

IMPROVISING OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE:
FLOW THEORY IN THE KEITH JARRETT TRIO

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ABSTRACT

Jamie Blake: Improvising Optimal Experience: Flow Theory in the Keith Jarrett Trio
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The music of Keith Jarrett reveals an artist deeply invested in the experience of each moment, a pursuit guiding his perception, improvisational decisions, and the construction of his performance environment. Jarrett has discussed how he conceives his improvisational practices, breaking down complex simultaneous processes into personae with distinct, but interrelated, functions. Jarrett's descriptions of these personae and their individual and cooperative responsibilities suggest a clear link between his creative process and the autotelic experience described by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's *flow theory*. In examining Jarrett's work through this lens, it is possible to observe the synthesis of his improvisational methodologies and philosophies as they developed over his career. Building on the research of Csíkszentmihályi and Elina Hytönen-Ng, this study probes the role of flow in performance and the work that flow theory can accomplish when utilized in jazz studies, improvisation studies and more broadly in performance studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Tonight, the concert feels as if it exists in a different world. Gary Peacock plucks away at his bass, his hands moving in tandem with the chattering groove set up by Jack DeJohnette. They both begin to lean slightly forward as pianist Keith Jarrett reaches the climax of a solo. There is nothing subtle about Jarrett's movements. He twists his whole body, contorting his knees in one direction and his shoulders in the other. His face is scrunched and he is inadvertently humming along with his own solo. Despite his seemingly uncomfortable position, he moves both up and down with the pulse and back and forth to emphasize the landing point of his gestures. Peacock and DeJohnette are not the only people locked in to Jarrett; the whole audience seems to contorting and swaying back and forth with him. It is Tokyo, 1986, the Keith Jarrett trio is, or at least appears to be, fully immersed in their performance.

The concept of focused engagement has generated interest in diverse areas of scholarship. The observation that people can, under the right set of circumstances, focus so completely on a single activity as to be immersed in it has ramifications in psychological and physiological sciences as well as pedagogical and analytical applications. Notable early explorations into the intense positive feelings often generated by focused engagement include the work of Abraham Maslow and Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Maslow theorized moments of hyper-focused engagement as *peak experiences*, calling them, "moments of highest happiness

and fulfillment”¹ Csíkszentmihályi called state of complete engagement *flow* and experiences within that state *optimal experiences*.

I argue that flow is a critical aspect of the creative process for Keith Jarrett, a vantage point from which to view the intersection of motivation, engagement, and satisfaction within the scope of the performance experience. Although flow is not necessarily linked to the quality of a musician’s output, it does help us to understand a performer’s perception of the performance experience. Moreover, flow offers an avenue towards better understanding the improvisation experience, which is often mystified (sometimes even by performers themselves). Over the course of Jarrett’s career, he has frequently discussed the nature of his improvisational experiences, and his theorizations of the improvisational process provide insight into the success, failure, and function of flow in his music.

Csíkszentmihályi wrote of flow that, “It is the opposite of psychic entropy.”² He argues that in contrast to the mind in a condition of disuse and disarray, the mind engaging in flow is utilizing its resources to their fullest capacity. One’s mental and physical resources are expended as one engages with an appropriate challenge, and the ensuing sense of success provides a feeling of intense satisfaction. While engaged in an activity that facilitates flow, one experiences the consistent positive feedback loop of their ongoing success. This subject is neither self-conscious nor self-critical, and will typically be unaware of aspects of their present reality that are not pertinent to the activity. A subject may lose track of time or their surroundings and is likely unaware of others unless interaction is a critical part of the

¹ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964). See also Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Being* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962).

² Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 40.

³ Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 40. Audience members might be so captivated listening that they feel as if they, too, are part of the performance,

activity. In this state, a complicated, largely improvisational nine-minute song passes by as if it was a three-minute pop tune. Performers describe moments like this as transcendent, so engrossed are they in playing that they could think of nothing else.³

The intersections between flow and musical performance have interested music scholars with varied applications. Ethnomusicologists such as Thomas Turino and Bruno Nettl for example, have treated flow as a characteristic of participatory music.⁴ Jazz scholars such as Ingrid Monson (1996), Paul Berliner (1994), and Robert Fink (2011) have explored the closely-related concept of groove, which utilizes analytical tools and genre conventions as well social cultural theories to develop a nuanced understanding of group dynamics and performance preferences in jazz performance.⁵ More recently, the collection *The Improvisation Studies Reader* includes an entire section centering on flow and its applications across artistic media, from jazz and classical music to dance and theater arts.⁶

³ Audience members might be so captivated listening that they feel as if they, too, are part of the performance, expressing the music alongside Jarrett and his band. Although this thesis primarily follows the flow experiences of performer(s), some pertinent extensions into audience experience have been footnoted throughout.

⁴ Turino makes the distinction between music for performance and music for participation, which I discuss more thoroughly in chapter 2 (2008). Nettl approaches the educational process necessary to produce optimal experience in complex improvisational traditions in his essay “On Learning the Radif and Improvisation in Iran” (2009).

⁵ *Groove* has a somewhat debated definition, though the term is most commonly used in jazz to describe the systematic rhythmic foundation of a work typically performed by piano, bass, drums, guitar, and percussion or some combination thereof. Groove reflects the genre and style performed as well as the abilities, personal preferences, and group dynamic of the performers involved. Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology, ed. Philip Bohlman and Bruno Nettl (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Robert Fink, “Goal Directed Soul? Analyzing Rhythmic Teleology in African American Popular Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 64 No. 1 (Spring 2011), 179-238.

⁶ Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble, ed, *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).

In the context of this study, flow will be discussed in relation to Csikszentmihályi’s use of the term and subsequent work relating to that usage. The term *flow* has also been applied to an unrelated concept in hip hop studies that describes the lyrical content of a song, both independently and with respect to other sonic content. This use of the term operates outside the parameters of Csikszentmihályi’s theory and will not be explored here, though both usages seem to stem from the same analogical connection between easy, continuous, unfettered motion and performance in real time.

A number of challenges face a scholarly examination of flow. Owing to the highly personal nature of flow engagement, no one analysis can definitively systematize engagement in a flow state in a way that is universally applicable. Furthermore, the discursive nature of an individual performer's experiences with flow allow for constant development and redefinition of how and under what circumstances that individual can engage in a flow state. However, a deeper understanding of flow is necessary to better theorize how and why musicians perform and, more specifically, how and why they improvise. With this in mind, I approach flow from several vantage points. I will explore flow as a process in the continual forward motion of real-time performance in the first two chapters, deconstructing the mechanisms at work in musical performance as a flow activity. In chapter one, I map flow theory onto improvisation, drawing on the testimony of performers (Jarrett in particular) as well as previous scholarship in this area. Next, I deconstruct the flow process in the specific context of jazz combo improvisation utilizing Jarrett's work as well as his verbal explanations in interviews and writings. In chapter three, I will approach flow as a performance goal, drawing parallels to Csikszentmihályi's ideas about flow as optimal experience (and, to a lesser extent, parallels in Maslow's theory of peak experience). Finally, I examine flow as a cultural product which can be consumed by an audience wishing to witness the flow state as a spectacle, taking as a starting point the intersections between cultural capital and cultural industry as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno, respectively.

Keith Jarrett's work and career is, in many ways, ideally suited for this study. He has, over the course of many years of performances and interviews, been particularly forthcoming regarding the flow process in improvised performance as he experiences it. His performance

style makes plain many of the distinct characteristics Csíkszentmihályi theorizes as markers of flow, and, when considered in conjunction with his verbal explanations regarding his improvisational process, Jarrett's performance serves to clarify the unique flow environment produced in improvisational music. Flow theory, in turn, helps to theorize context to shed light on many of Jarrett's ideas, performances, and professional choices.

In terms of broader applications, it is my hope that the exploration of flow theory begun here will also demonstrate its utility as a tool for better understanding improvisation. As Nettl noted in the preface to his edited volume *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society*, "I maintain that we haven't found ways to study improvised music as efficiently as we do music composed and recorded in writing or memory."⁷ Despite the recently growing interest in improvisation as well as expanding tools for modern analysis, Nettl's arrival still holds true. Flow theory can serve as a tool sharpened specifically for its effectiveness in analyzing improvisation.

⁷ Bruno Nettl, "Preface," to *Improvised Music: Art Education and Society*, ed. Nettl and Gabriel Solis (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2009).

CHAPTER 1: EXPANDING FLOW THEORY

Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's Flow Theory

The concept of flow describes a set of conditions that allow a person to engage in optimal experience in the course of an activity.⁸ These conditions require that the activity be goal-oriented and rule-bound, that the challenge presented by the activity is balanced with the participant's ability and, I will argue, the presence of intentionality on the part of the person performing the activity. In this section, I will discuss flow theory as explained by Csíkszentmihályi, in preparation for the use of flow theory as an analytic tool. Furthermore, this grounding will serve to illuminate specific areas of expansion necessary for a thorough application of the theory.

According to Csíkszentmihályi, a flow activity must take place within an established framework of rules and goals. This framework can be strict (as in a sport with precise rules, penalties, and rewards) or more fluid (as in reading a book). Within the activity's framework, the structure is essentially a set of limitations guiding the process of the activity. These limitations are necessary in order to make the activity challenging, to prevent it from becoming overwhelming, and to make the achievement of a goal rewarding. A soccer player, for example, would feel little reward if kicking the ball anywhere would result in a goal. Goal nets, like many other broad and fine rules in soccer play, provide structure. Musicians encounter structure in many ways: the process of producing a sound through playing an

⁸ The varied examples in Csíkszentmihályi's work demonstrate that almost any activity can allow a participant to engage in flow: chess, tennis, playing a musical instrument, and working on an assembly line are all images engaged in his writing. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

instrument or singing, the stylistic expectations of the genre(s) performed, compositional, improvisational, and/or interpretive processes, expectations of embodiment on a live stage, and the process of recording sound are all examples of ways in which limits can be placed to bind an activity to its structure.

There are also intersecting structural elements in the music itself, such as form, time, texture, melody, harmony, and timbre. In improvised music, many of these elements are malleable. For example, Jarrett frequently improvises long, fantasia-like introductions to his pieces, even when performing standards. These fantasia-like introductions often take on their own formal structures apart from the form of the tune, and harmonic and melodic content vary from recognizable bits of the standard to novel ideas drawing inspiration from diverse musical sources.⁹ In addition to bending or discarding typical structural elements in a rule-bound activity, one might also add additional rules to raise challenge. Jarrett's extreme sensitivity to the instrument on which he is playing creates an additional consideration and by extension, greater challenge.¹⁰ While many pianists note differences from instrument to instrument, a given piano has a particularly meaningful impact on Jarrett's performance on any given night. While he could still generate thoughtful improvisation without necessarily catering so closely to the quirks of a particular instrument, Jarrett's sensitivity to such minute idiosyncrasies provide him another layer of challenge.¹¹ Challenge may be added by applying additional structure or limitations, such as playing blindfolded or with only one hand, by reducing structure and forcing the performer to make more simultaneous decisions, and by

⁹ See Dariusz Terefenko, *Keith Jarrett's Transformation of Standard Tunes: Theory, Analysis and Pedagogy* (Saarbrücken: Verlag, 2009).

¹⁰ Jarrett's attention to sound and instrument are treated more thoroughly in chapters 2 and 3.

¹¹ I discuss the manipulation of rules in Jarrett's work more deeply in chapter three.

approaching physical limitations by increasing speed and/or technical demand. Rules can be manipulated to raise or lower challenge, a tactic that can be utilized to increase the likelihood of a flow experience. It should be noted that the manipulation of rules in a rule-bound environment is not unique to musical performance. For example, in soccer the field size is often reduced to lower challenge for younger players, whereas more experienced players might add or alter rules (such as limiting the number of times an individual can touch the ball before passing it) to raise the challenge in practice.

Within the framework of an activity, structure is necessary in order to provide goals and the subsequent satisfaction felt when achieving them. While structure implies that a goal be somehow understood, it is not necessary that goals be objectively measurable. Moreover, it is not necessary that all people participating in an activity have the same goals. In describing the variety of activities that can offer a flow experience, Csíkszentmihályi explains that goals can be as concrete as winning a game or as elusive as religious transcendence. He reported that respondents surveyed in his research described similar flow experiences almost regardless of the activity, provided that it had structure and the respondents expected a result—a goal—from their participation in the activity:

The pursuits we studied—climbing, chess, basketball—are flow activities that seem to provide the corresponding (flow) experience. Games are obvious flow experiences, and play is the flow experience *par excellence* . . . Flow experiences can be found in activities other than games. One such activity is creativity in general, including art and science. The composers and chess players in our sample described their feelings in ways that did not differ substantially from the descriptions of climbers or chess players. Surgeons involved in medical research and mathematicians working on the frontiers of their field answered the interviews in terms that were almost interchangeable with those used by players.¹²

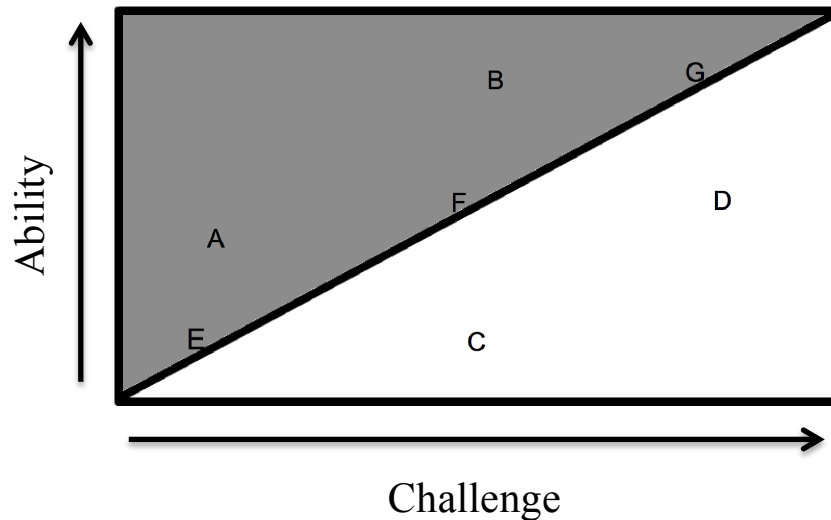
¹² Mihályi Csíkszentmihályi, “A Theoretical Model for Enjoyment,” *The Improvisation studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, ed. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 151.

As a creative activity, playing music offers ample opportunities to engage in flow. While the motivations for playing music can vary widely, playing music provides the necessary goal-directed, rule-bound environment to foster flow experiences. It is this environment in which Csíkszentmihályi's second condition can be met: the level of difficulty of the activity (hereafter referred to as challenge) should be matched to the skill of the person performing the activity.¹³ If the activity is too challenging, a person can become anxious and frustrated and, as a result, disengaged. If the activity is not challenging enough, the person may initially engage, but will likely become disinterested as the activity will not require enough effort to remain fully engaged.

