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Why Record Improvisation?

Nathan Moore

Introduction

Human life does not coincide with itself, so only very little – almost nothing – can be taken as self-evident, fully-present, auto-legitimizing, ultimately authorised, or absolute. Less prosaically, this means that humans cannot avoid making distinctions, nor deciding. However, to limit decision to a question of friend-enemy, or as being of the exception, is both petty and disastrous. Is it possible to claim back decisiveness from the Schmittian vision?¹ That is a much broader question than I can tackle here. Instead, I describe an alternative method for human discrimination, deciding, and intervention. This alternative

¹ Here the reference is, of course, to Schmitt's well known formulation that the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

is not offered as a model, nor as something exceptional. Rather, it is simply an example.

To orientate this writing, I discuss the *archive* as a diligent mode by which decisiveness can be structured and unfolded, using improvised music as an example in this regard. More specifically, I consider how improvised music not only archives itself but, indeed, only becomes possible – as a site of human activity – through such archiving. The technique of archiving I prioritise here is recording. Recording underscores that human practice is not to be restricted to either a naïve notion of presence, nor to an overbearing exceptional decision-making in the face of presence's equally naïve absence.

In the last part, I discuss the Pauline *katechon* – as filtered through the Schmittian *nomos* – as an example of another way in which human activity and decision-making can be formulated. The point with this discussion is to show how the *katechon* affords an overly rigid system that, through its obsessive concern with restraint, inevitably ends up consuming itself without end. This is, of course, the problem of auto-immunity; and so the piece ends by returning to music, but this time using Donna Haraway's references to the image of the immune system as an orchestra that, through time, begins to organise itself in a more de-centred manner (and perhaps even begins to improvise?)

Consequences of Listening

Free improvisation, non-idiomatic improvisation, experimental improvisation ... such phrases denote a music

making activity whose work, outcome, or product cannot be separated from the processes and techniques by which it is made. One either listens to improvised music knowing it to be improvised; or, perhaps encountering it by chance and being moved by it, one soon finds out that it is improvised – irrespective of whether this comes as a welcome discovery for the listener or not. In short, the appreciation of improvised music probably requires the listener to at least be aware that the method of production is improvisation. There is a necessary degree of reflexivity in freely improvised music. In this context, I am not referring to what might be called generic improvisation: improvised music that takes place in the context of a ‘type’ of music, such as jazz, rock, classical, raga, etc. Rather, as the idiomatic designator ‘non-idiomatic’ attempts to point out, I refer to improvised music that is, as it were, improvised from scratch and that, in its unfolding, actively avoids using the resources of pre-existing genre musics (unless deployed ironically or as in quotation).

In this sense, it is trivial to point out that ‘non-idiomatic’ improvisation has become an established idiom; rather, the better point is that it is an idiom that does not rely upon pre-established harmonies, rhythms, timbres, or patterns in order to exist as an idiom as such. To the extent that there is a ‘non-idiomatic’ style, it is the style of the individual, worked out and refined so that they may perform alone but also – and for this writer, more importantly – in conjunction with others. Like all good music, free improvisation gives the individual a voice and submerges that voice, making it part of something else. Improvising together requires an awareness of

process and, in this, can give a ritualistic – even shamanic – aspect to freely improvised music, as a condition of its emergence. This is not unique to such music-making but becomes more obvious because the usual supports of performance – a score, a repertoire, ‘hits’ – are absent. Improvisation is less about the pre-construction of musical tropes and figures, and more about the construction of social situations where such music can be played and heard. Sometimes (unhelpfully) referred to as ‘instant composition’, it is better to think of free improvisation as being, first and foremost, a social composition that happens to find expression through the various technologies of sound.

Freely improvised music foregrounds a number of problems – even, perhaps, *mysteries* – that are both implicated in, and go beyond, its ritualistic aspects. First would be the question: why bother with improvised music? Unless there is State or philanthropic support, performers of such music are not likely to make a living from it alone. Yet, at this time, a number of highly skilled musicians (meaning, musicians who could, at various points, have likely made a comfortable living from playing genre musics) have dedicated their musical lives to it. Is this dedication to an art? Perhaps, but this smacks a little too much of ascetism, overlooking both the significance of the social aspect of improvising and too, a possible ethical dimension inasmuch as it allows for a mutual yet individualistic self-defining.

Second would be the question: what *is* free improvised music? The difficulty of such a question is that this music can contain music but also noise and silence. What it

interrogates, then, is the social construction of sonorous material: why do we experience this as music, that as noise, and something else as silence? And are they really so different in essence? We might say that all sound is vibrating air, implying an immediate equalisation of all such material, whether 'music', 'noise' or 'silence'. Yet, asserting such equality is already a strategic and political gesture: all sounds might be equal, but no sound is innocent – that is at least, no sound echoing in a human ear. Improvised music is open to any potential sound, but it must be understood that the occurrence of any such sound will be judged, evaluated, decided upon by performer and listener alike. As such, a provisional, necessarily partial definition of free or non-idiomatic improvisation might be: music that, in its performing, attempts to respond to the consequences of its own sounding.

Third would be the question: what is free improvised music for? Catharsis for performer and/or listener? Or therapy? Or mimesis? These uses (and more) can all be present. Yet, it might be that the main aim of improvised music is to avoid manipulation. I mean by this that improvised music does not seek to illicit some particular outcome or use: it does not want to reconcile us, redeem us, uplift us, cure us, reassure us, make us fall in love, soundtrack our lifestyles, confirm our identities, bring us to a climax/prevent us from a climax. It confronts us with the possibility – and burden – of not being guided or manipulated, of not being brought to an epiphany whether negative or positive in tone. It exposes us, instead, to the potentiality of our human being. Of course, it is not the only human practice that can do

this – I do not wish to claim some special ontological status for improvised music – but it is nevertheless a practice which does, I would argue, depart from most of the current trends in music.

