through which individuals reconstitute these worlds as their own via sensory and bodily engagement (3). In improvisation, the structural openness of the event amplifies the listener's mimetic activity: because not everything is determined, there is space—indeed a necessity—for listeners to supplement, complete, or transform what is given.

The perception of a musical pause parallels the question of how an empty space is perceived and interpreted in the viewing of the ideogram: How does each reader receive this poem? Is a particular form recognized? Does the gap point to something, or is it merely an omission? Both cases invite recipients to fill the gap, whether with thoughts, feelings, or imagination. These processes are an essential part of aesthetic experience: "The mimetic process makes the images come alive in the observer; each observer creates an internal image of the work and connects it with other visual or linguistically processed experiences without doing violence to the otherness of what is perceived" (Gebauer and Wulf 2003, 53, translated by the author). In this emptiness lies an invitation to question oneself, to feel, and to recognize. This becomes especially evident in aesthetic strategies that cultivate harmonic or formal indeterminacy. Nebulous harmonic environments—for instance, triads without thirds, extended modal drones, or freely tonal improvisations without a clear tonic—resemble a fog-covered landscape. Just as a hazy horizon suggests forms without fully revealing them, these musical textures offer partial cues without enforcing a definitive interpretation. They produce a kind of ontological blur: it is unclear where the music is, what counts as its center, or how a phrase ought to resolve.

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In such situations, the listener's constitutive role intensifies. Each person may be drawn to different tonal centers, sense varying cadential forces, or experience the absence of resolution as a meaningful gesture. While appearing as less information on the surface, such openness provides an excess of possible worlds for the subject to constitute.

The same is true of temporal structures. Extended stillness, extremely sparse gestures, or widely spaced tones function like empty areas on a canvas. They force listeners to dwell, to wait, to inhabit time more consciously. Instead of passively receiving an informational stream, listeners are drawn into an active relation with temporal unfolding itself. John Cage's (1998) 4'33" radicalizes this principle by making the conditions of listening—ambient sounds, bodily noises, shifting attention—the material of the work. Cage's piece underscores the ontological point: without reception there is no music; the listener's activity becomes the primary locus of musical meaning.

Kanellopoulos (2011) deepens this relationality through Bakhtin's "outsideness," arguing that the audience provides the "temporary finalization" required for inherently incomplete improvisation: "Improvisation cannot be finalized; it remains always incomplete. But the existence of an audience, or a solitary performance carried through as if it were witnessed by an (imaginary) audience can create a sense of temporary finalization, thus turning improvisation into an objectified aesthetic moment. It is only through the reception of the listener, her reaction to what develops, that the musician/child begins to perceive her acts as musical actions. the process of exploring ways of taking the music forward becomes a unified process because the listener-as-other decides to follow this endeavor and receive it" (126).

Taken together, these phenomenological and ontological considerations allow for a reconceptualization of the "work" in improvisation. Rather than being an object fully formed in the composer's mind, the work appears as a relational configuration emerging in the co-presence of playing and listening bodies in a concrete here-and-now. Compositional materials, stylistic norms, and notational prescriptions do not vanish; instead, they are repositioned as conditions of possibility rather than ontological fixed points. What ultimately counts as "the music" of a particular improvisational event is the intersubjective pattern of attunement that crystallizes in the shared experience of performers and listeners.

In this state, individual streams of consciousness become synchronized through the unfolding of sound. The moment of anticipation—when all participants collectively await the next sonic event—makes this relational structure

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particularly palpable. Here, subjectivity becomes distributed across the listening situation through a shared orientation toward the imminent musical event. This synchronization is the primary condition for the emergence of "distributed subjectivity" (Kassabian 2013, xi). Musical meaning, in this sense, is no longer located solely within the performer's individual consciousness; rather, it arises within a dynamic mesh of recipient perceptions, anticipations, and evaluations.