Figure 1 represents a basic representation of the intersection of challenge and ability, similar to those used by Csíkszentmihályi; positions A-G have been placed to represent situations in which a person is participating in an activity that has the potential to induce flow. In positions A and B, ability overbalances challenge, and both positions are likely to result in loss of interest. In positions C and D, challenge overbalances ability, and both positions are likely to experience frustration and/or anxiety. Positions E, F, and G represent positions in which challenge and ability are relatively well balanced. Although position E's ability is far less developed than position G, the challenge facing E is also less difficult, allowing for the potential of flow in both positions.

¹³ The concept of challenge/skill balance has been suggested in other areas of study as well, notably in video game design. See Andrew K. Przybylski, et al, "A Motivational Model of Video Game Engagement," *Review of General Psychology*, Vol. 14 no. 2 (June 2010), 154-166.

Fig. 1. Visual representation of the balance between challenge and ability necessary to facilitate flow in a given activity.



The balance between challenge and ability requires that as person performing the activity becomes more skilled, the challenge must be raised accordingly in order to allow them to continue to feel the same sense of optimal experience. Csikszentmihályi offers that the challenge may be raised by external force, such as playing a game against a more skilled opponent, but a person engaging in a flow activity may also raise the challenge internally. A runner, for example, might try to improve a finishing time, or a golfer might try to attain a lower score. Or, as Csikszentmihályi suggests, a worker tasked with a relatively simple and repetitive job on a factory line might raise the challenge by trying to complete more items in less time or trying to complete each item more perfectly.¹⁴

Musicians who hope to engage in a flow state must also balance challenge with skill. Musically speaking, this condition requires that the performer play in a context suitable to achieving this balance. Performance context can include a number of factors, such as

¹⁴ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

repertoire, venue, audience, and the abilities of fellow performers. For example, as far as repertoire is concerned, a musician hoping to engage in flow should select works that are reasonably suited to their skill set, both in technical demand and stylistic experience.

Contextual factors such as the pressures of public performance, venue, time of day, length of performance, and the health and well-being of the performer also have the potential to encourage or disrupt the engagement in flow.¹⁵ In improvised music, for example, familiarity improvising over a given set of changes can drastically alter the potential for a musician to engage in flow. As I will discuss later in this chapter, familiarity and trust amongst ensemble performers also affects the flow potential of a given performance.

As a final condition implicit in Csíkszentmihályi's theory, though not explicitly argued in his work, I suggest that intentionality is necessary to experience a flow state while participating in an activity. That is, within the scope of a rule-bound, goal-oriented activity, a person must intentionally work towards a goal in order to engage in flow. While it is not necessary that all those participating work towards the same goal, it is the process of having a goal and progressing towards it that creates the experience of success and thus satisfaction that Csíkszentmihályi equates with flow. Intentionality must be personal; in order to engage in flow an individual must choose to work towards a goal. Intentionality may be driven by any number of internal or external motivations, including such motivators as anger, fear, or stress. However, Csíkszentmihályi suggests that when achieved regularly, the pleasure of engaging in flow can itself act as a motivational force. He suggests that the positive feelings associated with optimal experience are the central force motivating individuals to participate

¹⁵ Disruption and disengagement will be discussed in greater detail with regards to Jarrett's music in chapter three.

in flow activities not necessarily because they provide pleasure alone, but because they provide pleasure linked to success and self-growth, a combination that is uniquely satisfying.

This leg of flow theory can be particularly useful for the analysis of music and musical performance. Indeed, participation in music can be seen as a practice motivated by the desire to achieve optimal experience. This desire drives musicians to find ways to increase their challenge: playing harder repertoire, tackling high-pressure situations, playing more/different instrument(s) or playing their own instrument differently. Musicians might dabble in writing their own compositions, arranging, or participating in a form of musical performance in which they are decidedly less skilled.¹⁶ Creativity itself can present a challenge for musicians, when they challenge themselves to generate musical output that feels new and fresh, such as inventive, curious improvised solos or new stylistic approaches. If musicians are motivated to play in hopes of finding optimal experience, it is possible to extrapolate that many of their musical decisions center on the need to find the appropriate level of challenge for their (often considerable) skill.

It can be assumed that other motivations may also play a role in musical decision-making (such as career, monetary, and interpersonal factors), but these should not be seen as eclipsing the drive towards flow. One might consider, for example, that there are many ways to balance challenge—including, for many performers, the motivation to continue their current level of performance success. Csikszentmihályi's findings, however, held that people

¹⁶ Roger Blackburn, for example, played third trumpet in the Philadelphia Orchestra for nearly three decades. A highly competent player, most third trumpet parts in the common repertory required little effort from him. In his personal time, he tinkered with the trumpet itself (i.e., taking apart, altering, and reassembling it) and practiced and performed regularly with a barbershop quartet. As neither a very talented singer nor a skilled repairman, Blackburn felt gratification in these hobbies because they challenged him in ways that his professional career no longer could. Roger Blackburn, interview with the author, unpublished (July 2003).

excelling in fields as far apart as chess and rugby, dance and neural surgery have credited flow as the most significant factor motivating them to continue to practice their activity.

Csikszentmihályi is careful to point out that while his respondents point to optimal experience as the dominant motivation for participating in a flow activity, there is no sure way to guarantee that one will experience flow. Instead, he characterizes flow as a favorable outcome of a particular set of circumstances. In his words, one cannot create flow; it is a condition that can (but will not necessarily) happen to a person when the conditions are correct. Nevertheless, while it is possible that a flow experience might take a person by surprise, continued optimal experiences in the same flow activity require that the challenge of the activity shift with the rising skill of the person participating. Thus, flow could be seen as a moving target—one that, if Csikszentmihályi is correct, hits the shooter rather than vice versa. Despite the “elusive” nature flow seems to present, Csikszentmihályi’s conditions provide the necessary landscape in which flow can take place. In the coming sections, I hope to expand this theory beyond Csikszentmihályi’s discussion in two important ways: the concept of flow as a continuum and the notion of collective (or multi-person) flow experiences. These expansions will provide flow theory a more complete perspective from which to view combo jazz.

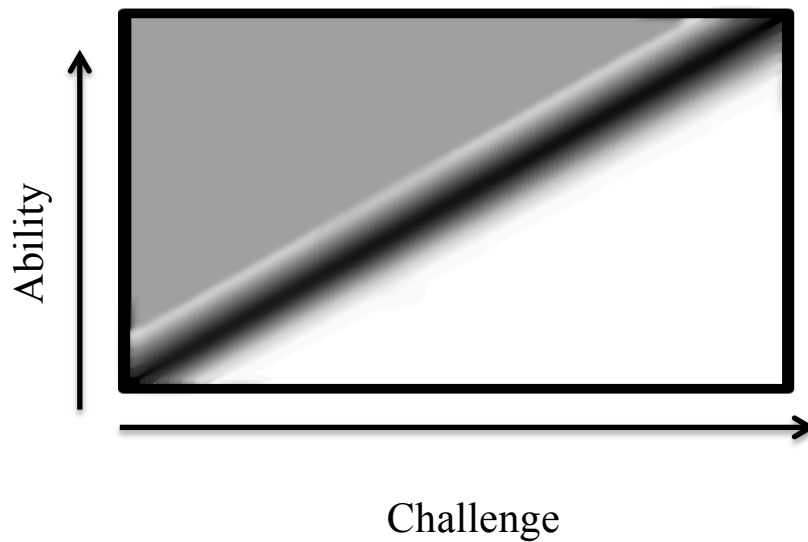
Gradations of Flow

Csikszentmihályi’s flow theory is built firmly on the notion of flow as an exceptional state of being. Even his alternate verbal description, optimal experience, suggests an understanding of flow as either on or off; a person is either experiencing a flow state or not. Similarly, Maslow’s theory treats the attainment of peak experience as the apex of a system

built for the purpose of reaching the top.¹⁷ As in Csíkszentmihályi's flow concept, a person attaining peak experience is standing at the top; proximity to the top is irrelevant. Like figure 1, above, Csíkszentmihályi's diagrams display a clear distinction between a position in the "flow channel" (in figure 1, the diagonal black line representing balance) and those outside of it.

With respect to the analysis of a flow activity, however, I posit that it is necessary to expand this black-and-white assessment to include grey areas (see figure 2).

Fig. 2. Challenge/ability graph visually representing a graduated channel of flow, in which some flow experiences might be categorized as peak (positioned at the center of the flow channel) while others are more peripheral (positioned with relative proximity to the center of the channel).



This shading would account for deeper and lighter flow experiences. The possibility that one might experience flow to differing degrees challenges the notion that flow is an on/off state and accounts for episodes in which a person experiences some of the markers of the flow state (but not all or not completely). For example, a person engaging in a flow activity may

¹⁷ Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964).

feel some of the signs Csíkszentmihályi identified as markers of optimal experience, such as time slippage and obliviousness to physical discomforts. These distinctions are not drawn along crisp lines, however, and one may be partially aware of time, even if its motion feels faster or slower than they would normally perceive. Similarly, one may be aware of some physical issues while others go unnoticed during the flow experience. For example, a soccer player might feel thirsty or notice that they are slowing down from exhaustion in the second half of the game but be unconcerned about a bruised muscle or unaware that they have become hot or hungry. One might be able to engage in some level of flow on a fairly regular basis while performing a flow activity, but on some occasions may note that their flow is deeper or more prolonged and perhaps more memorable as an experience.

For a musician, some gigs might provide a stronger, more palpable, more memorable flow experiences than others. In his interview with Elina Hytönen-Ng, jazz musician Gunter Kürmayr explained, “I found [it] was an unbelievable gig for us, yesterday, because we were . . . we didn’t have a gig, I think, for a week or so. And it’s always when you haven’t played for a while, and the first gig that you get everyone is on fire right away.”¹⁸ Here, Kürmayr describes the effect of distance and perhaps rest between gigs on his (and presumably his fellow musicians’) ability to engage in flow. For Kürmayr, distance increases the flow potential of a particular gig. Many other factors involving a musician’s audience, venue, gig circumstances, and fellow musicians might also affect the degree to which flow might be achieved. While flow can be achieved almost regardless of circumstances, artists themselves describe their fondest flow experience as a convergence of many factors. It is perhaps for this reason that musicians with lengthy careers will recall a few memorable performances

¹⁸ Elina Hytönen-Ng, *Experiencing ‘Flow’ in Jazz Performance* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 135.

decades later, often (though not always) because they were deeply engaged in flow during those performances.

Hytönen-Ng's study further confirms that while most musicians seemed to agree that they experienced flow, their opinions on the frequency of engagement varied. Some musicians felt that they achieved flow nearly every performance, with the possible exception of when something catastrophic interrupted the possibility of engagement. Others reserved the term for their most prized experiences, describing flow as an elusive force that seized upon them only when all conditions were ideal. When Hytönen-Ng interviewed Elliot Henshaw, he explained:

I think those of us who have to work hard to get to a certain level, [flow] makes it all worthwhile when you experience it. It gives you a kind of a benchmark. It's like, on that gig, I achieved that level of emotion, and maybe, on this gig, I didn't get up to that, but you still . . . I think . . . You know it's possible, and also it gives you another focus . . .¹⁹

Meanwhile, interviewee Michael Janisch told her:

And [flow] always happens to some degree. If you love music, it will always happen . . . Every gig, with me anyway, it always happens. Erm . . . I noticed some gigs a lot of people don't . . . If you're working with musicians that don't actually like what they're doing, I think a lot of musicians can actually play music without caring what they're doing."²⁰

This second quote sheds light on two major points. First, that flow clearly means something different to Janisch than it does to Henshaw. For Henshaw, flow is a goal, a rare achievement to be savored when accomplished. For Janisch, it is nearly always the state of the activity.

This brings us back to some of Csíkszentmihályi's examples: the chess player and the factory worker. While the chess player requires increasingly more difficult matches (as their skill increases) to experience flow, the factory worker can continue to self-challenge, day in and

¹⁹ Ibid., 25.

²⁰ Ibid., 26.

day out, and experience flow for longer stretches and more regularly than the chess player. Rather than simply assessing that the factory worker is better at achieving flow, or that the factory line is a better flow activity, it might be said that the factory worker is able to experience flow at one level, while for the chess player the degree of flow required to observe optimal experience might be much higher. Likewise, for Janisch, the activity of performing music draws him in to a certain degree of flow. Whereas some performances might be particularly spectacular for him, he considers nearly all performances flow experiences. On the other hand, Henshaw reserves the term flow for particularly exceptional experiences, which he believes occur infrequently and only when all conditions are favorable.

The second point that Janisch's quote exemplifies is that flow need not be related, necessarily, to the quality of activity participant's output. This too, is a point of contention among musicians, but Hytönen-Ng's study does a thorough job of uncoupling the concept of flow to the quality of performance. Optimal experience does not necessarily mean optimal output. An eight-year-old, for example, giving a first piano recital, will likely play fairly simple music clumsily and perhaps with mistakes. Nevertheless, the child can still feel the rush of flow during the performance, even if the parents and friends in the audience do not. Similarly, a musician may feel uncomfortable throughout a performance, never achieving optimal experience, and play exceptionally high-quality music. Hytönen-Ng explained her findings:

The respondents also talked about whether or not flow could be seen or heard on recordings. The topic came up as a few respondents remarked on how funny it was that they did not always know how well the gig had gone. One recalled that at times he could really be struggling with his playing, yet, when listening to a recording later, find that the end result had been really interesting. At other times he could think that a gig had been particularly good, and he had been in 'rapture', but, when he listened to

a recording afterwards, he found nothing special. Such comments underline how flow cannot necessarily be heard on a recording, even by musicians themselves.²¹

Meanwhile, some of Hytönen's respondents disagree, as in this exchange:

Respondent 1: But certain guys are in flow, and they sound like crap . . . I mean I've heard it, you know.

Respondent 2: But I don't know what you're talking about . . . I wouldn't think of them as in flow if they sound like crap.

Respondent 1: But they think they are. I'd think, so am I. So who's gonna say? It's art. There's no right, no wrong.²²

The power in this discussion helps to locate flow as a highly individualized, subjective experience. While flow experiences share certain traits and are often described in similar terms, they cannot be presumed standardized from person to person. Moreover, a single person may experience differing degrees of flow at different times. While one musician might consider only the highest, most fully engaging experiences as “optimal,” another might consider any experience that allows a complete investment into the activity as flow engagement. Because output is not a strong indicator of an individual's engagement in flow and flow experiences are highly subjective, claiming that a performer is or is not experiencing a flow state is dangerous—it forces questions of whose definition of flow we are to use and by what measure. It is more effective and reliable to allow for a range of flow experiences that peak at the ideal, fully-focused optimal experience.