Not being concerned to manipulate, improvised music can be thought of as a *slow* medium. It does not have pre-formatted gestures or signifiers designed to trigger a definite, short-hand response. For this reason, it takes time and some concentration to get anything out of it. It requires a listening appreciative of the performer's listening. Over time, it requires some familiarity with the style of a performer to better appreciate how they, the performer, listen and, too, how they react to that listening. The performer of improvised music is to be heard working through the consequences of their own listening: that is their individual style. It is at this point that the performer's relationship to their instrument, voice, or other sonorous material becomes important. What counts is not mastery of an instrument, but having a singular style of playing.

What is the function of recording in all of this? In many ways, given the event-specific nature of free improvisation as a shared, and social, listening, it would seem anathema to record the sound of a performance for playback at some later time. Yet record labels such as Incus and Matchless Recordings rank amongst the first independent labels in the UK, and are still active. It is difficult to imagine that, having got their foot in the door, such labels thought they would produce riches of the scale seen with major labels such as EMI and Virgin. Nevertheless, one would accept that trying to get the music heard more broadly was a

rationalisation for such endeavours. However, more than this, I want to suggest that the recording of improvised music – and the circulation of those recordings (no matter how restricted that might be) – also serves another purpose, more integral to the practice of improvised music itself. Recording enables some sense to be made of improvised music.

In this context, sense should not be equated with meaning nor rationalisation. Improvised music is not practised to be recorded. However, recording enables a certain distance to be taken from the event of music making itself. If listening is already a central component of improvised music, it is not too surprising that a re-listening might also be desirable. A distanced re-listening allows for a different type of hearing, for other things to be heard. Most obviously, a recorded piece becomes a piece through the fact of being recorded – recording gives discreteness to improvised music, and this discreteness also allows for a different type of listening. In short, recording allows for an archive.

Discreteness, distance, sense. These are the products of archiving, not to preserve for some future time, but in order to make some sense of what is happening now. It is for this reason that the recorded archive should be understood as an *active* ingredient in the current practice of non-idiomatic improvisation.

Discreteness. An interesting and recurring experience of playing improvised music with others is that, very often, it will be clear to all performers when the end has been reached – i.e., when it is time to stop. I suspect that this shared experience has something to do with the forgoing

improvisation inasmuch as a *good* improvisation will suggest its own concluding. I do not mean by this the suggestion of a linear narrative structure (a 'beginning, middle, and end'), but rather a shared sensitivity that something has become exhausted. Of course, a player might decide to resist this, and to carry on – but this cannot be done without this resistance to the end itself becoming a figure of the continued music. The point here is that, having reached an end and stopped, the players (and audience) are left with the sense that something has happened. However, because improvised music does not organise itself around the standard manipulations (indeed, it prefers to avoid these in the main), it is difficult to know what it is that has just happened.

To flesh this out, it is useful to return to the question of what improvised music is for, slightly recast as: *what does improvised music do?* The short answer is that free improvisation makes *music differ from itself*. The first consequence of this statement is that improvised music does not involve the application of exterior forms or principles: no bar lengths, no harmonic movement, no melodic development is to be *applied* to improvisation. The development of an improvisation occurs according to the resources of the performers in the context of their performing. For this reason, improvisation should be understood as an immanent practice (and as a practice of immanence). The differentiations that give a piece its characteristics derive from it internally, as a sort of concrete affectation made manifest by the materials and choices of, and in, the performing event. A piece begins and ends, but what gives it its specificity are the

potentials of the situation (never explicitly adumbrated but, in the event of music, 'felt' as affected and affecting); along with the *actualisation* of certain potentials and the *non-actualisation* of other potentials.

This might seem confused, depending upon one's understanding of immanence. For Jean-Luc Nancy, immanence is an absolute, perfectly complete unto itself and – in the face of such completion – violently refusing of all that challenges its faith in that completeness; including, of course, its *own assertion* of completeness.² For Deleuze, immanence is not this, but the refusal of transcendence as an explanatory principle for existence. For him, immanence is not the rejection of difference, but the full internalisation of it: difference is not an externalised relation between pre-given terms, but the persistence of relationality itself, even in the absence of any such relatable terms.³ In other words, difference is the first term, meaning that there is nothing which does not differ *from itself*.

Deleuze's vision of ordering (individuation) is then not premised upon discrete, well-defined borders and identities. Rather, there are *singularities* which have a specificity and individuality (but not an identity) arising out of their existences; meaning, out of their arrangements, functionings, slippages, connections and disconnections, and so on. The edge or border of a singularity is not distinct, but fuzzy in essence so that, all one can finally say, is that one has moved from one singularity to another, without being

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. P. Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

entirely sure just when or where the transition occurred. Of course, this also means that for immanence any singularity is itself composed only from other singularities.