From this perspective, the traditional hierarchy in which the composer creates, the performer reproduces, and the listener merely consumes becomes untenable. Improvisation shows that musical meaning is an emergent property of a distributed system of consciousnesses. Performers and listeners improvise—not in the same way, but in mutually conditioning ways. The listener's contribution is a constitutive dimension of the event, not an optional "extra." Ontologically, improvisation may thus be understood as the art of generating shared spaces of possibility in which silence, indeterminacy, and even "nothingness" are not deficits but the very conditions that make co-creative listening possible.

Listening and/as Improvisation II: A Constructivist Epistemological Perspective

While the phenomenological-ontological analysis highlights the listener as a constitutive participant in the musical event, a constructivist epistemological perspective shifts the focus to the specific mechanisms through which this co-creative agency operates. This approach investigates how musical meaning is known, constructed, and negotiated in real time, treating musical knowledge not as a reflection of an objective reality, but as an active, situated process of construction.

Michael Dartsch (2014) articulates a widely shared intuition when he writes that music "lives only as created or re-created; it presupposes the act of creation. Whoever wishes to bring music to life—whether in oneself or for others—must create or re-create it" (81, translated by the author). In pedagogical contexts, this formulation is highly productive because it establishes a crucial distinction: to re-create is not merely to mechanically reproduce prefabricated material, but to actively bring music to life. Epistemologically, however, the statement reveals a problematic one-sidedness: it focuses almost exclusively on those who perform music and leaves open whether, and how, listeners participate in this creative and knowledge-generating process.

In the tradition of constructivism, Jörg Harriers (1992) argues that music does not exist as an objective reality independent of perception; rather, it is

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brought forth through the interpretive acts of individuals. Music is therefore not an external object "out there" that subjects simply mirror; it is a subjective construction grounded in sensory input, memory, cultural conditioning, and situational context. This position aligns closely with foundational assumptions of radical constructivism: perception does not provide a faithful copy of an external world but is an active construction of reality. Applied to improvised music, this means that not only performers but also listeners generate their own versions of musical reality.

Within this constructivist frame, Edwin Gordon's concept of "audiation" serves as a primary example of internal meaning-construction: "sound is not comprehended as music until it is audiated after it is heard" (as cited in Gruhn 2008, 86). Listening is not mere sensory registration but an imaginative-interpretive activity that transforms physical vibrations into musical meaning (Gordon 2007). Departing from Gordon's (2007) positivistic focus on mental representations and hierarchical acquisition, I resituate audiation within a constructivist epistemology of perception. Epistemologically, musical knowledge—its understanding, recognition, and memory—does not arise directly from the physical sound itself, but through the listener's cognitive and imaginative processing. Sound becomes music only insofar as it is perceived, imagined, or anticipated; otherwise, in a phenomenological-ontological sense, it remains a non-event. Within this framework, audiation involves both the recognition of musical patterns (such as scales, rhythms, or phrases) and the anticipation of their possible continuations. This anticipatory dimension becomes particularly salient in improvisational contexts, where musical unfolding cannot be fully predicted: listeners internally "test" potential continuations, compare them with what actually occurs, and continuously recalibrate their expectations. The music in the listener's mind is an autonomous construction informed by personal history and situational factors, distinct from the performer's intent. Thus, "this improvisation" is not a unified entity but a network of individualized reality-constructions.

Expanding upon this epistemological framework, Pauline Oliveros's (2005) concept of "deep listening" offers a radical theoretical and practical extension of the listener's agency. Oliveros distinguishes the physiological act of hearing from the conscious practice of listening, which she defines as an active, heightened attention directed toward the entire space-time continuum of sound and silence. While biological sound processing constitutes the necessary physical substrate, musical meaning emerges through the listener's active imaginative-interpretive act. Within this paradigm, the traditional ontological boundary

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between performer and recipient dissolves: listening is elevated to a "composer's sound practice," repositioning the listener at the center of the aesthetic event (Oliveros 2005). Deep listening realizes "shared intentionality" (Kanellopoulos 1999) by fostering connections between body and environment, echoing Schutz's (1964) "tuning-in relationship." Creative energy thus emerges from collective perception, providing the framework for a music education that treats receptive creativity as an active skill.