Collective Flow

Hytönen-Ng identifies another key limitation of Csikzentmihalyi's flow theory: it solely addresses flow as it relates to the individual. She wrote,

²¹ Ibid., 136.

²² Ibid., 136.

Collectivity is of special importance in jazz and improvisation. While playing, musicians need to be open to the other musicians as flow is not just an individual's experiences. For musicians, flow is pre-eminently a communal phenomenon that cannot really be achieved alone. Making music means interacting and sharing with others. Even when playing solos, musicians are reacting to all of the influences they have had. They always create flow in a context that involves other musicians and other people.²³

Perhaps Hytönen-Ng overstates in suggesting that flow *must* occur in an environment of collectivity, stretching collectivity to include not only fellow musicians in a performance but also the entirety of a musician's personal experience. By this definition, collectivity is atemporal and uncontained, a definition that defies its own usefulness by embracing all things as potentially part of a performance's collective. To avoid this confusion, I will utilize *collectivity* literally, to refer to the collective of musicians participating in a given performance. In contrast, I discuss Hytönen-Ng's broader approach to the network of music and musicians that might influence (and be influenced by) a given artist at any given time as *discourse*, referencing the work of Michel Foucault and Reiner Keller.²⁴

While Hytönen-Ng is perhaps too broad in her definition of collectivity, she is correct in assessing that it has largely been left out of literature dealing directly with flow theory and peak experience in jazz improvisation. However, the importance of collectivity has been approached through ideas such as groove in Berliner's work, which locates the jazz soloist in the context of ensemble, and the work of Ingrid Monson, who explores the interaction between rhythm section players as a fundamental network in combo improvisation.²⁵ Groove

²³ Ibid., 64.

²⁴ See Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), Trans A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge, 2002); Berger, P. L. and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966); Reiner Keller, "The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse," *Human Studies* 34 (1), 2011c, 43–65.

²⁵ See Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

provides the musical context within which a given soloist works and, like flow, has been explored in related but discrete ways in global traditions by scholars such as Thomas Turino (2008) and Stephen Feld (1988).²⁶ In this sense, collectivity has been and continues to be an important consideration for the study of many musical traditions, including jazz, popular music, and many global music traditions.

It is significant, then, that collectivity is not adequately addressed in Csíkszentmihályi's theoretical framework. To this end, I suggest that flow be considered a function of a given performer within a given musical context, drawing on fellow musicians as moving parts in the performance that may or may not create feelings of optimal experience. Hytönen-Ng's interviews feature many comments from her respondents regarding the importance of musical interactions during a performance. Her respondents discussed communication and trust as essential to creating an atmosphere in which flow can take place, though they characterized communication and trust in different, sometimes contradicting ways. Nevertheless, musicians unanimously concluded that their ability to achieve flow in performance is tethered to their onstage peers. Thus, it is necessary to appreciate collectivity as an important facet in the development of flow theory.

Discourse, though not a facet of collectivity in the way that I have defined it, also plays an important role in improvisation. Discourse between contemporaneous musicians and

²⁶ *Groove* has, as discussed widely by Barry Kernfeld, many alternative interpretations. It is commonly used by jazz musicians to refer to the musical foundation set up by the drums and bass, and can also include comping instruments such as piano, guitar, and percussion. Groove is not exclusive to jazz, and can be used to describe the musical foundation many styles, including world musics. Stephen Feld ("Aesthetics of Iconicity of Style, or 'Lift-up-over Sounding: Getting into the Kaluli Groove,'" *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 1988, 74) utilizes the term to discuss the repetitive patterns that stylistically index musical traditions, and more recently the term has been tapped for its potential associations to embodiment. Though these uses widen or narrow the scope of the term according to the specificity of their definitions, the commonality that remains between them lies in the idea of foundation. Whether the groove is set by a single sound or a combination of sounds, whether it is fixed or changeable, and whether it indexes a specific style or a family of styles, the term seems consistently applicable to its function in creating musical context.

across time (through recordings, recollections, etc.) can have a profound effect on the improvising musician in informing the musician's creative decisions. Moreover, many musicians, Jarrett included, can attest to an awareness of their role in the evolving discourse of the genre.²⁷ Discourse as an influence on improvisational decision-making will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter two.

In expanding Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory to include considerations of gradation and the effects of collective cooperation, it is possible to approach a more complete perspective regarding jazz improvisation as a flow activity. Moreover, these factors interact in significant ways. For example, musicians in a given performance may not all experience the same degree of flow. Still, assuming none of them effectively disrupt the flow of their fellow performers, it is possible to collectively work towards flow experiences that are still highly individual. In the next chapter, I discuss Keith Jarrett's characterizations of flow in performance, paying particular attention to the satisfying collaborations Jarrett found in his trio work.

²⁷ Jarrett references an awareness that his prominence as an artist places him in an influential position on several occasions, most notable in his short essay on working with Miles Davis, "On Playing Free Jazz," found in *Scattered Words* (Gräfelfing: ECM Records/Verlag, 2003).

CHAPTER 2: DECONSTRUCTING THE IMPROVISATIONAL PROCESS

Personae and Processes

Flow-inducing activities require that a person analyze the current moment, make decisions regarding what should happen next, and then realize those decisions through embodiment. In the course of an activity, this process is a continuous cycle; as each decision is realized, the embodied reality becomes part of the past. This past, in turn, is reflected upon so that new decisions can be made. Keith Jarrett discusses this process in terms of “being” three people at once while improvising: the Improviser, the Spontaneous Composer, and the Keyboardist (the man at the keyboard).

The improviser is the easiest to explain (though no one in their right mind would try to). He sits there, confident in his ability to find some musical way from A to B (although he has no idea what B is). The spontaneous composer is harder to explain, though his position is slightly above the improviser. He “sends down” material (sorry, it’s the only way I know how to say it) at the spur of the moment whenever the improviser calls for it. He might have to create B out of thin air. His job is harder because he has to supply substantial “content” on the spur of the moment, in case the improviser gets stuck or lost or just plain loses his connection to “the zone.” The composer eggs on the improviser (and vice versa), while the man at the keyboard—monitoring the proceedings and trying not to judge too quickly or intervene, even when he disapproves—attempts to pay attention to it all, simultaneously (*all of this is simultaneous*).²⁸

Jarrett’s acute articulation of the way in which he perceives of the improvisational process helps to clarify the depth and complexity of the rule-bound system in which he operates as a performer. Jarrett himself is performing all of the tasks he describes simultaneously, but in an attempt to explain improvisation as an activity, he breaks down the task of performing into

²⁸ Keith Jarrett, “Some Thoughts on Free Playing,” *Scattered Words* (Gräfelfing: ECM Records, 2003), 7-13.

separate but interdependent “jobs” completed by his personae. I suggest that this insight offers a view of flow in improvisation as a balance and harmony between these tasks. Jarrett describes the perfect work of his personae as the height of improvisational experience; when each of his personae are able to work freely and in harmony with the others, Jarrett is able to engage in flow. Conversely, all three of Jarrett’s personae must be working effectively and together in order for him to engage fully. In the following chapter, I discuss each of Jarrett’s personae as well as their roles in the improvisational process, supported by Jarrett’s own descriptions as recorded in his writings and interviews.

For Jarrett, the Improviser analyzes each given moment and generates a feeling, a direction, a notion. The Improviser does not deal in notes and rhythms but in sentiments. Jarrett goes so far as to say that when he tries to use the Improviser to forward particular musical ideas, his flow crumbles under the pressure to put a particular idea to work. Instead, the Improviser must be completely free to respond to the impulses felt in any given moment in the improvisation. This response is not formulated; it is merely a sentiment, like an utterance, waiting to be interpreted into notes, rhythms, and gestures.

It is at this point that Jarrett introduces the Spontaneous Composer. He calls this part of his persona “difficult to describe,” and indeed, scholars of improvisation studies have at times used spontaneous composition interchangeably with improvisation.²⁹ For Jarrett,

²⁹ See Laudan Nooshin’s argument that the term *improvisation* is itself inappropriate, advocating for the use of the designations *performed* and *notated* to differentiate compositions that are written spontaneously in performance versus those that are notated in advance of a performance and then learned (and noting the existence of a grey area in between). Laudan Nooshin, “Beyond the *Radif*: New Forms of Improvisational Practice in Iranian Music,” *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 19 no. 2 (June 2013), <http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.13.19.2/mto.13.19.2.nooshin.html>, accessed 3 July 2016). See also Merce Cunningham’s description of dance as spontaneous choreography in “The impermanent Art,” and Michael Chekhov’s characterization of improvisational composition in the stage ensemble in “Improvisation and Ensemble,” both in *The Improvisation Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2015). See also Robert Levin’s discussion regarding composition and improvised composition in “Improvising Mozart,” in *Musical Improvisation: Art, Education, and Society* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

however, the Spontaneous Composer translates the artistic impulses of the Improviser into playable ideas. It is important to Jarrett that the ideas not originate with the Spontaneous Composer, but that they emerge out of the notions supplied by the Improviser. While this might seem like splitting hairs, Jarrett insists that without this process, his Improviser is unable to operate freely, and as a consequence, his ability to function as a creative artist is stifled. In an interview with Ted Rosenthal, Jarrett again referred to the process by which musical utterances are translated via composition to playable musical ideas and then performed in concert. Jarrett was asked why he hummed while playing jazz, but not while playing Mozart. Jarrett answered,

Well I think the singing comes from the fact that the subject matter is being dictated to me and I have to quickly transcribe it and then decide how to play it and in what dynamic and which finger and all that, so it's an *explosive* process. Whereas playing Mozart is not, in that sense, explosive.³⁰

The third of Jarrett's improvisational personae is the Keyboardist. Unlike the Improviser and the Spontaneous Composer, whose jobs are more internal, Jarrett's Keyboardist physically realizes the ideas provided by the Spontaneous Composer. The Keyboardist is the most embodied of the three personae, reaching out to touch the piano and creating audible sound. The Keyboardist interacts physically with the instrument, feeling the weight of the keys, the heft of a pedal, or the spring of a plucked string. If the Spontaneous Composer is a translator for the Improviser, the Keyboardist is a translator for the Spontaneous Composer. The Keyboardist also seems to supply the Improviser with analysis ("monitoring the proceedings"), completing the cycle in each interval.³¹

³⁰ Keith Jarrett, interview with Ted Rosenthal, "Keith Jarrett: Focus and Finesse," *Piano & Keyboard* (Jan/Feb 1997, 29-34).

³¹ "Interval" is used here in the context of performance criticism, as defined by Dylan Bolles and Peter Lichtenfels: "It locates the moment that time and space coalesce and expand, creating presence without

In interviews, Jarrett frequently discusses his relationship to a particular piano on a particular night. Characteristics such as tuning, weight, and timbre of areas on the keyboards (and sometimes individual keys) are important to him. As he plays, his process takes into account the unique characteristics of the instrument he is playing as well as the quirks of the venue in which the performance takes place. When asked about a particular recording session or live performance, Jarrett frequently turns to the physical and sonic qualities of the instrument and space. Moreover, his lifelong disdain for electronic instruments, a bias he cites as an important factor in his decision to leave the Miles Davis band, is a testament to the importance of the physicality of the acoustic instrument for him. The imperfections of an acoustic instrument are part of his process; they inspire him. Thirty years after his famed “Köln Concert” (January 24, 1975), Mike Dibbs’ documentary describes the circumstances of the concert (which was recorded live and sold a record number of albums). The piano Jarrett had ordered had not arrived and according to the documentary,

The one in the hall was substandard, sounding tinny and thin in the outer registers. Mr. Jarrett nearly refused to play, changing his mind at the last minute. Almost as an afterthought, the sound technicians decided to place the mikes and record the concert, even if only for the house archive. Later, longtime friend and record producer Manfred Eicher said: “Probably he played it the way he did because it was not a good piano. Because he could not fall in love with it he found another way to get the most out of it.”³²

The need to feel and hear the acoustic instrument and all its imperfections can be linked to the personae in Jarrett’s process. Jarrett’s Improviser takes in the entire context of the moment for analysis, including the sonic qualities of the space and the way his fingers feel on the instrument. The Improviser utters the next idea to the Spontaneous Composer, who

coordinates. An interval is ‘between the ramparts’, an opening like a set of doorposts to let in light, or a place you can walk through, It creates space without coordinates, fissures, energy.” Dylan Bolles and Peter Lichtenfels, “Interval,” in *Performance Studies: Key Words, Concepts, and Theories*, ed. Bryan Reynolds (London: Palgrave, 2014), 57-64.

³² Mike Dibbs, *Keith Jarrett: The Art of Improvisation* (Berlin and UK: EuroArts Entertainment, 2005).

translates it into playable musical ideas. Whereas the Improviser must consider the musical context as it exists at a given moment, the Spontaneous Composer's job is predictive, requiring this persona to take into consideration what a given musical idea will sound like on this particular instrument and in this particular space. The Keyboardist, too, must be attentive to the instrument and space and adjust the realization accordingly. For example, whereas one piano's high range might sound cool and clear, another's might sound brassy with abundant overtones. Jarrett's Improviser responds to these tendencies in the instrument, high Spontaneous Composer considers them when articulating his improvisation, and his Keyboardist accounts for them in the process of realization.

All three personae must be working in tandem in order for Jarrett to reach flow, as Jarrett's personae are yet a deconstruction of the improvisational process he himself completes. This deconstruction is highly useful, as it provides an illustration of improvisation as a flow activity. Nevertheless, interruptions or failures at any point in the process (and by any of Jarrett's personae) result in a loss of flow potential. In this chapter, I will discuss the processes of analysis, creativity and embodiment through the work of Jarrett's personae. I will then turn to the act of performance as a flow activity, considering the ways in which Jarrett's personae work together to allow him to engage in flow.

Analysis: Considerations of Context

Improvising musicians treat the act of analysis on several levels, none of which, generally speaking, require examining printed notes. On the most local level, analysis in improvised music takes into consideration that which has already been played. As soon as a sound is realized, it becomes part of the analysis. The sound has become a part of the context, a constant to which the next sound will relate. As soon as it is sounded, it ceases to be

possibility and becomes reality, a reality to be analyzed in order to create the next sound.

Max Roach described this motion in an interview with Paul Berliner:

After you initiate the solo, one phrase determines what the next is going to be. From the first note that you hear, you are responding to what you've just played: you just said this on your instrument, and now that's a constant. What follows from that? And then the next phrase is a constant. What follows from that? And so on and so forth.³³

Here, Roach discusses the linear, moment-to-moment analysis a soloist engages in to produce each new sound against the backdrop of what came before. For Hytönen-Ng's interviewees, however, the analysis that takes place during an improvisation is not limited to the soloist's output.³⁴ She argues that soloists also respond to other factors in a given performance, including other musicians, venue, and audience. Jarrett's intimate consideration of the piano adds the physicality and response of the instrument itself to this list. In the course of an improvised solo, the soloist may consider the entire environment and every sound produced in it as context worthy of analysis to inform their improvisation. Moreover, they shape their improvisations both with respect to the analysis of the immediate musical moment and considerations for the large-scale structures of the piece and performance.