The issue of discreteness in improvised music is then not one pertaining to pieces but, instead, to singularities. Each improvisation is a singularity, and it is the task of the performer to both realise this and, to an extent, make it explicit. This latter is a delicate operation, because it does not simply require making musical events happen but, just as much, making sure that inappropriate events *do not happen*; or, more accurately (because the inappropriate always does occur), being able to incorporate the inappropriate into the music's own singularity, as a bifurcating point of immanent difference. This means, then, that rather than a fixed piece – perhaps written out, with so many bars, notes, and chords – the specificity of improvised music lies in its mood or affective manifestation. Does this indicate that the music is simply in the ear of the hearer? No, because, the hearer is not, in fact, given licence to hear just anything at all – the immanent withholding of such permission is the very singularity of the musical 'piece'. This is also why political and ethical issues cannot be separated out from music: something is done to the hearer, to which the hearer can respond or not.

Distance. It follows that the idea of distancing is complicated for immanence. The usual critical notion of taking some distance so as to better reflect on events must be understood as an action *internal* to immanence itself. Abstraction is not a transcendence of the material, but an encounter with the powers that the material has to diverge from itself. Critical distance is perhaps better thought of

in terms of speeds: the speed with which abstractions can be manifested, meaning the power to make connections and disconnections in the material, as well as responding to surprising, possibly random, connections and disconnections. Distance-abstraction is the famous ‘diagram’ concept to be found in Deleuze and Guattari’s work,⁴ which can be thought of as a sort of evolving blueprint (or, even, score) *fostering* certain developments, actions, and connections, whilst also *following* developments, actions, and connections. By fostering and following, the diagram highlights the role of feedback in the continuation and transformation (positive or otherwise) of any given singularity. For this reason, distance-abstraction is present in any event of encounter between materials (whether real or ideal), with consequences that can happen both ‘quickly’ and ‘slowly’; indeed, the composition of speeds is inextricably involved in the specificity of a singularity – how fast and slow some things can (or cannot) happen.

Distance is the fuzzy border of the singularity, incorporated into the singularity itself but, too, extending it, making it difficult to say just where and when one crosses from a particular singularity to another (to what extent is an experience, idea, practice, trauma, feeling, etc., still operative?). The discreteness of improvised music is not the bringing to an end of a singularity, but – for that time and space, and for those people and materials concerned – the exhausting of a singularity. Who knows who will pick up the arrow in the future?

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (London: Verso, 1994).

Sense. Improvised music is a human activity. This points not to human exceptionality, but to human specificity. If we wish to make sense of improvised music we face difficulties, because it is a music that is often close to (sometimes indistinguishable from) noise and silence. Improvised music does not externalise its relationships with noise and silence so as to better distinguish itself; rather, noise and silence are internal to it from the beginning, making the status of improvised music continually problematic. As Cage pointed out in 1952,⁵ what we consider silence is sounds that we are not paying attention to. Similarly, noise is sounds that bring into question the specificity of an attentive listening; noise seems to be an unwelcome disruption or strikes as something out-of-place, but only because a specific listening has already been intended that would seek to bracket out such sounds. Improvised music plays with the aims and limits of such intentions, encouraging surprise for both performer and audience as sound that was not expected, because not *necessarily* intended. The distance-abstraction of what a music can and can't do in a particular moment is thereby brought to the fore, making both noise and silence strategies for improvised music.

It is in this assemblage of music-silence-noise that the Derridean 'archive fever' of improvisation is perhaps most apparent. Such a fever points to the provisional uncertainty of the sense of such music, in both its hearing and its performing, and it is this uncertainty which must nevertheless be made sense of if the music is to have

⁵ John Cage, *4'33"*, London: Edition Peters, 1952

consistency. The great conceptual difficulty is that this sense-making *remains* provisional – it is never conclusive, even after the music has ended. From this perspective, silence and noise become the membranes between performances, porosities through which things can pass from improvisation to improvisation; through which things can be filtered out; and through which other elements might be translated through. Silence and noise space music out.

Like any system, the system of improvised music is open to the differences that make a difference,⁶ an assemblage of repeating patterns interacting with discontinuities, mutations, and divergences. Only because there is difference is repetition possible (and *vice versa*),⁷ such that each repetition is itself a singularity. Repetition is a function exercised over and through what is encountered, evolving as a result, and calling into question relations of identity and transformation. The archive only endures through change. Here, if I prefer the term ‘archive’ to the term ‘system’, it is because I wish to mark the specificity of human systems as something singular yet, nevertheless, unexceptional. An archive is the systematic construction of human memory, the manner of our own feedbacking – intended and unintended – into systems and assemblages. If human existence is contingent, the problem remains of how to live with, and through, such contingency. How to archive or memorialise?

⁶ Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

Memory, of course, is not a static thing. More to the point, it is not simply in the past, but remains active as a condition of perception and action.⁸ From one perspective, neoliberalism⁹ might be considered as the honing of such activeness, with its constant demands for innovation and the embracing of change. Yet, this would be to radically underestimate the archival aspect of memory. Indeed, it would not be inaccurate to say that neoliberalism resists any archive at all, inasmuch as it always requires yet another ‘new beginning’ to remain permanently available to it. But such ‘new’ perceptions and actions are without value or, better, are to be valued simply because they have no value: no weight, no comparison, no past. Against this, an archive can only proceed by creative analogy when encountering a difference. If analogy-making is not possible for it – if a selective evaluation is beyond its power – then this is because the encounter

⁸ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

⁹ To be more specific, I mean by neoliberalism the infusion of an ethic of competition into any and all aspects of human life. ‘Activeness’, ‘innovation’, and ‘change’ should be understood in this register, as means to achieve more competitiveness. On the centrality of introducing, and maintaining, an ethic of competition as the essence of neoliberalism, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015); Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2013). A consequence of this ethos is the de-emphasis, or relativisation, of history as an explanatory or determining process. At best, in light of competition, history is something to be continuously overcome as, perhaps, ‘standing reserve’ – see Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

involves no difference at all (thus no change is required); or because the difference is too great (and the archive is potentially overwhelmed or destroyed). The problem of archiving is the encounter with contingency, of a power to affect and be affected.

