

2019 Schillinger Essay Competition Honorable Mention

Improvisational Accompaniment

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Accompany: (v.) early 15c., "to be in company with", "take as a companion"
Musical meaning "play or sing along with". **Improvise** (v.) from Italian
improvisare "to sing or speak extempore," from Latin improviso "unforeseen; not
studied or prepared beforehand," "not foreseen, unexpected,"

... precise temporal coordination is the first component of the immediacy of the
experience of psychic growth' ... crucial to a sense of vitality (that) leads to the
emergence of the emancipatory impulse. S. Leikert 2017 p. 666

Jazz offers so many pleasures, but there is one that has been most meaningful to
me as an analyst. I appreciate the beauty of the drummer's supportive role in the musical
interaction, his responsive flexibility that creates a shared pulse. The drummer improvises
as much as the soloist, but that effort is in support and response, behind the scenes as it
were, but no less crucial to the ensemble's musical success. I feel this same aesthetic
pleasure in my work with patients, when I can offer an attuned improvisational
accompaniment, when there is a rhythmic-emotional unison that allows my patient the
freedom to explore, or to be. The accompanying role of the rhythm section in small jazz
ensembles brings into view an analogous analytic role and activity: that of the *analyst as
improvisational accompanist*. This role reflects my aspirations as an analyst as I seek to
find the right accompaniment for this particular person, at this moment, to create or share
the pulse, at times harmonize, at others to provide a counterpoint that gives the necessary
support for the patient's development in the session. Accompanying is a creative and
endeavor, and as nothing is proscribed in each unique dyad, the analyst must improvise
the best way to accompany. In this sense, jazz and analytic work share similar aims: the
dyad is an attuned improvisational ensemble in which the analyst-rhythmic section
supports, communicates and fosters recognition, differentiation, creative expression and
freedom for the soloist-patient, in a shared world.

Jazz vividly illustrates the important dimension of improvisational analytic
accompaniment. As the jazz rhythm section lays down supportive vitalizing
accompaniment for the soloist to 'say something', the analyst similarly accompanies her
patient, providing a rhythmic- emotional narrative of improvised support that can lead to
'the emergence of the emancipatory impulse'. In accompanying, the analyst works at the
level of rhythm, tone, gesture, and words, finding the right pulse and intensity, the right
accompaniment for this patient. This happens in the somatic register, in the body. The
patient *senses, knows* when the analyst is with them, and knows this by what is felt

through the senses, not by what the analyst necessarily says. Our embodied accompaniment communicates our ‘presence’¹: a welcoming, available, and flexible response.

There are analogous forms of accompaniment in jazz and psychoanalysis. In jazz the drummer’s rhythmic support fits the needs of the group and the soloist to find his voice, ranging from a steady and constant pulse, to one loose and spacious, to one interactive and at times disruptive. So the analyst seeks what is needed to allow for the patient’s greater subjective experience, to ‘solo’, geared to the patients’ needs in the moment. These accompanying forms in both activities will be described and illustrated below.

What is also similar in jazz and analytic accompaniment, and crucial, is that the register of interaction and communication is an emotional narrative without words—or words that arise out of shared embodied rhythms. Analytic communication is grounded here, in the body, in tone, gesture, and rhythm, and the analyst’s increasing awareness of this dimension enlarge the possible transforming effects of her participation.

The Clinical Aims of Improvisational Accompaniment

If the end point of jazz accompaniment is to promote the soloist’s greater improvisational freedom², what is the aim of accompaniment in analysis? Why is accompaniment such a crucial aspect of therapeutic action? One aim of accompaniment is to offer the person a shared world of experience, active engagement, recognition, and witnessing. The person feels someone with them, available and receptive. He also feels recognized by the analyst’s verbal and non-verbal attunement in a way that strengthens his sense of self, in fact develops a stronger capacity for self-presencing³. The patient is offered the radical, often unprecedented experience of acceptance, welcoming, being-with-ness, and attunement. This gives the patient a way out of isolation, non-relating, and hopelessness, a way out of a being entrapped in protective defenses. All patients need this sort of accompaniment prior to elaborating their own voice and solo.