Findings published by both Hytönen-Ng and Sven Bjerstedt suggest that jazz improvisers are actively aware of the historical context of their work as well.³⁵ Musicians consider their improvisations to be influenced by the past, and in particular by a lineage of jazz greats and personal influences. Hytönen-Ng argues that this influence is neither a

³³ Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 192.

³⁴ Elina Hytönen-Ng, *Experiencing 'Flow' in Jazz Improvisation* (Surrey, England, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).

³⁵ Ibid. Also, Sven Bjerstedt, "The Jazz Storyteller: Improvisers' Perspectives on Musical Narrative," *Jazz Research Journal*, vol. 9 no. 1 (2015), 37-61. Bjerstedt also argues for the construction of narrative on the local level (within the organization of a solo), performance level (over the course of a song and entire performance), and on the global level (with respect to the broad history of the piece, genre, instrument, and style).

hypothetical in which a musician cites players/performances which may have influenced their playing, nor an indirect influence related only to the development of a musician's personal style. Instead, she finds that her musicians regularly and intentionally invoke historical influences in their playing through means as direct as quotation and motivic use or as vague as timbre and stylistic interpretation. Jazz musicians are keenly aware of the history of their genre, and they treat this history as an immediate and important part of improvisational context. During an improvised solo, a jazz musician analyzes personal output, everything happening in the immediate performance context, as well as the history and context of the piece, style, and instrument they are playing (as far as they know it).

For Jarrett, each of these levels of analysis plays a role in his improvisational process, and each of his personae engages, to some extent, in analysis. Jarrett's Improviser considers both the immediate past (that which has been played in the preceding moment, in the current song, and in the current performance) and the distant past (that which Jarrett has played in other performances and historical influences). This is not to say that Jarrett consciously utilizes preconceived musical notions. According to Jarrett each "nanosecond" is analyzed such that his Improviser can decide from a place of complete freedom, what to utter next.³⁶ I will liken Jarrett's nanosecond to the theoretical concept of the *interval*, as presented by Bolles and Lichtenfels.³⁷ An interval is an undefined measure of space in which processes may occur, between the physical, real-world happenings that are the result of such processes.

³⁶ Jarrett refers to the process of improvising by "nanosecond" in several interviews, including: Keith Jarrett, interview with National Public Radio staff, *All Things Considered*, NPR, 14 November 2011; Keith Jarrett, appearance with Dr. Charles Limb, *TED Radio Hour*, NPR, 6 May 2015; Dan Ouellette, "Out of Thin Air," *Downbeat* (August 2005).

³⁷ Dylan Bolles and Peter Lichtenfels, "Interval," in *Performance Studies: Key Words, Concepts, and Theories*, ed. Bryan Reynolds (London: Palgrave, 2014), 57-64.

Jarrett's Spontaneous Composer utilizes analysis. While the free utterance of the Improviser might be interpreted in a number of ways, the Spontaneous Composer determines the ways in which that utterance will sound when interpreted on the instrument. Considerations such as the range, timbre, and tuning of the instrument as well as the performance space and the potential reactions of other musicians are all part of the Spontaneous Composer's analysis. According to Jarrett, his Keyboardist utilizes analysis similarly, considering the movement involved in playing, but also observes the broader performance and the interactions between the first two personae in order to supply the Improviser with analysis.

Jarrett often describes intervals of analysis which have taken him in an unexpected direction, reacting to the immediate in ways he could not have planned. In a 2012 interview, Jon Regan prompts Jarrett to talk about surprising moments and his onstage inspiration:

Regan: . . . *Rio* sounds like *you're* as surprised by the music as the listener is—like we're finding the notes together. Was that intentional?

Jarrett: You just nailed it better than I could have. That is *exactly* what I was working with and trying to replicate. I knew a few things about the concert—one was that I had a feeling of ease. The music itself seemed to just show up, song by song. I didn't want to play with it because there was so much purity there One of the interesting facts about this recording is that as far as I know, it's the only solo release of mine played on an American Steinway. American Steinways are uneven in the sense that the good ones are *really* good, but [the bad ones] can be really bad. They're also uneven across the keyboard itself. So when I find a piano that has this "imperfect" character, it's actually much more to deal with—and I mean that in a good sense—than a "perfect" piano. So you're hearing me discover which notes on the keyboard will do this zingy thing with overtones, and I'm learning what part of the keyboard is acting a certain way. All my other solo concerts are on German instruments, which almost always don't have as many overtones on them. I also felt like I was playing for Brazilians, and that I was also figuratively playing guitar. So that

zingy sound was part of my language, and it adds to your experience of phrasing when you're listening.³⁸

Even sounds that have proven distracting (and potentially flow-inhibiting) to Jarrett are factored into his analysis and, ultimately, his performance. Interviewer Dan Ouellette discussed the matter of coughing sounds heard on another studio-mastered live recording, *Radiance*, released in 2006³⁹:

Initially ECM chief Manfred Eicher requested the coughs be excised; upon hearing the mix, Jarrett disagreed. "I'm the one who demanded the coughs back, he says with a laugh, as if to say, can you believe it? "To get his mix Manfred had to close down some of the mikes in the house. I listened to what he did and it didn't sound right. During those shows the coughs had been cues to what I did next. For example, there's one cough that determined where the end of a piece should be. I was playing very softly and I could have gone on, but that cough told me it's about ready to resolve. So, it was like getting messages from the audience.⁴⁰

The coughs might be considered disruptive, and indeed Jarrett has been known to pause mid-concert to quell distractions. Nevertheless, they become part of Jarrett's analysis and vitally informative to his improvisation—so crucial, in fact, that he cannot fathom releasing the album featuring these live recordings without the necessary coughs.

Analysis plays an important role in any flow activity. It is analysis that provides the mental organization needed for a person to participate in a rule-bound, goal-oriented activity. Csíkszentmihályi argues that the natural state of the human mind is chaotic and that it seeks organization through structured thought. Without analysis, the mind would be unable to contextualize and process participation in an activity as progressive and, in turn, to sense

³⁸ Jon Regen, "Keith Jarrett: The Power of Being in the Moment" *Keyboard*, 38 (2012), 13-16, 18. The recording referred to is *Rio*, Jarrett's two-disc release of his live show performed at Teatro Municipal, Rio de Janeiro on April 9, 2011, mastered under Jarrett's direction and released by ECM later that year.

³⁹ *Radiance* is a combination of two live performances, recorded in Osaka, Japan on October 27, 2002 and Tokyo, Japan on October 30, 2002, and released in 2006 by ECM records.

⁴⁰ Dan Ouellette, "Out of Thin Air," *Downbeat* (August 2005).

accomplishment.⁴¹ Jarrett is emphatic about the need for complete freedom in order to experience flow, but this freedom does not preclude organization. Even if he keeps his mind open to an infinite world of possibilities, Jarrett does not play anything at any time. Rather, according to his own description of his process, he analyzes everything around him including extremely subtle influences, such as the feel of a given key on the keyboard or the ring of the bass in the performance space. He then uses this information to choose what to play next. Chaotic freedom would mean selecting things to play at random; through analysis, Jarrett's ideas are all connected to each other and to the rest of the performance. The following section explores the process of choice and the role of flow within it.

Flow and Decision-Making: The Creative Process

Csikszentmihályi argues that a person is at their most creative when engaged in optimal experience. This notion is supported by Jarrett's description of the process of improvisation, in which he uses analysis to help him choose what to play next from an infinite number of possible gestures in any given moment. I suggest that creativity is the process by which he makes this choice; in other words, creativity is the bridge connecting input to output through decision-making. A deeper explanation, however, regarding the process of creativity requires nuance depending on the persona/job being discussed.

While creativity can be difficult to quantify or evaluate, relative creativity can be observed. As a seasoned musician, for example, Jarrett can imagine many more possibilities at any given moment than an average amateur player who, in turn, can call on more possibilities than a beginner. Furthermore, Jarrett's creativity is celebrated precisely because of the choices he makes, many of which are pleasing, surprising, or deliberately agitating. His creativity allows him to play a given tune in radically different ways from one

⁴¹ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

performance to the next, as his live recordings attest. He contends that the freedom to improvise without even traditional restrictions is so important to him that he often surprises himself in the process of playing:

I often think I'm literally asking myself, "Okay, what comes next?" The audience quiets down, and then I throw them an arpeggiated A minor. And right away, the room's different. Everything's different around me, and I'm the one in charge, so I have to know, "Okay *why* did I play that?" And then, "How far *away* from that chord do I want to go?" And those are things I'm certainly not thinking in words. It's way, way faster than that.⁴²

Although Jarrett's process of analysis and decision-making happens too fast to verbalize even in his own head, it is nevertheless a process he recognizes taking place in every "nanosecond" of his improvisation.

Each of Jarrett's three improvisational personae could be said to utilize creativity. Jarrett's Improviser chooses, from a seemingly endless well of possibilities, what to utter in any given musical moment. Jarrett consistently describes the process driving these utterances in intangible ways, using words like feeling, sense, and instinct. It is clear that at least to Jarrett, the process of analysis and subsequent decision-making is not scientific; he does not evaluate each musical situation and then select the best option, regardless of what criteria might be included in the definition of *best*. If this were the case, his improvisations on performances of the same song would bear more resemblance to each other (even taking into account differences of audience, venue, and instrument which Jarrett consider critical), and he would likely describe his process with more emphasis on intelligent musicianship than sentiment. Instead, Jarrett plays what he feels belongs next, and both *feeling* and *belonging* are ambiguous and subjective enough to warrant different choices in every performance. The

⁴² Jon Regen, "Keith Jarrett: The Power of Being in the Moment," *Keyboard*, 38 (2012), 13-16, 18.

Improviser's creativity lies in the ability to reinterpret feeling and belonging to reach new outcomes in every performance.

Jarrett's Spontaneous Composer also bears creative burdens. In interpreting the Improviser's utterances, the Spontaneous Composer must make countless decisions that shape the improvisation, such as pitch, rhythm, range, volume, articulation, texture, and direction. Whereas an utterance is inherently a limit, narrowing down limitless possibilities to a family of similar possibilities, the utterance still necessitates that the Spontaneous Composer make many concrete decisions. These decisions, though often technical, take Jarrett's free utterances and translate them into ideas that can be played on the piano. The Keyboardist, in turn, realizes these ideas. Jarrett's Keyboardist is left with the creative decisions revolving around the embodiment of the performance. Whereas the Spontaneous Composer's ideas are more concrete than the utterances of the improviser, they are still just hypothetical ideas until realized. Furthermore, as will be discussed in the next chapter, embodiment itself is a cycle of choices and executions that may or may not always succeed as planned.

Before Jarrett's improvisational personae are put to work, however, a rather conscious creative choice must be made: repertoire. Throughout his career, Jarrett has insisted that repertoire is not selected prior to a performance; rather he allows himself to choose the next piece after each piece concludes, depending on factors such as venue, audience, and the directions the previous piece's improvisations had taken. This strategy was possible in part because the Jarrett/Peacock/DeJohnette trio (the Standards trio) played sets of standard, well-known tunes. Jarrett refers to these tunes, which have been improvised over by generations of players, as opening rather than limiting creative possibilities. Whereas many

musicians might consider standards to be tired, overplayed, and difficult to engage with to create new improvisation, it is precisely the history of these tunes, together with what Jarrett considers to be excellent and time-tested melodic construction, that appeals to him. Although he certainly spent periods of his long career exploring his own compositions as well as free improvisation, Jarrett spent years with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette reimagining well-worn standards such as “Stella by Starlight” and “All of Me.” Jarrett says of the decision to utilize standards:

I knew Gary and Jack had gone through standards as I had—in the prime of our lives—and they became second nature to us. Like a cocktail pianist knowing two hundred tunes, all the bridges at the flip of a coin. I thought we could all share this tribal language we were given; a world of wonderful little melodies. We had dinner the night before the (first recording) session . . . I talked about our spiritual involvement in something that is not our own. Something beautiful that is not ours; and we will make it ours, but we will not try. And what we ended up with is incredible.⁴³

For Jarrett, the use of standards was more than inspiring; it was strategic. The trio’s use of standard tunes relieved them of the need to rehearse extensively, to familiarize, to perfect. Rather than exploring new compositional material, the Standards trio utilized the possibilities available within material that was already familiar to all of them. In terms of Csíkszentmihályi’s challenge/ability graph, the Standards trio assuaged any burden presented by new repertoire to find improvisational techniques that work. Had the trio simply played standards with formulaic, run-of-the-mill improvisations, their concerts would likely have sounded fine—at least passable—but they would have had difficulty engaging in flow, as their ability would have far exceeded that which is necessary to perform. The trio raises the challenge into balance with their exceptional abilities by treating the standards in novel ways, as Jarrett explains:

⁴³ Keith Jarrett, *Scattered Words* (Gräfelfing: ECM Records, 2003), 30.

The easiest thing would be for Gary, Jack, and I to say to ourselves, what is second nature to us? What material can we deal with without even thinking about it? And ‘Standards’ was the answer to that, because we all played in cocktail lounges, and commercial bands, and Dixieland bands, and bars . . . our Japanese promoter once made an alphabetical list of the tunes we had already played, and it’s you know, we all looked at it and went, what? We play all those? And they were, you know, someone can just name the song and we can play it, so although what that sounds like is a cop out, to me, the hardest thing to do is preserve the freshness and the standard of playing while playing material that is anything but new.⁴⁴

Jarrett improvises elaborate, fantasia-style introductions to each tune, and although he incorporates pieces of the melodic and harmonic structures of each standard, he also freely expands, condenses, and amends the existing structures. Peacock and DeJohnette are also free to reimagine them alongside Jarrett (and not necessarily following his lead). Jarrett has said that he wants each member of the trio to be completely free to improvise what they feel belongs at any given moment in any performance, a freedom which opens possibilities for improvisational exploration for Peacock and DeJohnette far beyond backing Jarrett.⁴⁵ This sense of the limitless possibility forces each member of the trio into a constant cycle of analysis and decision-making from one moment to the next, spanning the entirety of each piece. Jarrett himself best explains the reason they chose to work with standards, and the challenges they faced in doing so:

I thought someone could show that music wasn’t about material, it was about what you bring to the material. I wanted to say that we don’t possess this, this isn’t our music. You’ll hear us relating to it as seriously as if it were ours, but not changing it into some other thing When the trio started playing standards, nobody was thinking it was the right thing to do, everybody had to have their own material. If you have a new band, you are playing your shit. And when I talked to Gary, it even shocked him. It was radical; as classic and traditional as it is, it was radical. Now, at the moment, when everybody is saying, “Oh Gee, the trio can’t go anywhere from here, they can’t keep playing standards,” *Inside Out* comes out, and *Always Let Me*

⁴⁴ Keith Jarrett, “Interview with Keith Jarrett, Part Two,” interview by Liane Hansen, *All Things Considered* (Washington, DC: NPR, Jan. 8, 1995).