In this light, and with reference to music, the term 'consistency' is to be preferred to 'composition' (instant or otherwise): how to give an improvisation sufficient consistency that it can be considered as an archival event or, even, as an entity (and not simply as one sound followed by another)? The musician's response can only be provisional: what might work as a consistent piece in one situation will not necessarily do so in another. Consequently, improvisation must be repeated (rather than recited), because consistency is not consistent once and for all. Improvised music is not eternal in this sense. In many ways, it might be thought of as a genealogical music, inasmuch as it could always have been otherwise, with alternate branchings and relays. This begins to bring us toward an answer to the question, 'why record improvised music'? What can be heard in such recordings is not only the consistency of the players' responses, but also the consistency of how they didn't respond, *but might have*. This connects with two earlier points.

The recording of improvised music allows the hearing of the players' listening and, from this, an appreciation – and possible evaluation – of their response to their own listening. Perhaps the most obvious example is when one player quotes a phrase from another player in a group, developing it and permutating it according to their style and ability (something that Cecil Taylor, amongst others, was a master of). Perhaps less obviously, but nonetheless

crucial to the consistency of a piece, is hearing how a player might refuse to respond, or perhaps respond ‘negatively’ or in a destructive manner. This brings us to the second point: how a player responds (or not) to their own listening is a question of their style (of their own archival fever). Recording allows for an appreciation of a player’s style to be more quickly acquired through repetition, and by allowing for a broader dissemination of improvised music than reliance upon live performance alone. This means that recorded improvisations are more than a record: in the true manner of an archive, they influence the reception and development of future music by allowing a more acute appreciation of style and, just as importantly, by providing a means for the performer to be able to reflect (with ‘more’ distance or slowness than available in performance itself) upon their own style. The recorded archive provides an important method for evaluating the consistency of a performance and, furthermore, for the future development and modification (through feedback) of the archive. In other words, recorded improvisation constitutes an evolving repository of evaluative techniques that accelerates the developmental potentials of performance itself.

Hearing the Sound Of

Recording as an archive – in a sense close to that of Derrida’s account in *Archive Fever*¹⁰ – cannot, in its specificity, be presupposed. Like the ‘content’ of an archive, the

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. E. Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

very existence of an archive is a matter of contingency and genealogy. Why do archives become necessary or desired at a particular time? How is it that they become individualised? There is, of course, no universally applicable answer to such a question. Evan Eisenberg's superb account of the shellac and vinyl record in *The Recording Angel*,¹¹ considers a number of psychological and socio-economic contingencies as context for the twentieth century's enthusiasm for records as commodities, art objects, *records*, and so on. Yet, Kittler, in his *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*¹² highlights a stunning fact: the materials needed for the production of a phonograph (metal, wax, a pig's bristle) have been available since before the time of the ancient Greeks; yet it does not seem to have occurred to anyone to utilise these materials as a device to record sound until the nineteenth century. Why? What is it that, in the nineteenth century, made the desire for an archive of recorded sound *active*?

In *The First Concert*, Edwin Prévost imagines the first time that our early human ancestors might have listened: not listened generally but intentionally, with an awareness that they were listening. At that point, listening became something framed or assembled through consciousness of a specific faculty. Furthermore, that faculty would have become instrumentalised in the sense of being directed and capable of focus; the possibility of comparing what was being heard comes to the fore, with the potential

¹¹ Evan Eisenberg, *The Recording Angel: Music, Records and Culture from Aristotle to Zappa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹² Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. G. Winthrop-Young and M. Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 28–29.

for the listener to ‘compose’ what they hear by choosing to concentrate on certain sounds rather than others.¹³ Directed listening becomes an attribute, but this does not yet make of sound *something in its own right*. If we continue to imagine out from the scenario described by Prévost, our ancestors might have heard the sound of animals, forest noises, the grunts of their colleagues, thunder storms, singing, drums, and flutes – but all of these would have been the sound *of* something. The reception of sound as the sound *of* sound itself comes, I would suggest, much later, with the recording of sound. As Eisenberg points out, when we hear a clarinet on a recording, we are not hearing the sound of a clarinet, but the sound of the recording,¹⁴ and this becomes a matter of hearing the sound of sound itself. In this sense, all recorded sound is acousmatic even when we know its original source. Recording marks a radical distinction between the sound of a clarinet and the sound of such a sound – the latter becomes an entity in its own right, taking on the materiality not only of tape, vinyl, and bits, but too as a complex vibration of air, with frequencies and amplitudes susceptible of a more ‘abstract’ understanding via techniques such as Fourier analysis.¹⁵

However, this is not straightforwardly a phenomenon of science alone: Kittler’s point that recorded sound was possible much earlier in human history raises a question as to why this was not achieved. As he points out,

¹³ Edwin J. Prévost, *The First Concert: An Adaptive Appraisal of a Meta Music*. (Matching Tye: Copula, 2011.) See Chapter 8 in particular.