Accompaniment then can support the patient’s improvisations, often allowing him to move away from the analyst and create a more differentiated link. As the patient separates, he ventures out into new or difficult territory, the analyst’s presence is there following. Over time the person develops greater confidence in self-expression and

¹ See Gabriel Marcel’s (1933/56) work on presence and availability. Also see _____ (2017) for a in depth consideration of Marcel’s concept in clinical practice

³ This concept can be summed up as a subject knowing they are having an experience, the experience—feelings, perceptions, desires-- are their own.

‘relational freedom’⁴, taking chances while still relying on the supportive accompaniment. He takes greater risks and individuates from the internal group and the analyst—“with and against the group”⁵.

A crucial aspect of therapeutic action involves failures of accompaniment, when the analyst is in the wrong key or time signature, and as in jazz, this leads to intensified listening and greater mutual understanding than previously experienced. Through heightened episodes of living and shared knowing that result from disruption of accompaniment, and subsequent re-attunement by the analyst as she struggles to regain attunement in an open, non enigmatic way, the patient gains trust in her analyst and her object world, her perceptions, and her ability to act and impact the object. She gains a greater sense of what is real. These moments of re-alignment and mutual understanding are intensely meaningful. The therapeutic effect is contingent upon the analyst’s recognition of failure and its effect on the patient, and the responsibility the analyst takes for these mis-attuned episodes.

Embodied Accompaniment: “It don’t mean a thing if it aint got that swing”

Accompaniment happens in the body. Jazz and psychoanalysis are both temporal arts, and *time is felt* in rhythm and movement, in the body. Jazz musicians create and live in an embodied world, where what is known and communicated occurs via the senses, in the body (rhythm, emotion, tone and intensity), rather than through cognition and apprehension. While other musical genres emphasize harmonic development or song, the jazz genre I am describing that shares qualities with communication in analysis, rests on, in fact *celebrates*, what Trevarthan and Maloch (2002) term ‘communicative musicality’. This concept, describes a non-verbal, rhythmic and embodied aspect of relating, story telling without words, through pulse, tone, and gesture. Jazz brings out and in front what is often underneath in communication, and is a vivid illustration of the embodied dimension of communication in the analytic relationship. A. Harrison’s (2014) metaphor of the clinical encounter, the ‘sandwich model’, layers the way meaning emerges in the analytic situation. The symbolic world and language, the top two levels of the sandwich, rests on the bottom somatic slice, the ‘music and dance’ of the interaction. The bottom slice at the ‘somatic level’ is one of “coordinated rhythms that both communicate meaning and provide essential scaffold for all higher-level change processes”. This view of the embodied dimension is not meant to supplant the importance of language, but to show where the ‘action is’ that determines the meaning made through language. And this bottom slice is where accompaniment happens.

The analyst’s *instrument* for finding the right form of accompaniment is *embodied attunement*. This concept refers to the *analyst’s kinesthetic sensing of patient, knowing her rhythm, affect, and experience, as communicated through the body*. The analyst’s capacity for accompaniment at the embodied level comes from her awareness of the body and perceptions—both of herself and the patient. This quality of ‘*embodied awareness*’

⁴ See Stern, Donnel (2013) for a detailed account of this important concept.

⁵ Ralph Ellison (1964) defined jazz as the soloist working “within and against the group”.

can be expanded with time and attention. Embodied awareness *shifts the direction of the analyst's attention*, from the patient's words and associations, and also from the analyst's 'reveries', to the immediacy of bodily and perceptual experience in oneself and in the dyad. This way of attending has immediacy, a 'now-ness'. The analytic frame of consistent time and space foregrounds the nuance of somatic interaction for accompaniment. For example, giving the regularity of the setting of my office, it is striking the variety of my sensory responses to it, the sense of my body in space, in relation to the patient, my sense of movement, the sound and colors and atmosphere, all shift in response to the embodied register, where emotions are first recognized through the body, and then put into words as feelings. When I share the pulse with my patient, when I feel attuned in accompaniment, I feel relaxed and open to sensations and feelings I know through bodily response. Even if what is shared is difficult, I am affected but take in and contain the patient's distress and am not overwhelmed by it. When I am preoccupied and off, or when I match the difficult states in my patient in ways that I also am overwhelmed and dissociated, that is known to me (and the patient) as well by the way my body signals me that I am not settled, cannot focus, am agitated, and so on. 'Presence'--the physical ways I know I am open and welcoming and attuned—is communicated to me and to the patient at the bodily level; *this is my subjective 'home base'*, the best set point to listen and accompany. In my experience, when I am a present accompanist in the embodied way, I notice the quality of light in the consultation room and the richness of color, the way my body moves in fluid ways, the tone and timbre and rhythm of my voice. These somatic-perceptual qualities are constantly changing and signal shifts in my emotional states that often mean a disruption in the 'home base' of receptive accompaniment. The same is true of the analyst's 'knowing' the patient's states in this register: sensing their rhythms, tones, gestures, and intensity.