⁴⁵ Jarrett comments to the contrary: “I’m always accompanying Gary and Jack!” Keith Jarrett, “Maintaining Standards: Keith Jarrett and Dave Grusin,” interview with Becca Pulliam, *Downbeat* (May 1992).

Go comes out. There are subversive, subliminal messages in this that have to do with retaining our integrity and retaining our freedom under all circumstances.⁴⁶

This quote, when considered alongside many similar remarks, demonstrate that the decision to play standards was deliberate, calculated, and reflective of the way in which Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette wanted to feel while playing. Standards were not chosen to appease an audience with familiar tunes or to play mindlessly, easy gigs that require little investment. Rather, this repertoire was selected specifically for the kind of investment it required: the challenge to be innovative and personal in the context of pieces that, though finely crafted, have become generic. This challenge, together with the spontaneity of being able to draw from hundreds of tunes with no predetermined concert order, helped the Standards trio to reach the flow experiences they were seeking. Thus, repertoire was an integral part of the creative decision-making process.

Realization: From Ideas to Sounds

As each decision is made—from utterances to the translation of those utterances into musical vocabulary—it must be realized in sound. The mental energies engaged while the analysis and decision-making are taking place are very much embodied, utilizing the brain, the physical senses such as sight, sound, and touch, and the chemical process driving emotional response. At every moment, Jarrett's physical body is engaged in the improvisation and among his personae the Keyboardist's responsibilities are the most embodied. In physically carrying out the realization and creating sound, the Keyboardist supplies the music heard by the audience—music that immediately upon being realized becomes part of the analysis informing the next musical moment.

⁴⁶ Keith Jarrett, *Scattered Words* (Gräefelting: ECM Records, 2003).

Csikszentmihályi argues that flow, at its most ideal, fully engages both the mind and body. Nevertheless, Csikszentmihályi's examples and the flow continuum developed in Chapter 1 suggest that some level of flow can be achieved without *complete* engagement, and from this it follows that mental and physical engagement may not be utilized in equal measures. Nevertheless, the peak experience, at its best, requires a complete mental and physical commitment to an activity.⁴⁷ Within the context of the challenge/ability measure, both challenge and ability should provide for all aspects of participation in an activity, including physical ability and the physical demands of the challenge. Csikszentmihályi also attends closely to the issue of training, explaining that engagement depends on one's ability to train the body and mind to work together to satisfy the challenge. To achieve a flow state is to find a place in which mental and physical energies are employed together and balanced with the challenge of the activity.⁴⁸

The coordination between thought and action creates observable behaviors. Perhaps one of the clearest observable examples of this coordination can be found in dance. When journalist Laura Ling interviewed ballet prodigy Rio Anderson, the young artist described a practice she uses to prepare herself mentally and physically for the act of performing:

Ling: You have a very distinct ritual when it comes to performance and ballet, can you tell me about that?

⁴⁷ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990, 94-116). Two flow activities that Csikszentmihályi describes in this chapter are a competitive swimmer and a person listening to music. While the swimmer is engaged in an intense, constant, and total-body activity, the swimmer must be fully engaged mentally, both for success in the sport and enjoyment of the activity in a flow state. Conversely, the person fully engaged in listening to music is performing much less physical activity, but is nonetheless utilizing their senses to perceive the music and allowing their body to react in a way that *does not disrupt* their optimal enjoyment.

⁴⁸ If a person's mental and physical abilities are out of sync in a given activity, it may be more difficult to find an appropriate challenge to induce flow. Consider, for example, an accomplished pianist attempting to learn to play the flute. While some of the pianist's physical and mental abilities are highly attuned (ear training, reading music, etc), others parts of the process are unfamiliar, such as blowing into the flute to make a sound or utilizing the finger patterns to play a scale. This disparity can skew the challenge-ability graph; even if parts of the challenge are manageable, others are too hard, preventing the pianist/beginning flautist from reaching flow.

Anderson: So part of the ritual for me is a very set routine for preparing your body, and in doing such a repetitive and specific warm-up, you also get your mind into that sort of Zen zone. I just sit down, close my eyes, and then I rehearse my dance in my head. Sometimes I'll put in earbuds . . . but the music activates the muscle memory when you're dancing. I like to visualize all of the dance and go through each step in my mind, just thinking about the movements and also really trying to feel them in my body. You do the ideal in your head and hope it translates.

Ling: What pressure are you under? How high are the stakes for you?

Anderson: As a student, each performance matters because you just don't have as many, and in the competitions you only have one chance on stage. It's a lot of pressure. The visualization is so important because it shows me what I'm going for, what I'd like the performance to be. You know, I get really nervous on stage, so if my mind goes blank the muscle memory kind of kicks in because your body recognizes what's going on and what's going to happen.⁴⁹

In this passage, Anderson articulates, according to her own experience, critical ideas about embodiment in flow. She describes not only the extraordinary mental and physical coordination necessary for her performance, but also what can happen when she experiences slippage: she has trained herself so well that she can recover when her nervousness temporarily interrupts her experience. She describes this moment as her mind “going blank,” but I suggest that even if her optimal experience is interrupted, her training allows her to continue the activity. Her mind is not disengaged from the performance; it continues to work in tandem with her body, even if this connection has slipped beneath her awareness momentarily.⁵⁰ Perhaps Anderson's most poignant point, however, is her description of her warm-up: she actively primes the mind-body connection necessary for her performance by

⁴⁹ Laura Ling, “Meet the Dancing Prodigy Who Turned Down Harvard,” from “Seeker Stories,” 11 Jun 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T5rnD6u5EtY> (accessed 25 March 2016).

⁵⁰ Slippage (in this context, a lapse or momentary failure in the connection between thought and action) and rupture (moments in which a person is yanked from the flow state) will be discussed in more depth in chapter three.

easing into it with a set routine. Many musicians prime their performances similarly through pre-performance routine such as a warm-up or meditation.

While there are significant commonalities between Jarrett's and Anderson's processes, especially with regards to achieving flow, there are also key differences. Anderson has no use for an Improviser on stage, and composition for her is all but spontaneous. Moreover, Jarrett (as a jazz performer) has said that he avoids warming up; he feels that it causes him to overthink and bias his performances, thereby limiting his creativity. Whereas Anderson reaches her optimal flow experience through the pursuit of challenging, perfected performances, Jarrett needs a creative decision-making process in order to engage in flow. Even in his classical performances, which more closely echo the process of Anderson's work, Jarrett values the ability to make creative decisions where possible:

[When recording Mozart in 1994 with Stuttgarter Kammerorchester] I was working in a different way than most interpreters would have worked. I purposely wasn't hearing the orchestra in my mind until we got to the hall, and when I was sitting in the middle of the sound, the orchestra was so beautiful. Where a traditional interpreter would prepare a vision of his work, I didn't have any until the orchestra and I were actually playing. Partly because I've been an improviser for so long, my reflexes are incredibly fast. I didn't come in with a vision, but together we were playing a vision. The orchestra was taken by surprise. Dennis [Dennis Russell Davies] was taken by surprise. I was taken by surprise. Things were happening that were magic. One reason Dennis and I work together is that he knows how fast I am and one of his main strengths is speed. He was actually able to respond with the entire organism of the orchestra to these moments without losing integrity. It was much more like the primary element was listening rather than playing, which is jazz.⁵¹

Here, Jarrett gives a rare glimpse into the connective tissue between his classical playing and his jazz playing; often, he treats these as separate and unrelated worlds. Jarrett has commented that he feels more personally attached to his jazz performances because when playing classical music, he is playing music that belongs to someone else. It is interesting that he has reiterated this idea on many occasions, because it seems to rub against the idea of

⁵¹ Keith Jarrett, "Interview with Keith Jarrett," interview with Larry Alan Kay, *Fi Magazine* (1996).

performing standards. For Jarrett, however, playing Mozart is a process of interpreting Mozart, whereas playing a standard is a process of expressing himself through the lens of the standard.

The quote above also highlights the role of the physical in Jarrett's performance (of any genre). One might be tempted to think he devalues the importance of the physical, technical player he is because he often discusses his desire to play more simply and with fewer notes in improvisation. In the above quote, however, he articulates an appreciation for his exceptional technical skill in that he can respond quickly to the context around him. Of course, this response necessitates analysis and creative decision-making as well, but these would be lost on a keyboardist physically unable to execute a response in a given performance moment.

A peak experience fully engages mind and body, and physical engagement is not necessarily limited to that which contributes sonically to a performance (i.e., the Keyboardist). Csikszentmihályi's theory also addresses bodily movements and sensations to which a person engaged in a flow activity *cannot* attend. The hyper-focus experienced during a flow activity is consuming to the point at which an engaged person can only attend to the processes directly involved in the activity. Other processes, then, are deprioritized while the optimal experience remains the focus. Csikszentmihályi describes this separation of necessary and unnecessary processes:

Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears and the sense of time becomes distorted.⁵²

He further describes additional conditions that, if they occur within reasonable limits, might be temporarily disregarded such as hunger, thirst, pain, and exhaustion. Even senses

⁵² Ibid, 71.

themselves might be suspended, as might be the case for an athlete who tunes out crowd noise, a chess player who imagines a blank board, or a musician who closes their eyes at a particularly dramatic moment. Moreover, sensations such as hunger, temperature discomfort, nausea, and pain can be temporarily staved off if they are not severe enough to disrupt flow.

Jazz musicians commonly move during improvisation in ways not connected to the creation of sound. These body movements may serve other purposes, such as enhancing the visual performance for an audience, lending emphasis to climatic moments of an improvisation, or communicating with other members onstage. Many of these movements seem involuntary. Jarrett, for example, contorts his body as he plays, in spite of the fact that these contortions result in objectively less comfortable playing positions. He is also known to hum—a loud nasal, rather unbeautiful sound—while playing. Considering his careful attention to the minute timbral discrepancies on a given piano, it seems safe to assume that Jarrett’s humming is a physical part of his process rather than his intended musical product.

One might consider that there may be differences between intentional and unintentional body movements and between those that are functional to the performance versus those that serve no working purpose. Nevertheless, regardless of the intentionality and functionality of a movement, the body is still fully engaged in the activity when a performer experiences flow. Jarrett’s body contortions, for example, do not practicably serve his keyboard technique and appear to be involuntary. When he pulls his right leg up towards his torso and presses his head sideways against his shoulder, it has no discernable effect on his playing; one might marvel, rather, that Jarrett is able to execute his astonishing keyboard technique in the midst of such movement. While it could be debated as to whether these movements serve to visually engage the audience, they are relatively distant from traditional

forms of showmanship such as dancing. Many artists clearly utilize physical movements intended to enhance a performance for the audience. Examples of this cross time and genre boundaries to include the way Little Richard famously threw one leg up on the piano as he played as well as Eddie Van Halen's trademark leaps, dives, and splits. Similarly, physical movements range from necessary to the performance (those, for example, needed to play their instruments such as Itzhak Pearlman's playing stance, Joni Mitchell's instrument accommodations, etc.) to those that serve no purpose at all (such as Jarrett's humming). I posit that although the movements necessary to advance the activity take priority, unnecessary and even involuntary movements are both integral to and reflective of the flow state. In fully engaging the body in the flow activity, the performer prioritizes movements which forward the activity, simultaneously freeing the body from the restrictions of typical social comportment to move in ways that support the performer's flow (even if they do not directly contribute to the activity). In allowing his body to move freely, for example, Jarrett may put himself in more uncomfortable playing positions, but he frees himself of regulating the position of his body. Similarly, his humming may well flow from the utterances of his Improviser before they are translated into musical ideas and played. In allowing himself to hum, Jarrett frees himself of the responsibility to reign in his compulsion to make these sounds. Because freedom and complete investment are of paramount importance to Jarrett, the nasal humming sound and uncomfortable body contortions are preferable to spending the energy and concentration it would take to *not* prevent these inclinations. In order for Jarrett to engage in flow, he needs to be able to allow himself complete physical freedom, and these movements are the product of such freedom for him.

Performance as a Flow Activity

The act of performance, both staged and in the socio-cultural contexts of the everyday, is crucial for engagement in flow. When engaged in a flow activity, the performance of that activity is paramount; a cyclist is, at that moment, fully committed to the role of cyclist.

Likewise, when improvising, Jarrett is committed to himself as an improvisation artist. This commitment is evident in his change of demeanor, in the ways he uses his body, in his humming, and in his characterization of himself as a “moderator,” observing the work of his improvising personae. His improvisational self is a performance character; only when he is fully engaged in that character is Jarrett able to experience flow in performance.

Furthermore, for Jarrett, his improvisational character demands musical freedom and spontaneity, both conditions which raise the challenge level of the activity (by providing more creative choices and avoiding the safety of pre-planned ideas, respectively).

Csikszentmihályi describes creative performance as an ideal flow activity. Like other flow activities, it requires the complete commitment of mind and body to engage in flow; in other words, an investment in the character performing. Jarrett’s improvisational character encompasses his “moderator” and his three personae, a single, focused facet of himself. It is different than the frustrated person Jarrett often became during his mid-career when his flow was interrupted during a concert, and different from the easy-going jazz veteran in many of his later interviews. Jarrett’s improvisational character also differs slightly from his character as a classical performer. Though the two are related, Jarrett describes crucial differences in his attitude toward classical music and the performance of it as compared to his jazz performances. To split hairs, one might even consider the possibility that Jarrett’s

performance character in jazz improvisation is shaded differently when performing solo concerts than in his trio or when performing his own compositions versus his standards sets.

The importance of understanding the performance character lies in its ability to connect the processes foregrounded (as well as those pushed to the background) in performance as a flow activity. In examining the needs and processes of Jarrett's character while performing with his trio, it becomes clear that he is hypersensitive to the context of the performance, responding to the instrument he is playing, his fellow musicians, and extraneous sounds that occur during a performance. Additionally, Jarrett explains that the freedom to make unrestrained and unbiased musical decisions is critical to his ability to achieve flow. Despite his emphatic investment in context (including the historical context of the piece, style, and genre), his character needs to feel unfettered by expectations that might seem normal or practical to other musicians, such as adherence to a tune's basic form or harmonic integrity. He uses his body to perform, but his physical investment does not extend to parts of his body not directly utilized in the process of performance. Thus, his legs, torso, and face can often be seen moving and contorting in ways that seem uncomfortable. Though these movements are not directly linked to the creation of sound, the freedom to move, unrestrained, is part of Jarrett's improvisational performance character. Constraining himself to refrain from such movements would actually disturb his flow. A similar argument could be made regarding his humming: while it does not contribute directly to his pianistic improvisations, the freedom to allow himself to hum (or utter) is necessary to his character's ability to achieve flow.