¹⁴ Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

¹⁵ Fourier analysis, as the analytical decomposition of complex sounds into sine waves, could be applied.

for the human voice to be thought of as recordable – meaning, here, a sound in its own right – it was necessary for the voice to have become conceptually detached from humans themselves. Voice, breath, anima, pneuma, spirit, soul – all of these were too intertwined for it to occur to anyone that just one of them – the voice – could (or should) be separated from the rest and preserved in a technical medium for re-playing at will. We might say that a certain degree of disenchantment was needed before it occurred to anyone that the voice could be recorded – the soul itself first had to be considered as the result of so many techniques and processes:

Only when the soul has become the nervous system, and the nervous system ... so many facilitations, can Delboeuf's statement [that the 'The soul is a notebook of phonographic recordings'] cease to be scandalous.¹⁶

This suggests that something like improvised music could not have occurred without recorded sound, to the extent that it depends upon the capacity to hear sound as sound. There is nothing inherently sterile or scientific in such a technique, because improvised music is still a music – meaning that it is more than an inventory or taxonomy of sounds. But, to generate its own archive as a human practice and memory, it needed to be able to hear sound as something in itself and thus as 'distanced' or abstract, so long as this is understood in reference to immanence: the sound of sound is the hearing of sound's potential, the hearing of how sound differs from itself.

¹⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 29.

The improviser must survey the parameters of a sound: not just pitch, harmonic relation, and rhythm but, more importantly, timbre as a variable compound of harmonics, frequencies, and amplitudes. This abstraction is to be heard immediately, in the time of its sounding, as part of the very concreteness of a sound. The improviser's abstraction is not something ideal or transcendent, but an encounter with the singularity of sound in its abrasiveness, with its being-there as eliciting a human response to foster, follow, or refuse. Nothing is more abstract than the potentiality of the concrete, the skill of the improviser then being to select such potentials with style.

What does potential mean in this context? The short answer I would like to propose is, 'an encounter with contingency'. Recently, the problem of contingency has come to the fore as an explicitly philosophical problem – most notably in Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude*.¹⁷ If contingency *is*, how does order become possible? Equating contingency with chaos is misleading, to the extent that the latter indicates an empty void or – which amounts to the same thing – an undifferentiated clamour. In distinction, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the virtual insists upon difference as immanent and, in light of this, upon the singular quality of any 'part' or zone of the virtual.¹⁸

¹⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. R. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008). For an interesting account that makes a distinction between probability and contingency, see Elie Ayache's *The Blank Swan: The End of Probability* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010). Yuk Hui's *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019) is another important contribution to the topic.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

Contingency is thus better thought of as new information – a difference that makes a difference. In this sense chaos is relative, being too much information applied at the wrong level of systematic operation. However, I do not wish to complicate matters by attempting an analysis of the various theoretical contributions to date but, instead, to return to the archive as the human mode for encountering contingency.

The archive enables contingency to be met at a human level. Sometimes the archive is not successful in this, suffering disintegration at the hands of contingencies that are ‘too great’ for it; or calcification because of a failure to respond to contingencies that are ‘too small’ for it. In this, the importance of the archive is that, in and through its endurance, it becomes a power to meet contingency. Derrida has outlined the difficulties and problems that arise when, as has been the case ‘traditionally’, archives have failed to understand themselves as the consequence of contingency. There is nothing eternal or necessary about an archive, yet the human propensity to think otherwise has enabled the threat or problem of contingency to become attenuated; in the place of chance: a God, a sign, a nature, a cosmos. Nietzsche’s entire philosophy is concerned to confront this difficulty head on: can humanity survive its gods? Perhaps, more banally: can humanity survive the hearing of sound *as sound*? Not without ambiguity, recording would seem to be a significant method for doing so.

According to its composition and processes, its authority and memories, an archive re-constitutes itself in the encounter with contingency; from this, and assuming its

parameters¹⁹ have not been exceeded, it changes whilst remaining itself. If today, contingency is becoming a problem – meaning, the problem humanity has in confronting its own contingency – then we must expect that archives too will have to find a way to ‘process’ their own contingency. In other words, the archive must come to terms with the fact that it is itself a contingent assemblage – that it could have been otherwise than it is and, more to the point, *that it remains capable of being otherwise*. The rise of the disrupter in politics and economics illustrates the dangers of making of contingency nothing more than a new transcendent principle.²⁰ Instead, the purpose of the archive is to allow for selectivity – contingency does not mean that all potentials must be realised, but that what is actualised develops the archive in a particular direction – its ongoing specificity resulting from encountering such contingent events. At the same time, potential survives its actualisation,²¹ such that the archive is never closed nor complete ... and so remains prone to veering off course.

The archive is a memory moving from encounter to encounter, being capable of such encounters because of the specific qualities it has. It is a set of powers for filtering encounters. The task of the archive is to extract information from such encounters. To reiterate: information does not pre-exist in some raw state, but is the product of the encounter between an archive and the contingent.

¹⁹ My use of this word derives from Manuel De Landa’s *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

²⁰ As most forcefully presented in Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2007).

²¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

The archive makes the encounter, according to the potentials of both its powers and the qualities of what it encounters. To exhaust an encounter means to use it to enrich the archive to the fullest extent possible and, here, enrichment should be understood in a Spinozist register: to increase the archive's capacity to affect and to be affected (that is, to foster and follow). Such processes must set the archive in relation to its own immanent difference; for the improviser, this means making the archive's own contingency central to its own operation. The archive – as a human system – must be 'aware' of its own contingency. Is contingency a threat or a possibility? Such a question once more makes it necessary to distinguish the simple-minded neoliberal tendency, which sees all disasters as opportunities, from the enrichment of the archive. The latter does not turn contingency into a transcendent principle in its own right, but continues to recognise that the contingent is always an encounter, a relation, a hybrid. As Krapp indicates, there is no God-place from which to 'celebrate' the contingent as something in-itself but, rather, only the persistence of relationality and the ongoing complications of memory.²² Recording helps us to grasp that it could be – can be – otherwise, even in the very last moments. In this sense, a counter-intuitive (and perhaps tragic) consequence of recording *is that it fails to fix anything*.