However, this construction is never purely individual; it is deeply embedded in social interactions. Music sociology provides meaningful counter-narratives; following the psychology of music advocated by Cook (Dibben and Windsor 2001), I understand music as a product of social and cultural constructions rather than as an autonomous phenomenon. This aligns with music sociology (DeNora 2000; Small 1998), which recognizes listeners as legitimate agents of meaning-making. Cook's perspective challenges the traditional autonomous object model by redefining music history: it is no longer viewed as a linear succession of masterpieces created by sovereign composers, but as a history of changing patterns of perception and conception (Dibben and Windsor 2001). From this viewpoint, art—and specifically improvisation—serves as a primary means for constructing and communicating new ways of perceiving the world. Accordingly, this study proposes a paradigm shift toward a relational, co-creative model.

Dana Reason (2004) provides a crucial epistemological foundation for this claim by arguing that in improvisation, "interactivity is an essential structural component" (17). By compelling both musicians and audiences to "rethink traditional expectations about the expression and reception of musical meaning" (Reason 2004, 17), this perspective challenges the composer's epistemic monopoly and aligns with the broader shift toward "distributed subjectivities" (Kassabian 2013, 110), thereby framing musical meaning as an inherently negotiated process.

Constructivist epistemology therefore highlights not only the individual but also the social character of knowledge. Musical knowledge and musical meaning arise within communicative processes: discussions about music, classroom situations, criticism, theoretical texts, and even nonverbal concert behaviors (such as applause, restlessness, or concentrated silence) shape what a given community considers a meaningful improvisation. Borgo (2004) describes jazz improvisation as a dialogical process in which musical meanings are not transmitted but negotiated through reciprocal play. Although his focus is on interactions among musicians, the theoretical structure readily extends to listeners:

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they, too, participate in this dialogical field by accepting, rejecting, reinterpreting, or responding with their own inner continuations.

Sam McAuliffe (2022) argues that subjectivity in improvised performance cannot be localized solely in the intentions of performers; rather, it arises within a mesh of perceptions, decisions, and evaluations involving both performers and listeners. Epistemologically, this is radical: it implies that no single subject (such as the composer or improvising soloist) possesses epistemic monopoly over the meaning of an improvisational event. Instead, meaning is the result of distributed subjectivities engaged in a common—but asymmetrical—process of construction. Performers make audible decisions; listeners make invisible ones—for instance, whether they interpret a musical turn as a rupture or a continuation, or whether they highlight a motivic detail as meaningful or ignore it.

The analogy with concrete poetry clarifies this point. Gomringer's (1990) schweigen generates varying interpretations not despite but because of its central blank. The perception of the gap—its interpretation as rupture, center, or frame—are epistemic acts grounded in individual and collective interpretive schemata. The blank "contains" nothing, yet it evokes maximal interpretative activity. Applied to improvisation, silence becomes an epistemic laboratory: it reveals which categories and concepts listeners apply to understand musical events and how they cope with indeterminacy.

Constructivist perspectives also show that improvisation is a uniquely powerful site of learning. If music education, as Dartsch (2014) emphasizes, understands music learning as creating and re-creating, then from a constructivist standpoint it must take learners seriously not only as acting but also as listening subjects. Knowledge about improvisation arises not only from practicing specific patterns or scales but through conscious experiencing, reflecting, and negotiating acts of listening. For example: Which improvisational trajectories appear coherent to me? Where do I lose orientation? Which pauses feel meaningful, which empty? When learners articulate their subjective constructions and compare them with others, it becomes clear that no single correct interpretation exists; rather, there exist a spectrum of possible meanings, shaped yet constrained by cultural and institutional frameworks.

In summary, a constructivist epistemological perspective frames improvisation as a powerful site of learning in which knowledge emerges through the conscious negotiation of listening. The listener does not act in a vacuum; rather, their agency as a co-creator forms through a complex architecture of internal and external factors. Consequently, musical knowledge and the resulting

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aesthetic construction arise through a dense web of audiative, cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural processes.