Jarrett is not the only artist to describe freedom and spontaneity as necessary conditions for achieving flow in performance. Miles Davis said of *Bitches Brew*, "What we

did on *Bitches Brew* you couldn't ever write down for an orchestra to play. That's why I didn't write it all out, not because I didn't know what I wanted; I knew what I wanted would come out of a process and not some prearranged stuff."⁵³ Stephen Blum goes so far as to define improvisation as "responding to unforeseen challenges," suggesting that the process of moving from analysis to decision-making to realization (or from the unforeseen challenge to the recognized challenge to the response, in Blum's verbiage) is essential to the improvisation, and by extension, to the act of improvised performance.⁵⁴ This is not to say that precomposition, or the performance of patterns, motives, or ideas generated in practice, has no place in improvised music. Paul Berliner argued that these snippets (or sometimes even longer phrases) play an important role in the improvisational practices of many musicians. For Berliner, improvisation is not (necessarily) the generation of entirely new content, but the production of an improvisational product through the recall, selection, and arrangement of musical ideas from the possible ideas a given artist might have in their storehouse.⁵⁵

⁵³ Miles Davis, *Miles: The Autobiography*, written with Quincy Troupe (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991).

⁵⁴ Blum points out that musicians almost never encounter circumstances that are *completely* unforeseen; as experienced artists they most often understand the circumstances that will occur in a given improvisation as a wide but manageable set of possibilities. To this I would add that for some improvisational artists, it may be important to keep that set as open as possible. For Keith Jarrett, for example, any narrowing of the unforeseen into the predictable becomes a constraint he would prefer to shed. Though Blum may be correct in stating that Jarrett can never completely free himself of expectations, his attempts to do so can be read as important to his ability to achieve flow in performance. Stephen Blum, "Recognizing Improvisation," *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, ed. Bruno Nettl with Melinda Russell (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 27-46.

⁵⁵ Furthermore, one of the chief purposes Berliner outlines in *Thinking in Jazz* is to highlight the rigorous training process through which accomplished improvisers learn the skills necessary to perform well. He argues that while elite improvisers can seem mysteriously gifted onstage, and indeed this is often part of the appeal of hearing and seeing them perform, mistaking this sense of ease as a talent bestowed on these performers belittles the many years they spend honing their art. I would add that it echoes concerns familiar to jazz musicians, and black musicians more generally, that they are perceived talented rather than learned, thus devaluing their training. Paul Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press), 1994.

Research conducted by neuroscientist Aaron Berkowitz further emphasizes the essence of improvisation as a performance activity. Berkowitz centers his argument on improvisation as a spontaneous process rooted in a rule-based environment, a definition that places improvisation squarely within Csíkszentmihályi's definition of a flow activity. Berkowitz argues that improvisation requires the use of both declarative and procedural memory, the latter of which remains accessible only to the unconscious in the act of performing the activity.⁵⁶ Berkowitz's research also confirms the personae Jarrett understand intuitively:

The internalization of the referent and knowledge base allow for somewhat automatic generation of the microstructure of the music from moment to moment, allowing the allocation of conscious attentional resources to higher-level musical processes. Once reaching the stage of "letting go," growing confidence in the ear, hands, and subconscious competence can allow the improviser to submit freely to the moment of performance. "Letting go" means allowing the procedural/automatized sub-elements, processes, and structures of knowledge base to guide the improviser from moment to moment, as he or she steers the "bobsled" as a more global level. After a style has been thoroughly internalized, the improviser can "leave nearly everything to the fingers and to chance," because that chance draws upon the performer's accumulated musical knowledge base and experience.⁵⁷

While Jarrett might bristle at the term *automatic*, Berkowitz is referring here to the ability (and perhaps necessity) to utilize both explicit/declarative memory and implicit/procedural memory in order to improvise. Jarrett's Improviser and Spontaneous Composer have access to his expansive body of improvised experiences, learned through years of practice. In search of complete freedom, however, Jarrett seems to avoid at least a conscious accession of previously performed musical ideas, feeling that they bias his playing

⁵⁶ "Declarative memory refers to the ability to recall facts and events, whereas procedural memory describes the knowledge of skills. Declarative memory and procedural memory are sometimes referred to as "knowing that" and "knowing how," respectively. Generally, declarative knowledge is thought to be consciously accessible, whereas procedural knowledge is thought to be inaccessible to the consciousness." Aaron Berkowitz, *The Improvising Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 125. Quotes within are from an interview by the author with Robert Levin, September 10, 2007.

and limit his creative possibility. To this end, Berkowitz points out that while an improvising artist might certainly utilize declarative memory, implicit/procedural memory alone can suffice to perform improvised music. He refers to the story of Clive Wearing, conductor, singer, and pianist who suffered severe amnesia. Despite the fact that he could not remember even seconds in the past, Wearing was still able to sing, conduct, and improvise at the piano. Berkowitz concludes that, “Clearly, his improvisation cannot be guided by any kind of “memory” in the traditional sense—short- or long-term—given the extent of his amnesia. Yet the traditional musical-motor procedures that he internalized before his illness somehow steer him from moment to moment in his music-making, as in his talking and walking.”⁵⁸

Taking this idea one step further, I propose the flow potential of improvisation rests in its performance, in the moment-to-moment processes that occupy the improvising artist. This idea echoes Hytönen-Ng’s findings that artists were often unaware of (and unconcerned with) the quality of their improvisational output until they were able to distance themselves from the performance and listen to it objectively. While flow in performance might lead to a combo’s ability to respond to each other with immediacy and hypersensitivity, it can also cause a musician to be so lost in their own processes as to lose the ability to react to their fellow musicians. The disconnect between product and process further reinforces the connection between flow and the performance of improvisation (rather than improvisation as an object).

Similarly, flow in improvised performance is not beholden to virtuosity. While a virtuosic performance could induce an optimal experience, it is just as plausible that a performer might engage in flow from an amateur performance, if the challenge/ability

⁵⁸ Ibid., 128-130.

balance and context is amiable. Turino approaches this idea from a sociological perspective when he discusses flow in participatory music:

It is in participatory settings that focal attention to synchrony becomes the most pronounced and important. Because the music and dance of participatory performances are not scripted in advance, participants have to pay special attention to the sounds and motions of others on a moment-to-moment basis . . . This enhances the potential for flow and a special awareness of other participants as realized through their sounds and motions. This need to pay attention results in a kind of heightened, immediate social intercourse; when the performance is going well, differences among performers melt away as attention is focused on the seamlessness of sound and motion.⁵⁹

Turino distinguishes between musical fields as either participatory or presentational, here describing the way in which flow typically arises in participatory music. His definition seems to leave combo jazz in a liminal space between one and the other. Although improvised jazz is spontaneous and malleable from moment-to-moment, it is also often presented to an audience, either live or through the process of recording, and the distance between performers and audience casts doubt on jazz as a wholly participatory practice. Jarrett's interviews suggest that he wrestled with this problem in various ways throughout his career, alternatively admonishing or begging the audience not to interrupt the flow of the performance and, later in his career, including the audience as (somewhat) silent participants in his performance. For Jarrett, then, the participatory element of jazz is central to his enjoyment and critical to his achievement of flow in a given performance; either the audience must be imagined away, or they must be considered in his mind as participating in the performance.

The participatory nature of a performance highlights the care with which Jarrett must select fellow performers; it is unsurprising that he chose to play with the same bassist and

⁵⁹ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 43.

percussionist for many years in his trio performances. Jarrett frequently highlights the enjoyment he feels (and the absence of anxiety) when playing with Peacock and DeJohnette. When asked about the trio in 1984, Jarrett said, “A lot of it is about magic. If you don’t choose the right guys, magic will never happen. A big part of my work is intuition. You don’t need much information or many clues to know if you want to play with someone. If it is really right, then clues are right in your face.”⁶⁰ In a 1995 interview he further explained, “The most delightful thing about this trio is that there is nothing—we don’t need anything but ourselves. You know, if Jack’s there and Gary’s there and I’m there, that’s all we need. We don’t need any rehearsing . . . we need to be conscious human beings with the willingness to have intense feelings and intense experiences, and that’s it.”⁶¹ Of course, Jarrett plays with other capable musicians (notably, his combo work with Paul Motian and Charlie Haden, for example), but his inclination to perform and keep performing with Peacock and DeJohnette suggest his repeated ability to achieve flow on stage with them.

In the above paragraph, Jarrett also refers to a lack of rehearsal as central to his practice of improvised performance. This calls into question the role of preparation in performance (not to be confused with training, which Berkowitz refers to as the accumulation of knowledge, implicit and explicit, from which a performer can draw in the act of performance). Like the selection of fellow musicians and the selection of repertoire, preparation for a performance can affect the challenge-ability balance. Strong preparation can raise a performer’s ability to meet the demands of a challenge that might otherwise be just out of reach. Inadequate preparation, in turn, might be reflected in a distance between challenge and ability that inhibits the achievement of a comfortable flow. Likewise, over-

⁶⁰ Keith Jarrett, “The Keith Jarrett Interview,” interview with Art Lange, *Downbeat* (June, 1984).

⁶¹ Keith Jarrett, interview with Liane Hansen, *Weekend All Things Considered* (Washington D.C.: NPR, Jan. 1, 1995).

preparation has the potential to raise a performer/performing group's ability far above the challenge, squelching spontaneity and making the performance feel stale rather than pleasurable.

Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette were exceptional performers with creative and responsive styles. Once familiar with each other's performance styles, preparation was no longer needed (or rarely needed), and over-preparation was a threat to the joy of spontaneity and surprise onstage. Jarrett went to great lengths to preserve spontaneity, particularly when playing standards, by avoiding rehearsal and refusing to select a set list before a given concert. Within a piece, improvised solos, groove and time, texture, shape and climax, and even form and fundamental harmony are all changeable. This unpredictability allows the music to remain participatory, formed through the process of encountering and reacting to the new, and this in turn provides an environment in which Jarrett, Peacock, and DeJohnette could pursue flow in performance.

CHAPTER 3: FLOW POTENTIAL, DISRUPTION, AND COMMODIFICATION

Flow Conditions and Flow Potential

Susan Leigh Foster called flow “elusive,” highlighting the need for it to both arise and develop organically. Foster wrote, “Flow is not, as Csíkszentmihályi observes, accessible in ‘everyday life.’ An exceptional experience that involves a state of immersion within one’s actions, it is distinct from the dispersed and fragmented mentality of quotidian existence.”⁶² Moreover, the conditions under which an individual can engage in flow contain so many variables that whether one will engage in flow at any given moment is unknowable. However, past flow experiences can help to guide predictions regarding conditions that may serve to encourage or disrupt flow for an individual. In situations involving multiple performers, individual flow conditions as well as group dynamics factor into the individual’s potential to achieve flow. Jarrett’s particular performance preferences reveal conditions under which he is more likely to achieve flow, based on his own performance experience. An examination of these favorable conditions help to provide a fundamental understanding of the ways in which artists manipulate performance conditions to increase flow potential.⁶³

Conversely, the flow state may be disrupted by the loss of favorable conditions. Just as engagement in flow occurs under multifarious and individual circumstances, the causes of

⁶² Susan Leigh Foster, “Improvised Flow: Opening Statements,” Introduction to “Part 6: Flow,” in *The Improvisation Studies Reader: Spontaneous Acts*, ed. Rebecca Caines and Ajay Heble (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶³ “Flow potential” here is discussed as the rough probability that a person will be able to engage in flow in a given situation. Although directed studies would be necessary to develop a system which measures and compares flow potential, it is nevertheless possible to discuss relative flow potential and conditions which might influence flow potential for a given artist.

rupture from a flow state shed light on an artist's flow process in performance. Jarrett's own descriptions of performance indicate that there are conditions under which he cannot achieve flow or becomes torn from a flow state, and analysis of these processes expands the potential for understanding his occasionally erratic (and infamous) performance behavior. Just as group performance alters the conditions under which an individual can experience flow, the dynamics within a performing group can also affect the conditions that disrupt flow.

The concept of flow as both process and product raises questions regarding the intersection of musical performance as an experience and the construction of music as a product. I suggest that the experience of flow itself is a value that can be sought by the performing musician, complicating the common notion that musicians—and specifically improvising musicians—primarily value output. The flow experience is valuable for both its pleasure to the performer and its ability to engage the spectator in a kind of transferred flow. Thus the performance of flow is a powerful product, distinct from the experience a performer may or may not have, and potentially consumable by individuals in an audience.

In this chapter, I discuss the conditions employed by Jarrett to create an environment in which flow potential is high. I address flow as a successful performance outcome, exploring the concept of the performance experience as a value apart from musical output. I then turn to conditions that prohibit or interrupt flow for Jarrett and the ramifications of rupture in a performance setting. Finally, I consider the performance of flow as a distinct consumable product, modeled on an artist's flow experiences but not necessarily indicative of immediate flow in a given performance.

Orchestrating Flow Potential

“You’re never in a secure position. You’re never at a point where you have it all sewed up. You have to choose to be secure and like stone, or insecure and flow.”⁶⁴

The satisfaction experienced through engagement in a flow activity is, understandably, motivating. In the absence of a way to guarantee flow engagement, one might attempt to cultivate successful flow conditions, setting themselves up for both peak performance and peak engagement. Having experienced flow in performance, performers can become familiar with the conditions that seem to facilitate flow. In this section, I will explore some of the ways in which a performer might manipulate conditions to favor flow potential through a discussion of certain conditions which seem to routinely effect Jarrett’s flow potential.

In the quote above, Jarrett comments on the importance of spontaneity as a condition for fostering flow. According to him, it is critical to his creative process. For many artists the idea of spontaneity in performance means the flexibility to indulge spur-of-the-moment impulses, accommodate the spontaneous impulses of others, and/or permitting (even encouraging) new interpretive liberties in performance. For Jarrett, however, spontaneity is of such importance as to be prioritized over other considerations. For example, Jarrett’s trios almost never rehearsed, as he felt rehearsals consume creativity and lead to routine. He refuses to prepare a set list before a performance, preferring to determine the length and order of tunes in real time as the concert progresses. These concessions—choosing a set list in advance and rehearsing—may well have provided comfort to Jarrett’s fellow musicians and producers. Nevertheless, Jarrett’s need to make decisions spontaneously rather than in advance is a necessary condition of his ability to engage in flow.