For the improviser, the persistence of potentiality, continuously re-presented through the contingency of relations, means that music, sound, and silence cannot be

²² Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

essentially distinguished from one another. This also indicates that free improvisation is unlikely to sit well with any Pythagorean notion of a harmony of the spheres.²³ Yet, improvisation is not without its orderings – but they are emergent orderings, in movement and under review. In this sense, we can think of recording as an example of second-order cybernetics, allowing not just for a specific type of abstraction from performance but too – and arguably more crucially – an abstracting of sound itself. This has encouraged a ‘re-wilding’²⁴ of music inasmuch as it has fostered the extension of acceptable sounds to include noise and silence. Recording has also fostered the return of an experimental attitude in relation to any sound-making material. The specificity of improvisation in our time is indicated here by the use of the word ‘experimental’, to indicate abstracting in light of the continuous potential for further abstraction. To stress once more, this is not a refinement or transcendental operation, but an encounter with contingency; more to the point, it is an encounter with contingency at a time when the essential or necessary fact of contingency is increasingly incorporated into the perception and conception of human action.

Airs, Sweet and Turbulent

Like Hobbes, Carl Schmitt articulates a clear notion of sovereignty at exactly the point at which the notion

²³ For critiques of the Pythagorean Harmony of the Spheres, see Tony Conrad, *Writings* (New York: Primary Information, 2019), and Edwin Prévost, *An Uncommon Music for the Common Man* (Harlow: Copula, 2020).

²⁴ Discussed in Prévost, *The First Concert*.

described is becoming untenable. Just as the centralised sovereign-compact of protection for obedience is slipping away in the mid-seventeenth century, so too the idea of humans being able to decide what is exceptional is withering in the first part of the twentieth century. Before proceeding, I want to be clear that neither Hobbes nor Schmitt have anything to do with improvised music. At the same time, I also want to stress that I am not offering improvised music up as a model for political or social organisation. However, if I am justified in bringing improvised music into relief with political philosophy, it is because the archive of improvised music *is just as valid as any other human activity* as a framing of questions concerned with order and interactivity. Immanence means that we must dispense with the idea of a centralised power or authority, from which all other such power or authority is delegated. Rather, an archive simply *takes power* through its very consistency. If the centre cannot hold, then we must also grasp that the status of otherness is not exceptional. Instead, the continuing political demand to refuse the marginalisation of the other must be grasped as the continuing unfolding of an abstraction. If so, it might be that human ethics should be re-cast as an immediate attempt to activate an *nth stage of repetition*. In other words, if humanity is to foster and follow itself, the point must be reached where the idea of an 'exceptional person' ceases to be thinkable.

Instead of exceptions, there are examples.²⁵ As a counterpoint, it is useful to consider Schmitt's later work on the

²⁵ Here, I am thinking of the ambiguous quality of the example as set out by Agambenn: that an example stands out as being a remarkable

idea of *nomos*.²⁶ The reason for this is that here, Schmitt proposes an idea of order that could be construed as potentially ecological,²⁷ inasmuch as it attempts to think a human archive as something inscribed on the land itself; the archive as an environment. As such, Schmitt is interested to investigate the parameters by which a system of human law could be made operational, with enough resilience that it would, in effect, repeat itself. The key to such a system for Schmitt is the land: more to the point, the inscribing of the land (marking it, giving it character), such that the legal system has enough order and orientation that it can administer itself in the face of contingencies. The right balance of closure and openness, whereby the earth itself becomes archival. The law should be written onto the land – most obviously through the use of boundaries and other markings – becoming, as it were, the very program or algorithm of the law. This is the idealisation of a law that would not need to be applied by anyone because it would be self-administering: human behaviour would be conditioned and controlled by the arrangements of space, movement would be guided,

indicator of a more generic grouping; yet, at the same time, the example is as generic as any other member of that group. The ambiguity, then, is about the example as being, simultaneously, both general and specific. See ‘What is a Paradigm’ in Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. L. D’Isanto and K. Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (New York: Telos Publishing, 2003).

²⁷ In what follows, I use this word with reference to Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

nudged, blocked, and directed.²⁸ The marking of the land would be the foundation for all other law, the bedrock of a legal code inscribed first and foremost in the visible and resistant features of the human environment. The land, so overwritten, provides the sense of direction by which a subsequent human society can be given an orientation, allowing new encounters and contingencies to become adapted to the pre-existing order.