Synthesis

This synthesis demonstrates that a genuine paradigm shift occurs once musical meaning is understood not as a static, pre-existing object, but as a situationally emergent and fundamentally relational event. By grounding the theory of "who listeners are" (being) in the functional evidence of "what they do" (doing)—specifically their active processes of audiation, projection, and imaginative continuation, the triadic model (improviser–event–listener) reveals the listener's contribution as the fundamental condition for music's existence.

Ontologically, sound becomes music only when actualized by a receiver — be it the performer or the listener—who acts as an intentional agent. This receiver transforms physical vibrations into an aesthetic event, where "aesthetic" refers not to a value judgment of beauty, but to the Greek root of aisthesis: the conscious sensory perception and meaningful constitution of sound (as fundamentally established by Baumgarten 1763; Dewey 1980; Merleau-Ponty et al. 2013). Without this constitutive reception, gestures remain mere sound; the listener's participation provides the "temporary finalization" (Kanellopoulos 2011) required for an objectified aesthetic moment. Consequently, the listener's agency may exceed traditional roles, as reception enables sonic forms to realize their essence. Without this constitutive act, the sonic event remains an ontological non-event.

Furthermore, this investigation clarifies that the marginalization of improvisation and the invisibilization of the listener are inextricably linked. George E. Lewis (2008) observes that the "silent revolution" displacing improvisation reinforced a regime obscuring music's emergent nature. Neglecting improvisation suppresses active listening; interactivity is an "essential structural component" (Reason 2004) that challenges traditional hierarchies. Dominant discourses marginalize improvisation to prevent the emergence of a "distributed subjectivity" (McAuliffe 2022). Reclaiming improvisation in education thus reclaims listener agency, shifting discourse from a monological "regime of truth" (Lorenzini 2015, 2016) toward shared intentionality.

This fundamental asymmetry in Western aesthetic discourse can be effectively illuminated through the analogy of procreation. While traditional theory has focused almost exclusively on the initial "seed"—the composer's intentions or the performer's gestures—it has rendered invisible the prolonged, embodied,

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and responsive process of carrying and nourishing that constitutes the essential condition for musical life. Yet it is precisely in this receptive-creative sphere that musical form and content develop and become experientially real. Drawing on a procreative analogy, the musical event can be understood as the relational offspring of the performer's initial generative act and the listener's sustained, nourishing reception, both of which constitute essential conditions for its existence. Accordingly, the contribution of the listening subject is never less than that of the initiating performer or composer; it is at least equivalent and can, in temporal and phenomenological terms, be even greater. Ultimately, this analysis serves as a programmatic opening for alternative narratives in which listeners appear not as disturbances but as constitutive co-creators, and where silence and openness are recognized as vital aesthetic resources. By repositioning the locus of meaning within the shared act of performance and reception, this study facilitates a conceptual space for rethinking music-aesthetic theory through the lived practices of improvisational co-creation.

Conclusion

In this study, I establish that the ontological status of improvised music fundamentally depends on the listener's co-creative agency. Challenging the traditional, production-centered paradigm, the proposed triadic model (improviser–event–listener) repositions musical meaning as a situationally emergent, relational event. Sound attains the status of "music" only when actively constructed by a receiver through processes of audiation, cognitive schemata, memory, cultural knowledge, and emotional appraisal. Listeners construct their own versions of the improvisational event, shaped by personal histories and shared social frameworks. Consequently, the listener's volitional engagement is not merely a subjective impression, but the necessary condition for the emergence and actualization of music.

Furthermore, this research clarifies how the historical marginalization of improvisation systematically invisibilized the listener. As Lewis (2008) notes, displacing improvisation reinforced a paradigm that obscured music's intersubjective nature and downplayed shared authority. Within the dialogical model proposed here, the improviser, the event, and the listener are ontologically inseparable. Reclaiming this distributed musical subjectivity (McAuliffe 2022) prevents the reduction of music to a pre-existing object and restores the listener to their indispensable role as an aesthetic co-creator.

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Reclaiming improvisation in higher music education thus necessitates restoring the listener's creative agency. Taking listeners seriously in educational contexts requires moving beyond production-centered models toward a reflective and experimental music pedagogy in which the meaning-generating activity of listening is recognized as the site where musical form, content, and meaning becomes experientially real. Consequently, the central pedagogical objective shifts from the mere mastery of instrumental technique to the cultivation of receptive creativity—an active, imaginative capacity through which listening itself becomes a creative act.