⁶⁴ Keith Jarrett, interview with Robert Palmer, “The Inner Octaves of Keith Jarrett,” *Downbeat* (October, 1974).

Spontaneity, as discussed previously, is also part of his philosophy of improvisation and, in this light, the need for large-scale spontaneity (the absence of rehearsals and set-lists) can be seen as an outward extension of Jarrett's need for constant small-scale spontaneity. His interval-to-interval improvisatory process centers spontaneity as the key to its organicism. By breaking his improvisational process down into three personae operating individually (though working together), Jarrett is affording himself the ability to capture absolute spontaneity (or as near to it as one might get in a fixed system, comparative to the extremes of free jazz). He views his inner improviser as spontaneously uttering sound, pure and organically generated out of the sounds realized before them. His other two personae (his Spontaneous Composer and his Keyboardist) have roles in interpreting the Improviser's utterances, and thus the onus of spontaneous creativity rests most prominently with the Improviser.

Over the course of Jarrett's career, his quest for greater spontaneity has only increased. In an interview in 2005, he described the point at which he realized that the ability to end a song at any moment, regardless of its form, was also a fundamental decision that he needed to free from predetermination and expectation.

I started to play and then would stop if I felt there was an end . . . Why wasn't I doing this before? I'd be fully into the music, but maybe I was missing the whole point. I always kept a watch onstage to look at. In the past, there'd be times when I felt like stopping 25 minutes into a 40-minute set, but I'd look at the watch and say 'I can't stop now. I'll lose the whole flow, so I'll keep playing.' But then I started to think about it the other way around. If I lose the flow, that's good because I may not want to hear what's coming next. So I'll stop. Why keep playing? Just because you know how to do that? That got me fascinated in the creative process. Where's the resolution? How do pieces end? If I start playing and a minute and a half later I feel a piece is over, I'll stop. It's the freedom to stop when stopping seems correct.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Keith Jarrett, interview with Dan Ouellette, "Out of Thin Air: Keith Jarrett Reinvents His Approach to the Piano and Looks to do the Same for his Reputation," *Down Beat* (August 2005).

Here, Jarrett describes a change in his own understanding that affected the way in which he thought about flow. He expounds on performance moments in which flow was ostensibly broken, as he left the flow state to consider the passage of time onstage. Whereas he previously considered the disruption created by the end of a song as detrimental to his performance flow, Jarrett came to realize that having one more continual decision—whether to end the song at any given moment—only increased his flow potential.

Although Jarrett’s desire for improvisatory freedom is palatable, freedom and spontaneity are still bound by the overall pursuit of flow. One might consider, for example, that the relatively unrestricted spontaneity experienced when playing free jazz would be most appealing to Jarrett. Jarrett explored free jazz with Miles Davis and, ultimately, found it less satisfying than improvising on composed works.⁶⁶ In an interview with Liane Hansen, Jarrett described one particular moment in which he was forced to carve out a place for himself free-playing:

. . . He [Miles Davis] came out onstage and he started playing ballads that the bass player had never heard, nor probably half the band, and it was like my first experience with a bass player at playing on a white bass. He played on certain beats but he didn’t know what notes he was playing. That’s exactly what this sounded like. Miles was there, too sick to play well, trying to play these melodies and the bass was playing notes that didn’t exist and didn’t know the changes. And I’m sitting there at the piano going, ‘Oh my God, what am I going to do now?’⁶⁷

Jarrett could have played according to his own vision, irrespective of what the other players were doing. He could have made an effort to pull the bass player in, creating a cohesive

⁶⁶ This line of thinking raises questions about the notion of the work. One might require a certain amount of precomposition to consider a work its own entity; another point of view might see each new performance as a new work. This distinction is less important for Jarrett, who thought of his pieces as individual works (both standards and his own compositions). Though he performed each work many times, and despite the fact that each performance was unique, his discussion of tunes suggests he considers each tune a new work, rather than each performance of the same tune.

⁶⁷ Keith Jarrett, interview with Liane Hansen, “Interview with Keith Jarrett, Part Two,” *All Things Considered* (Washington, D.C.: NPR, Jan. 8, 1995).

platform of Jarrett's engineering. Instead, however, Jarrett managed to contextualize the notes the bass player was playing in such a way as to connect them to what Miles was playing. This takes a remarkable amount of ingenuity and musical maturity. It also marks a limit to Jarrett's pursuit of freedom: In order for Jarrett to engage in flow, he must play inside a rule-bound, goal-oriented system. In the moment at which Jarrett was afforded total freedom, he chose to reinscribe the system, shifting rather than discarding his approach.

It is unnecessary to assume that the boundary between the rule-bound system and Jarrett's pursuits for musical freedom were either mutually exclusive or consistent across his career. Jarrett repeatedly protests the concept of a rule in improvisation, but when contextualized, these arguments seem linked to the notion of concrete, inviolable rules.⁶⁸ Based on Jarrett's verbal comments, any constraint, when placed on a performer, is as arbitrary as it is limiting. In practice, however, Jarrett bends rather than breaks rules⁶⁹, and when he does discard a generally accepted tenant of the jazz improvisation establishment, he replaces it with a new rule, either permanently or temporarily. For example, in the late 1980s and 1990s Jarrett frequently discussed his disdain for thinking in chords and, as Dariusz Terefenko recognized, his playing from this period shied away from traditional, recognizable chord patterns far more often than it followed them.⁷⁰ This was not, however, an indication that Jarrett was disavowing harmony. Rather, he altered the rules-bound system to consider harmonic practice differently (linearly rather than vertically, which he said is inspired by his

⁶⁸ Ibid. See Liane Hansen's interview as just one example of Jarrett's verbal contempt for making and adhering to performance rules.

⁶⁹ Dariusz Terefenko, *Keith Jarrett's Transformation of Standard Tunes: Theory, Analysis, and Pedagogy* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2009). On pp. 268-312, for example, Terefenko discusses the ramifications of Jarrett's formal approach to standard tunes, including his points of departure and key points of return to conventional standard forms.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

time playing works of Johann Sebastian Bach).⁷¹ He did not dispose of the rules; he retooled them.

According to Csíkszentmihályi's challenge/ability graph, one primary function of a rule system is to regulate challenge. Because rules can allay and/or further challenge, rules (and a fluent understanding of them) bear on the challenge a performer experiences in a given activity. Performers may elect to alter the rules in a given environment to better balance challenge with their abilities. These alterations can include amending, excepting, or omitting rules as well as self-imposing new rules. For example, as many trumpet players age, they become physically unable to play in the upper extensions of their range. They often accommodate this impairment by challenging themselves to improvise creative, novel, and interesting solos in a much more limited range. For the aging trumpeter, trying to play high notes they can no longer comfortably reach may prove frustrating and disrupt their flow potential. However, as seasoned improvisers, the added challenge of restricted range can actually contribute to their flow potential.

As an exceptionally talented pianist and seasoned improviser, it is unsurprising that Jarrett seems to seek a high level of challenge to increase his flow potential.⁷² In this light, Jarrett's quest for more freedom can be understood as his desire to make more musical

⁷¹ Ibid, 267: "The analysis of Jarrett's transcriptions reveals that harmony, for the most part, depends upon counterpoint. Even when the texture seems homophonic, Jarrett is able to carry a single contrapuntal strand that not only balances a melody but also ties it together with a harmonic scheme. By relying on this approach, melodic dissonances that contradict the harmony become less apparent and function as a vital embellishment of the musical structure." See also 209-211.

⁷² Jarrett's need to balance his high level of ability should not be mistaken to mean that *all* conditions that increase challenge also increase flow potential for Jarrett. This misunderstanding could posit dramatically outlandish (Should he play in a blizzard? Should he play blindfolded on a piano that's missing keys?). Jarrett must find ways of continuing to challenge his abilities without disrupting his flow potential. Owing to the subjective nature of flow, it is certainly possible that a given musician might achieve flow by choosing to perform in highly unfavorable conditions (such as outside in bad weather), but because Jarrett has never expressed any interest in doing this, it is safe to assume that he has not, at least yet, considered this a viable path to increase flow potential in his performances.

decisions simultaneously. He is not simply inventing melody over a fixed harmony; he is redefining the harmony as he improvises.⁷³ Interval by interval Jarrett selects and performs ideas on the piano, taking into consideration the nuances of the instrument and overall concert environment at any given moment. According to Jarrett, in the latter part of his career, he chooses to consider at any given moment the impulse to end a piece.⁷⁴ For Jarrett, adding possibilities raises his challenge in ways that are favorable to his flow potential by forcing him to make more decisions and to include more considerations into each musical decision.

One example of Jarrett's process at work is Jarrett's *Rio* concerts, recorded live in 2011 and released in a two-CD set with tracks labeled only by roman numerals. Unlike his trio recordings, *Rio* was performed solo and consisted entirely of Jarrett's own works. Unlike Jarrett's other live recordings, which were typically released many years after the original concert, *Rio* was released less than a year later. In an interview with Jon Regen, Jarrett admitted that this concert felt special—so much so that Jarrett pushed off other projects to work on preparing *Rio* for release.⁷⁵ The album begs to be listened to in its entirety, as Jarrett created an arc that sounds narrative, despite his general aversion to conventional planning. It is clear from the start of the album that Jarrett has not predetermined the shape or direction of

⁷³ A discussion regarding the mechanisms of Jarrett's reharmonization is presented in Dariusz Terefenko, *Keith Jarrett's Transformation of Standard Tunes: Theory Analysis, and Pedagogy* (Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2009, 209-267). In his interview with Ted Rosenthal Jarrett explained: "Well, I play the piano, but I don't believe in chords, in the sense that they're vertical structures. I think of everything under or around the song as a possible priority. If there's a chord that should be sitting under a melody note, I want that chord to be alive. And if it isn't alive just sitting there, then something moves inside it to keep it from being a solid object somebody just dropped on the floor . . . I'm thinking . . . texturally. I think what I see is never-ending motion inside the chords, whether they're still or not." Keith Jarrett, interview with Ted Rosenthal, "Keith Jarrett: Focus and Finesse." *Piano & Keyboard* (Jan/Feb 1997), 29-34.

⁷⁴ Dan Ouellette, "Out of Thin Air: Keith Jarrett Reinvents his approach to the piano, and looks to do the same for his reputation," *Downbeat* (August 2005).

⁷⁵ Regen, Jon, "Keith Jarrett: The Power of Being in the Moment" (*Keyboard* 38, 2012, 13-16, 18).

the performance. His first piece, “Part I,” is amorphous, featuring snippets of melody and a variety of ostinato-like textures woven together, as if he is exploring the instrument. In his interview with Regan, Jarrett references several times the unique situation of being in Brazil, surrounded by Brazilian culture, and playing on a tinny American Steinway.⁷⁶ The odd tuning of the piano and the wide variances in timbre across registers are audible on the released recording and, as one listens across the album, it becomes clear that Jarrett is resolving the sound of this piano in this space. In “Part VII” these elements align, and he spends much of the song playing bright, articulate rhythms in the mid-range of the piano, utilizing both the timbre of that register and the impression of Brazilian culture around him. Jarrett says of the experience creating “Part VII,”

I honestly have no words about why it was the way it was . . . in a way it’s classical, and in a way it’s classically Portuguese or classically Spanish—there’s something going on there that’s out of my hands. It was sort of the audience helping create that piece and what follows to the end.⁷⁷

When Jarrett describes the *Rio* performance in this interview, he covers many of the critical markers Csíkzentmihályi points to as indicators of flow: the sense that time was suspended, an intensity in each moment of the performance that left Jarrett feeling exhausted and satisfied afterwards, the sense that each moment the immediate future—the next musical moment—was undetermined. Though the result of such an experience need not be as successful as *Rio*, the *Rio* concert serves as a tangible example, preserved and released for the public ear, of a concert in which Jarrett likely felt flow throughout the performance. It might be speculated that, while some conditions (such as the particular piano Jarrett played on) were uncontrollable, others were selected deliberately to facilitate flow. By electing to

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

perform a completely improvised set without so much as predetermining the lengths or forms of the songs he might play, Jarrett maximized the number of spontaneous decisions he would need to make. By choosing to consider not only the nuances of the piano but also the inspirations of the place in which he was performing, Jarrett gave himself more material to take in and analyze in the process of his improvisation. Furthermore, as flow is often a self-perpetuating force, it is clear that the first tracks on *Rio*, which were thoughtful, accessible, and well-received, may have provided Jarrett the positive feedback that allowed him to relax into flow for each subsequent piece.

Although Jarrett played solo piano concerts throughout his career, his long-term relationships with his trios are equally important, indicating that he had meaningful musical experiences playing in these contexts as well. His comments regarding his work with DeJohnette and Peacock as well as with Paul Motain and Charlie Haden affirm that Jarrett was able to engage in flow while working with these musicians in particular, and the length of his associations with his trio players suggests that the other members felt similarly. All of these musicians were adept instrumentalists, sensitive and experienced improvisers, and highly respected in their own right. Hytönen-Ng's research, however, suggests that ability alone is not enough to generate high flow potential among collaborative musicians. Her respondents tended to mystify the nature of successful, flow-inducing collaborative relationships, highlighting the complex and often unpredictable group dynamics affecting musicians' ability to mutually engage in flow while performing together. However, the musicians Hytönen-Ng interviewed did seem to agree on several conditions that increase the potential for flow in environments of collaborative performance. These conditions include mutual trust and respect, a willingness to demonstrate vulnerability in front of each other and

consistent support in the face of that vulnerability. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of her musicians suggested that they are more likely to achieve flow when performing with musicians with whom they have a long history of successful and positive collaboration. This may be a self-perpetuating cycle, as musicians who engage in memorable flow experience enjoy working together continue to demonstrate trust, support, respect, and vulnerability. Through many iterations of this cycle, relationships can be formed which offer high levels of flow potential. The more musicians experience flow together, the more they associate each other with the potential for flow experiences. In building and reinscribing these relationships, musicians are able to eliminate potential barriers that might impede flow, such as uncertainty or a lack of trust between musicians. While this cannot guarantee flow in a given performance, it can increase the potential that the conditions will be right for musicians to engage in flow.

Over time, performers likely become aware of some conditions that regularly correlate to their ability to flow. For Jarrett, working in the trio format with musicians he readily trusted allowed him a musical environment in which flow was possible. Furthermore, his career-long pursuit of new ways to employ freedom and spontaneity and additional considerations in the process of improvising demonstrates a self-regulated approach to maintaining the balance between flow and ability throughout Jarrett's improvising career. These conditions, for Jarrett, set up performance situations with the highest flow potential. Just as particular conditions may tend to increase flow potential for an artist, individual artists may also be aware of conditions that tend to impede or disrupt flow.