Obvious to say that with Schmitt, we leave the ear behind. The ordering of the earth is first and foremost *to see how the earth has been divided and bordered*. It is worth noting in passing a performative contradiction here, inasmuch as to be able to see the divided earth it will already have been necessary to have left the orientation of its inscribed surface so that *it might be seen from above*.²⁹ From that vantage point, the eye can probe into the distance, to compare, refer, verify, and so on. The Schmittian eye directs itself to the proper allocation of things, depending upon the divided earth. In contrast,³⁰ we can consider the ear to receive more than it directs, and as being caught up in an

²⁸ For more on these themes, see Nathan Moore, 'Diagramming Control' in *Relational Architectural Ecologies: Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity*, ed. Peg Rawes (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁹ On the significance of the aerial view (and imaginary) see Jeanne Haffner, *The View from Above: The Science of Social Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

³⁰ I do not wish to set an essential difference between the ear and the eye but, rather, to use their mobile specificities as a way to draw a distinction between the archive and the katechon (see further in the text). Nevertheless, it is not without merit that Marshall McLuhan wrote, 'There are no boundaries to sound'. See 'Visual and Acoustic Space' in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004), 68.

endless process of attunement,³¹ through which it gathers itself. In this sense, both the eye and the ear are *diligent*, except that the ear falls upon collecting and assembling more than the eye, which focuses upon the selecting and separating of what has been gathered.

Selectivity and separation also imply, for Schmitt, the problem of retaining and holding, as is clear from his treatment of the etymology of ‘*nomos*’. From the three senses of *nomos* he describes,³² it is the case that the working of the land to make it productive, and the allocation of the land as so many plots and claims, are dependent on a prior appropriation. Seizing land is the most basic ground of *nomos* including, of course, the problems of then holding onto it. Consequently, there is clearly no ecological dimension to Schmitt’s thinking because it remains resolutely anthropocentric: how to seize land from other humans, and how to protect ownership against other humans. Holding land, *nomos*, makes those that hold it exceptional, because of their very power to appropriate. This is the ground of sovereignty, showing a consistent thread throughout Schmitt’s work: from the definition of the sovereign as he who decides upon the exception, to the *nomos* of the earth as the power of appropriation.

Exception and *nomos* can be brought under the envelope of the *katechon*.³³ Rather than an ecology, archive, or

³¹ See Sara Ramshaw, ‘The Song and Silence of the Sirens’ in this volume.

³² Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth*.

³³ Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Z. Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 71. *Katechon* is a term that has become significant because of its use by St Paul in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians. Its interest derives from a seeming contradiction, whereby evil is held at bay but only at the expense

open system, the katechon maintains closure – this is its ‘power’ and its exceptionality. The katechon is that which withholds or restrains – clearing an appropriated space and holding it. Esposito analyses the katechon as a paradigm of immunity:

[T]he *Katechon* restrains evil by containing it, by keeping it, by holding it within itself. It confronts evil, but from within, by hosting it and welcoming it, to the point of binding its own necessity to the presence of evil. It limits evil, defers it, but does not eradicate it: because if it did, it would also eliminate itself.³⁴

The danger, as articulated by Esposito following Derrida, is that the immunising action of the katechon comes to recognise its own functioning as not only restraining evil but, too, as also allowing for the survival of evil. At that point, the katechon tips over into auto-immunisation, fighting itself in a headlong (and suicidal) rush to preserve itself by eradicating itself. Might this be understood as something akin to second-stage cybernetics, whereby the katechon begins to take its own operation into account as an element of its ongoing operation? Auto-immunising – the immune system attacking itself to preserve itself – might be akin to the processing of sound *as sound*; except that improvisation does not – generally – seek to eradicate itself.³⁵ The crucial difference, between the nomic katechon, and the archive of improvisation, is that the latter

of putting off the coming of God’s Kingdom. As well as Esposito and Agamben, it has also been discussed by Massimo Cacciari in his *The Withholding Power: An Essay on Political Theology*, trans. Edi Pucci (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018).

³⁴ Ibid., 63.

³⁵ Although this perspective perhaps raises interesting questions about the use of certain minimalist approaches in free improvisation.

does not prioritise closure. Whilst certain compositional strategies might seek to enclose improvisation,³⁶ free or experimental improvisation not only remains open to contingency, *but finds its very necessity in it*.

Donna Haraway has already pointed out the dangers of over-estimating immunity as an appropriate diagram for human organisation.³⁷ The katechon is over rigid, inflexible, concerned to hold the enemy out and at bay and, in so doing, draws out a sort of eternal now.³⁸ Haraway perhaps did not have Schmitt in mind when she wrote, yet her concern over the ‘militarisation’ of the immune system, as an object of scientific discourse, problematises the notion that the body to be protected could ever be, in practice, discrete, unified, non-porous, or clearly differentiated. In short, there are no *exceptional bodies*; instead, only bodies (as systems) encountering other bodies. Haraway writes:

[T]he immune system is in some sense a diagram of relationships and a guide for action in the face of questions about the boundaries of the self and about mortality. Immune system discourse is about *constraint and possibility* for engaging in a world full of ‘difference’, replete with non-self.³⁹

³⁶ See Prévost, *The First Concert*.

³⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991). See Chapter 10.

³⁸ As Agamben has pointed out, the temporal aspect in play here is highly ambivalent: it is concerned to keep the forces of evil at bay; yet, it cannot reach the final security/immunity of the kingdom without first confronting – indeed, being overrun by – those forces. Consequently, the katechon keeps both God and Satan at a distance. This produces a suspended or halted time: not quite the end, but the time ‘just’ before the end. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 34.

³⁹ Prévost, *The First Concert*, 214 (my emphasis).

The point is that if non-self is to be ‘contained’ – rather than encountered – then the militarised notion of immunity cannot avoid attacking itself, because it is not able to finally separate itself from its non-selves. There is no body that stands separated from the situation of its particular time and space (i.e. its ecology), being, ‘necessarily finite, rooted in partiality and a subtle play of same and different, maintenance and dissolution.’⁴⁰

Archive and Katechon

Of course, it is no surprise that if Schmitt fails to achieve an ecological thinking, it is because he remains committed to the idea of the exception until the last. As such, he is not so much interested in an archive as he is in the katechon. On the one hand, a flexible system adapting to (and producing), where possible, contingency; on the other, a rigid system intent on erasing contingency and thus, in the process, ultimately intent on eradicating itself.