The practical realization of this re-orientation requires pedagogical frameworks that translate the theoretical recognition of the listener into concrete practices. Oliveros's (2005) concept of "deep listening" provides such a foundation by conceptualizing creativity as an innate potential that can be cultivated through attentive listening, sonic awareness, and shared auditory experience. As a "composer's sound practice," Deep Listening offers an inclusive framework accessible across ages and levels of expertise while foregrounding listening as a generative mode of musical engagement. Practices such as sound meditations, collective toning, and the use of field recordings sensitize students to the complexity of their auditory environment and situate listening as a primary site of creative exploration. In combination with Randall Allsup's (2016) call for "remixing the classroom," these practices transform the classroom into a space of participatory "sense-making" (Lanier 2023; Schiavio and De Jaegher 2017), in which the traditional boundaries between production and reception are deliberately dissolved.

In pedagogical practice, the active monitoring and articulation of this receptive creativity can support learners in making sense of their experiences. As Tavousi (2026b) demonstrates, structured reflection in improvisation education helps participants transform fleeting, embodied moments of listening into explicit conceptual understanding. This ongoing reflection empowers students to adjust their aesthetic perceptions and recognize their constitutive role in group dynamics. Within such an experimental pedagogical framework, the musical classroom becomes a dynamic field of shared intentionality where perceiving sound constitutes a vital form of co-creative labor. The emergence of musical events is thus understood as a distributed process involving performers and listeners alike. Even the technical challenges of improvisation become intelligible within this relational framework. While audiation provides the internal musical imagery that anticipates musical action, its realization depends upon the stability of an auditory–motor feedback loop. Tavousi (2026b) identifies a

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central learning challenge in the gap between inner hearing and embodied execution. Technical learning in improvisational contexts therefore often involves the gradual automation of motor routines and the precise coordination between listening and instrumental action required for fluent musical response. Breakdowns in this coordination—particularly under temporal pressure—function as diagnostic indicators revealing that technical competence is not a fixed background condition but a situated regulation of sensorimotor processes that must be continuously recalibrated within the unfolding creative act (Tavousi 2026b).

By situating these technical processes within a broader ecology of participatory listening, the proposed pedagogical model reframes improvisation not as an exceptional skill but as a relational practice that integrates perception, action, and collective meaning-making. In this sense, the rehabilitation of improvisation within higher music education simultaneously restores the listener to a central position within musical creativity, enabling a more inclusive conception of musical authorship grounded in shared intentionality and distributed agency.

Ultimately, framing reception as an active-creative process offers transformative implications for music education, performance practice, and philosophical theories of musical ontology. By situating the locus of meaning within the shared dynamics of performance and reception, the study articulates a conceptual framework for rethinking music-aesthetic theory through lived practices of co-creation. This perspective invites a future where composition, improvisation, and listening are no longer seen as fixed roles, but as fluid, dialogical practices within a shared field of musical meaning-making.

About the Author

Davoud Tavousi is a musician, music theorist, and music educator with a focus on style-based improvisation. As an internationally active musicology researcher, he earned his doctorate in music education at the University of Music Saar. His doctoral thesis explored the teaching and learning processes of style-based improvisation, adopting a multidisciplinary approach that included philosophical, sociological, and psychological perspectives. Through his comprehensive research, he has developed several foundational pedagogical frameworks, including the 3B Model (Self-, Group-, and Teacher-Perspective), the Integrative Approaches in Improvisation Education (IAIE) model, Embodied Resonant Pedagogy (ERP), and the Affective-Reflective Resonance (ARR) Model. Currently, he is an Associated Researcher at the Institute for European Ethnomusicology at the University of Cologne. As a santur player, he performs

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both as a soloist and in ensembles, including a concert at the Beethoven House in Bonn in 2018. His repertoire spans traditional and contemporary Iranian music, as well as his own original compositions.

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