

Paper Summary:

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“Musical Improvisation: Play, Efficiency, and Significance”

(A. J. Racy)

In the essay, “Musical Improvisation: Play Efficiency and Significance” A. J. Racy explores the different aspects of improvised music as its implications on performance, politics, music education and humanity. The text has emphasis on traditional Arab music (Trab) but it explores its effects in multiple cultural backgrounds and what happens when they are mixed.

According to the author, improvised music (creating music spontaneously) though similar to composed music has fundamentally different characteristics in the way it's produced and in the audience's experience. Unlike composed music, improvisation is dependent mostly (or entirely) on the performer's ability to convey hers or his emotions through hers or his instrument. The effect of the performer's state of mind therefore has a much greater impact in the outcome for it not only alters the subtle timing, intonation and dynamic nuances of the performance but it also dictates the notes that are played. This means that the music becomes a response to everything that surrounds the player, from the spectators to the room. Improvised music also has different expectations from the listeners for it expresses greater artistic individuality and geniality from the performer thus making it a more visceral experience to hear it.

Improvised music also has to be educated differently from pre-composed playing. In this section Racy questions if it is even possible to teach someone how to improvise because the most a music teacher can do is to expand hers or his student's technique and vocabulary while the student is put in the situation of having to learn how to have original musical ideas by themselves.

Another important aspect of improvised music mentioned in the text is its ability to expose creative individuality especially when it comes to different cultural backgrounds. Improvised music is a part of countless different cultures and though their practices and scales might be different the process of performing bares enough similarities that it enables musicians to bridge their cultural and linguistic differences and collaborate in a shared experience. Historically musicians have been able to produce harmonious works of art even when put against performers whose languages expresses different modalities or even micro-tonalities, a true statement of human versatility and creativity. These “fusions” can bring great political and societal impact through the exposition of the greater harmony which binds all cultures and human expressions and perhaps even promotes a message of peace.

In conclusion, improvised music is an incredibly versatile human way of expressing emotions, political agendas, cultural backgrounds and individuality while expanding the music vocabulary and promoting musical and human progress.