As noted above, the discreteness of the archive involves a high level of undecidability about where the edge of an improvised ‘piece’ actually is. This does not make any given improvisation undifferentiated, but means that the process of the improvisation is ongoing beyond the confines of its own performing (or, indeed, recording). The specificity of an improvisation is in the composition of its occurring, in terms of the players and their styles, the audience and their listening, and (where applicable) in its recording and playback. At a certain level, this means that ‘bad’ improvisations are just as significant as ‘good’ ones,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 205.

without the ability to distinguish the two being lost: both are information for subsequent improvisings. In this way, the archive of improvisation does not seek to eradicate either its non-self or – more significantly – its own difference from itself. Indeed, according to the above, this latter is what it seeks to elicit.

The *distance* of the katechon – its abstracting – is transcendental, inasmuch as it seeks to make the material conform to its own idealised account of itself. There can be no hesitation or working through of what informs it; instead, what is idealised is an ever faster ability to distinguish ‘friend’ from ‘enemy’, so that the latter might be contained or destroyed. The nomic body aims to transcend itself, and so to exist outside of itself, through a forced, but impossible, convergence on its (future-projected) self. Rather than differing from itself, it aims to coincide with itself now and forever. But, in the end, the only thing that does not differ from itself is death: non-being as a uniform void or absence. *Nomos* is not responsive, it does not foster nor follow, but assimilates and equalises: it is a negentropy aiming at the ‘completion’ of entropy.

The *sense* of the katechon is not related to duration through change or discontinuity. Rather, it tends to depart from any experience of duration, becoming an eternal instant or end of history happening *now*. Referring to Agamben, we might say that nomic sense is both already and not yet,⁴¹ serving to suspend any possibility of evaluation or judgment, in favour of a brute will

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Daley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

to power masquerading as decisiveness. Lacking the means to evaluate, the nomic katechon tends to present everything without perspective, as crisis or impending catastrophe. The best that can be said is that whatever is encountered should be appropriated if at all possible, not so *nomos* can repeat and differ, but so that it might carry on in its unchanging nowness and petrifying continuity. Consequently, there is no nomic sense (or nonsense)⁴² to speak of. Neither chronic nor aionic, the time of the end cannot be made sense of.

This all suggests a basic point: there can be no system of systems (no catalogue of catalogues); and the decision in favour of the katechon, rather than the archive, can only be at the cost of a dangerously unstable tendency towards auto-immunity. From this perspective, it might be that something more remains to be said about Haraway's account of how the immune system was represented through different editions of Golub's *Immunology: A Synthesis* textbook, in the 1970s and 80s.⁴³ Haraway describes how the human immune system was depicted in Golub's text-book as an orchestra, initially with certain cells presiding over events as a conductor would, with other specialised functions being both subordinate to, and coordinated by, the immunological baton. As Haraway writes, the illustrations, through the various editions, 'are about co-operation and control'.⁴⁴ Yet, through subsequent editions, the conductor is increasingly side-lined,

⁴² Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. M. Lester and C. Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁴³ Prévost, *The First Concert*, 205.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 206.

with the illustrations tending to depict a more decentralised (musical) organisation. By the end,

The joke of the single masterly control of organisational harmony in the symphonic system responsible for the integrity of 'self' has become a kind of post-modern pastiche of multiple centres and peripheries, where the immune music that the page suggests would surely sound like nursery school space music. All the actors that used to be on the stage-set for the unambiguous and coherent biopolitical subject are still present, but their harmonies are definitely a bit problematic.⁴⁵

Leaving to one side what we might understand by 'post-modern' in this context, the more interesting point might be that from a divergence of specialisms and tendencies, systems and bodies come to be affected by, and to affect, each other. More than this, that these bodies do not exist as such outside of the relations that they enter into or, better yet, that through these relations certain potential tendencies are actualised and, through these actualisations, certain other potentials are elicited in the other bodies encountered which, in turn, feedback to turn on or off potentials in the other bodies. And yet, even more, through all of this, new potentials can emerge, either to be realised or not. This is not the katechon but an improvised archive or, to borrow the (in)famous phrase of William S. Burroughs: there is nothing here now but the recordings.⁴⁶ Something which has never not been true.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶ William S. Burroughs, *Nothing Here Now But the Recordings*, Industrial Records, 1981.

Conclusion

Drawing distinctions are useful and, indeed, inevitable. Yet, any given distinction must not become over-determined. Haraway's account of the immune system-as-orchestra shows that slippages, breakdowns, and dis-harmonies can begin to show through in even the most ordered of representations. If this is so, it is because the difference between archive and katechon is very small – even, more or less nothing. Yet, in this almost-nothing, the call for human decisiveness resides, even if I must express it here, by way of a conclusion, in a crude or superficial way: archive *and* katechon/archive *or* katechon. The undecidability between 'and' *and/or* 'or' already indicates that a decision cannot finally ground itself, leaving further decision-making unavoidable. The danger is to make of this unavoidability a proper ground or apparent legitimation – i.e., to make it into the exception. Against this – and this is the appeal of the archive – decision calls for recursivity,⁴⁷ as the process through which the archive endures in its concrete abstraction.

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⁴⁷ See Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

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