When Flow Breaks Down: Failure, Rupture and Intermittence

Flow experiences are, by definition, pleasurable, and peak flow experiences are often memorable events for an artist. On the other hand, an inability to engage in flow or the experience of being torn from a flow state in a way that feels premature might reasonably be frustrating and even angering for a performer. Just as particular conditions can contribute to the flow potential of an individual performing a particular activity, it is also possible to identify conditions that might prevent an individual performer from engaging in flow or might cause a performer already engaged to disengage from a flow state. Some such conditions might approach universality, such as extreme temperature, extreme fatigue, a malfunctioning instrument, or a heckling and booing audience.

The list of conditions potentially affecting an artist's ability to engage in flow is both inexhaustible and idiosyncratic; it is impossible to predict precisely which conditions will result in a performance with a high probability of flow engagement. Knowledge of the peculiar conditions which disrupt flow for a particular artist, however, can assist in understanding performances in which flow is not achieved. Jarrett has several well-known triggers that interrupt flow for him. For example, Jarrett is unable to fully engage in a performance when he feels he is being photographed. He considers all forms of photography and videography distracting, even without the use of flashes. Jarrett has been known to instruct audiences to put cameras and phones away and to berate audiences who refuse to do so. In his most infamous episode in Perugia in 2007, Jarrett told "all these audience members with cameras to turn them fucking off right now," followed by a threat to discontinue playing if the audience was unwilling to do so. Jarrett was banned from the venue, the Umbria Jazz Festival, for several years following. His outburst stirred up both vitriol from those appalled

at his abrasiveness and support from audience members who felt *their* experiences were tainted by flashes and cameras and echoed Jarrett's sentiments that such devices should be banned.

In a similar incident in San Francisco in 2013, Jarrett lectured the audience for over five minutes regarding their coughing, which Jarrett found distracting. His comments followed a particularly sensitive ending over which an audience member had coughed. Jarrett ended the piece on the cough because, as he explained, he could not bring himself to go on. Headlines highlighted Jarrett's selfishness, lack of appreciation of his audience, and unprofessionalism, comparing the evening to the Perugia performance. Just as in Perugia, others also responded in support of Jarrett's speech, citing coughing and cell phone use as distracting to both the performers and audience.⁷⁸

In comparison with his gut-wrenchingly sensitive playing and generally good-natured interviews, Jarrett's outbursts seem to be an oddly different character. The incidents in Perugia and San Francisco are not without precedent, however; Jarrett has been lecturing and chastising audiences for the better part of his career. This irritable, unstable character seems to surface only when Jarrett is unable to achieve flow or his engagement in flow has been broken.

Jarrett responds to the distractions that interrupt his flow potential as malignant forces, and the loss of flow experience in a performance as theft. It should perhaps be noted that the distractive magnitude of a given offence is of little importance. While many performers are unbothered by photography, Jarrett's outbursts indicate that unsanctioned

⁷⁸ See Thomas Conrad, "The Madness of Keith Jarrett," *Jazztimes* (Oct., 20, 2013) and Alva Noë, "Coughing and the Meaning of Art," *Cosmos & Culture* (Washington, D.C.: NPR, April 5, 2013).

photography—and indeed even the *idea* that unsanctioned pictures are being taken—is highly disruptive to Jarrett.

This disruptive fear does not seem to extend to official videos or sanctioned audio recordings, as Jarrett more or less seems to ignore the camera in the Tokyo videos, and he eagerly discusses listening to performance recordings after the fact in interviews with *Keyboard* and *Downbeat*. It is possible, of course, that audio recordings do not affect him with such force as videography and photography. It is also possible that in the Tokyo videos, his flow may be interrupted or that he may be unable to achieve flow knowing that there are cameras recording him. As a professional, knowing that video releases can be important professional output, it is possible that Jarrett willingly sacrifices flow in these performances to accommodate the sanctioned videography.⁷⁹

When flow is not broken by forces such as the application of unfavorable conditions, performers may still experience points of rest and recuperation from the intensity of the flow state. Between songs in the 1986 Tokyo performance, for example, Jarrett's posture relaxes, he smiles easily, nods to his fellow performers, and sometimes uses a cloth to wipe his face. At these points, the previous piece has been allowed to finish organically, and Jarrett is able to come down out of his flow state to rest momentarily. These brief but important periods of rest allow Jarrett to release the tension created by intense focus over the period of one tune. They allow him to recuperate from one flow state and reset his mind and body for another experience. The pleasure found in these moments is derived from the flow experience and the release felt as it subsides. I suggest that this creates a kind of cyclic pattern in which Jarrett is able to prepare for the intensity of a potential flow performance, experience the performance,

⁷⁹ Although discussed briefly here the performance of flow, particularly contexts where flow is not possible for an artist, would merit its own investigation, ideally approached with ethnographic support.

and then feel the release as he comes back out of a flow state. Referring back to his comments regarding his technique of allowing songs to end where he feels they should finish in any given performance, he seems to be referring to this coming down as an organic close to a cycle in which he has experienced flow as an arc, with a beginning, peak, and end.

Flow as Goal; Flow as Commodity

As Csíkszentmihályi discussed, the flow state is a highly satisfying cycle of challenge, success, and positive reinforcement. For this reason alone, a performer might seek flow as a desirable performance goal. Many artists, including Jarrett, interpret the experience of a flow state as somehow closer to the music, as if the flow experience is a marker of having encountered the metaphysical. This language echoes that of the religious experiences discussed in Maslow's work by elevating music to an otherworldly position, treating it as if it has an existence of its own in some pure and divine form. This metaphor places the musician in a transitive or perhaps translative position, in which they attempt to access music (or musical inspiration, or Art, etc.) and realize it in a tangible, human way. In an interview with Ian Carr, Jarrett explains,

There are innumerable examples where I know that what was to be heard was too much to be played. And I don't mean that I needed extra hands or another pianist or a band or something. And I've known that since I was young . . . and I've felt that for myself for so many years. I believe that a truly valuable artist must be an artist who realizes the impossibility of his task . . . and then continues to do it . . . What I'm saying is, I guess my calling isn't even music to me, it's *it* [sic], whatever *it* is. Sometimes I can feel *it*, and as an accomplished player I can feel *it* and not be embarrassed to attempt to play *it*, and not be uncomfortable and not be afraid. And yet I know very, very well that *it* can never be played, and it can never be written and it can never be read off a page . . . and what *it* is, is a sublimation of a feeling we once had, that we wish we could convey without this intermediate step.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Ian Carr, *Keith Jarrett: The Man and His Music* (London: Harper Collins, Grafton Books, 1991, 185-188).

Jarrett frequently personifies music, discussing notes as “demanding to be played,”⁸¹ and describing his most acclaimed successes as accomplishments in effectively reaching this otherworldly music. He says of his album *Rio*, a release of his recording of a live concert in Brazil, “The music itself seemed to just show up, song by song. I didn’t want to play with it because there was so much purity there.”⁸²

In this context, a flow experience is akin to communing with a deity. Whether the artist attributes the satisfaction that comes from a successful flow experience to a divine being, a metaphysical concept, or simply the exhilaration of pushing the limits of human performance, it is apparent that flow can serve as benchmark of success for the musician. Despite the possibility that flow experience is not necessarily tied to the quality of performance output, the satisfying performance might well be remembered as more successful (or at least as much so) as the most sophisticated performance.

This notion is likely fed by the presence of an audience, often in attendance at least in part to see an artist in flow. Just as watching an athlete perform seemingly superhuman feats, watching an artist perform allows an audience to experience a kind of secondary engagement. Susan Leigh Foster describes an audience gazing on the movements of a dancer’s body, connecting with the dancer’s movements as if, for the brief period of the performance, the onlooker has the privilege of sharing in the performance with the dancer—in a way, *becoming* the dancer.⁸³ Similarly, Jarrett’s audience is able to observe his performance and, at least for the duration of the concert, enjoy sharing in his flow.

Recall the Tokyo performances, which were video recorded with Jarrett’s consent. If Jarrett was unable to engage in flow owing to the videography, he is nevertheless performing

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Regen, Jon. “Keith Jarrett: The Power of Being in the Moment.” *Keyboard*, 38 (2012), 13-16, 18.

⁸³ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (New York, Routledge, 2011).

flow for his audience (and the cameras). Understandably, engaging in a flow state seems far more satisfying than performing a flow state but, in the absence of flow conditions, performance may be necessary. The performer's flow, for the viewing audience, becomes a commodity. Pierre Bourdieu theorized "cultural capital" as a kind of pedestal from which one might derive authority (as well as associated power, status, and influence).⁸⁴ His conceptualization of cultural production as both commodity and as currency for power suggest that, in performing flow for an audience, the artist mobilizes performance flow to increase the power and status of their personal artistic brand. This may seem a cynical application of flow in performance, especially for an artist such as Jarrett who seems to avoid any discussion of music as a product. Nevertheless, by allowing an audience to compensate the artist for the privilege of viewing the spectacle of performance, one necessarily commodifies flow, should it occur. And, should the audience come to expect to observe the artist in flow as a spectacle, it may become necessary for that artist to perform flow, with or without a deep and engaging flow experience.

Is it possible to engage in flow when flow is a commodity, or does the performance of flow preclude the artist from feeling the satisfaction of optimal experience? How does an artist's expectation of flow contribute to the realization or disruption of the flow experience? In many ways, the considerations of flow as a commodity, as a goal, and as a measure of success in performance raise more questions than can be resolved here. A concept of flow that considers the ways in which an artist might utilize flow allows for a richer understanding of the relationship between performer and experience.

⁸⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "Ökonomisches Kapital - Kulturelles Kapital - Soziales Kapital" in *Soziale Ungleichheiten*, ed. Reinhard Kreckel (Göttingen: Schwartz, 1983, 183–198). See also Bridget Fowler, *Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1997), and Jeff Browitt and Brian Nelson, ed., *Practising Theory: Pierre Bourdieu and the Field of Cultural Production* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

This study has attempted to contextualize the experience of flow in jazz improvisation. Through the work and words of Keith Jarrett, we have been able to explore not only when flow might occur, but also how and why. Despite the personal and subjective nature of a flow experience, Jarrett's candid descriptions offer a window into the ways in which flow contributes to his performance, including the ways flow experiences fit into his overall musical and improvisational philosophies and methodologies. In investigating Jarrett's creative process, it has become clear that flow is more than a positive byproduct of performance; it is a critical component of what is, for Jarrett, a successful performance.

The magnetism associated with flow experience may, with further research, help to better understand the drive to create music, the impetus to perform, and the decisions made by performers to increase their flow potential in a given performance. As a superb pianist in both jazz and classical traditions, Jarrett's attention to detail—minute shadings of timbre and tuning on a particular instrument, the unique way in which sounds reverberate in a particular venue, even the point at which a song would best conclude—allowed him to make many intricate decisions simultaneously while improvising. This freedom and complexity provide conditions under which he can fully invest himself, increasing the potential that he will achieve flow. Conversely, there were conditions that decrease Jarrett's flow potential, such as photography at live concerts. The characteristics that affect flow potential positively and negatively for Jarrett are unique to his performance experience, but point toward a greater understanding of how we experience flow in performance (or perhaps, for some, how/why

they do not). In this sense, performance need not be limited to musical performance, but extend to any activity in which performance is an integral aspect. As such, Jarrett's sensitivity to a particular piano might be likened to an elite athlete's sensitivity to particular equipment. The freedom with which he allows his body to move in performance differs from the professional dancer only in the measure of control exacted on the body; both Jarrett and the dancer utilize their bodies fully in ways that further their respective performances. The study of flow in the course of performance allows for the alignment of activities that might otherwise be considered irreconcilably dissimilar: musical performance and gymnastics, improv comedy and chess, dance and public speaking.

Having established flow as a connection linking performance-driven activities, it is, by extension, possible to approach the subset of activities that utilize improvisation as even more closely related pursuits. Improvisation is an exemplary flow activity precisely because it requires creative decision-making within a rule-bound system, the very conditions that facilitate flow. Thus, activities that permit or require a high degree of improvised thinking may indeed prove alike in valuable ways, and an exploration of these commonalities could prove advantageous in fields as disparate as pedagogy, entertainment, and human resources management. Within musical contexts, the study of improvisation-based traditions cuts across genre boundaries, allowing for comparative studies between such musical traditions such as the improvised fugue, the jazz standard, and traditions built on the *Radif*. This is certainly not the first study to discuss such possible comparisons (Turino, 2008; Nettl, 1987, 2009; Solis, 2009; Berliner, 2009) but supports and develops the concept of flow as a

perspective from which to view intersections that might become obscured by traditional genre and/or stylistic limitations.

Should further research be conducted, applications potentially include a greater investment in the variables affecting flow in group performance and the variety of ways in which performers might manipulate the conditions of a performance to favor flow. The application of drugs and/or alcohol for example, might serve to increase flow potential to one performer by effectively lowering ability, another by allowing them to ignore potentially disruptive conditions like stage fright or an unruly crowd, and a third performer might actually find their flow inhibited by the use of drugs/alcohol. This line of inquiry locates flow as a value, perhaps even a goal of artistic production.

Though only briefly discussed here, the examination of flow as a commodity may serve to clarify the performer-audience relationship. The flow process can indeed be viewed as a commodity, sought by audiences hoping to observe an artist at peak performance. These audiences may value the experience of the live performance as a unique interaction with the artist and thus engage in a kind of flow state of their own observing, listening, and responding physically with varying degrees of body movement. In consideration of musical production as a business as well as an art form (and by extension, in consideration of an artist as a brand), the opportunity to observe the artist in flow becomes a spectacle—a (seemingly) rare product consumed by audiences in attendance. Much like audiences at sporting events, audiences present at a performance simultaneously consume and interact with the performance. Their presence can affect the flow of the performer positively or negatively. Moreover, an artist might attempt to perform flow for an audience, even if the artist is not experiencing it. Thus, with respect to flow, audience(s) and performer(s) are linked by

multiple channels of influence running in both directions. Analysis of flow as a product can help to unpack the complex dynamics of the live performance.

Finally, a deeper exploration into audience flow could contribute significantly to the growing body of literature theorizing how and why we enjoy music. This is perhaps the most fitting application of a theory based on Csikszentmihályi's work, as despite the many nuanced modern uses of the term *flow*, his theory was primarily concerned with the experience of enjoyment. The power of this conception should not be underestimated, as it has applications in the cultural and historical understandings of musical practice, music analysis, music industry, and music pedagogy. If enjoyment, as experienced through music as a flow activity, is brought into focus as paramount to the practice of music, then participation in music can be understood to be essentially similar regardless of the tradition, style, or genre performed. Musical performance, then, can be aligned with other performance-oriented activities in new and revealing ways related to experience rather than outward similarity. This logic, in turn, suggests that the growing field of performance studies is critical to a complete and well-rounded musical analysis.

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