4. Tuning the Instrument of Accompaniment: an illustration

Several years ago I treated a man that resulted in a shift in my clinical approach and attention. John was an unusually sensitive and perceptive patient who could articulate what I imagine was going on with many of my patients, but in a silent way—someone with 'perfect pitch' in the accompaniment department-- who heightened my awareness of the importance of the right form of accompaniment that happens in the non-verbal, embodied aspect of the relationship. He was exquisitely sensitive to intrusion and abandonment and needed just the right rhythm from me in order to stay with his own mind and experience John was highly attuned to me and had immediate access to the quality of my presence-accompaniment. I found a form of accompaniment that was a soft and steady rhythm that followed his lead closely, using bodily clues to his state of mind and need for quiet or more active support. John made the state of my body a prerequisite being in his own mind, like the baby needs the mother's warm smile to relax in her arms. He sensed immediately my bodily state and thus my state of being with him. When I relaxed in my chair, tilting it fully back, he would comment, "I like that you're at ease with me". My tone of voice, it's depth and timbre, registered immediately as well. If I spoke out of pressure, coming from my own need for contact or meaning, he would unflinchingly decry my 'thin voice' or my 'fast tempo'. If I asked a question that related

more to my need to know that what he was developing, he would tell me to stop interrupting him, “Is it OK for me to go on with what’s on *my* mind?” I thought of him as a real connoisseur of my presence and quality accompaniment, and he taught me, as I describe below, how to handle failures of my accompaniment that allowed for his continued emotional growth.

Gradually, over a few years, he came to take my attention and care more and more for granted. This was freeing: he could feel himself, his needs and desires, in the presence of another. He could go on when he sensed my steady relaxed accompaniment in gestures, tone, and rhythm that asked nothing of him, and communicated my interest in his experience. He ‘knew’ my embodied state; what he needed was to know I was open and non-acquisitive and relaxed, not preoccupied with my needs or disturbed by his freedom and spontaneity. He summed it up quite beautifully: “if you’re calm and relaxed I feel you want to be here for me, for me.

There were disruptions in my accompaniment that he picked up immediately. Either I was distracted or tired or into my own ideas about what was going on. These disruptions of course were meaningful and could be understood in the transference-countertransference situation. Yet as *my attention was primarily on my role as accompanist*, that is what needs to be restored. My main job is to get back to John and his world, to get back to accompanying him and not continue to work through my world of memories, or ‘make sense’ of what happened between us. If I could detect that John was disturbed in a way that led to a kind of manic flight, not wanting to confront me with my absence, then I might slow down the interaction, to see what more emotionally lies there, and to take responsibility for my absence. John’s angry and disappointed reactions to my absences were an important part of the process, and I would acknowledge his perceptions in ways that allowed him to feel secure in my accompaniment and trust in my honesty and responsibility.

2. The Forms of Accompaniment

Jazz offers vivid examples, pure examples, of what appears more complicated in the sessions, and that is one of the merits of listening to and studying this genre of music. The forms of accompaniment between these two endeavors are strikingly similar. The accompanying forms in jazz are represented by iconic drummers that range from Elvin Jones to Cecil Murray, that range encompassing more or less structure, spaciousness, and interaction. Analogous forms are found in analytic accompaniment when the analyst finds the right ‘groove’ for this person at this moment. Here are the basic forms of accompaniment. The connection to analytic accompaniment should be clear. References to the musical examples are at the end of this essay, and may provide interest and enjoyment while reading this section.

1. The Steady Support of Accompaniment for the Patient’s Solo

One form of accompaniment is the patient-soloist given steady rhythmic support, as on John Coltrane's *Impressions*, the drummer Elvin Jones is palpably and energetically there in a way that is both strong and relaxed. Coltrane depends on Jones to both carry him and push the beat, which then allows Coltrane to elaborate his narrative. Elvin Jones creates a steady, consistent pulse. "There is no getting off this train", he says, as he pulls the group along, giving the soloist a solid and reliable floor of support. "I am here with you; I won't let you go", the accompanist speaks, "no matter where you go". The analyst can be like a steady drummer providing a strong pulse and attuned presence in tone, rhythm, intensity, and words, pushing things along and holding things up. It speaks the language of, 'I'm here with you, present, following you where you go'.

2. The Unobtrusive Rhythmic Accompaniment

The pulse is fluid and expansive in a quiet way, drawing less attention to the drummer as a differentiated voice. This can be heard in Paul Motian's work on *River's Run*. The drummer's support here is palpably there, but less conspicuously. He creates a tissue that surrounds the soloist. His touch is light, non-repetitive, not driving the beat but suggesting it, creating spaces with subtle fills. Paul Motion is a most unobtrusive drummer who weaves a loosely textured fabric of accompaniment. You can almost take his voice for granted—almost, yet the pulse is there, his presence a vital medium of support. The analyst can provide a more diffuse, less hard-edged rhythmic accompaniment, what M. Balint (1968) calls the 'unobtrusive analyst. This rhythm is like a 'medium', a soft steady beat of presence, offering nuanced figures the patient will pick up, or not, without pressure to respond. It is spacious.

C. Interactive, Playful Accompaniment

In ensemble playing with less differentiated roles, both patient and therapist are playing together, at times in an equally interactive way. There is more anxiety here for the analyst, requiring more spontaneity and improvisation, and risk-taking. Miles Davis created an interactive group conversation, on *My Funny Valentine—Live at the Plugged Nickel*. There, an attentive sharing of the creative movement is based on the moment-to-moment level of responsiveness that still relies on the drummer Tony Williams's pulse. Williams sometimes solos and the group accompanies him, a beautiful trade off of roles, though Williams's beat is never lost. Tony Williams is spacious, responsive, accommodating, and playful. "Ok, I'll follow you there". Or, they may say. 'You'll follow me now for a time now, check this out. ". These drummers offer the possibility of mutual play and interactive soloing.

D. Enlivening Deadness in Accompaniment: the accompanist as soloist.

Sometimes the analyst needs to break out of deadening rhythms and take the lead, though a lead that should eventually engage the patient in her own experience. Sonny

Murrey's drumming with Cecil Taylor broke the frame of what a drummer, responsible for the beat, should offer. Murrey improvised beats in parallel to Taylor that were disruptive and rhythmically dissonant, with the aim of finding new and more enlivening interaction. This music is challenging to listen to. Overtime a heightened ensemble experience is reached, because of Murray's revolutionary style. An example of this is *Lena*.

E. The Disrupting Accompanist

There are occasions when the analyst does not offer an alternative rhythm for the patient to join. Instead the analyst disrupts and so creates a freer unstructured form. This may be compared to 'free jazz', where the rhythm section is entirely independent in ways that create disruptive breaks. John Coltrane's *The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* is a jarring example of music without structure. The musicians have to be awake and take nothing for granted, and the rhythm section is very much a part of the created tension and open space—at times is the instigator of this tension. This making 'open space' is the metaphor for the disrupting analyst accompanist. There is a more disruptive rhythmic accompaniment that is meant to enliven and provoke. This form is especially helpful in situations of deadness and dissociation.

All these forms of accompaniment are determined by the particular momentary needs of the patient, as sensed by the analyst and improvised at the embodied level of communication.

Coda

Psychoanalysis, like jazz, is a temporal art: there is a sharing of rhythm and mode of expression in real time. There is no art form more devoted to 'temporal coordination' than jazz. And no therapy devoted to the same, as psychoanalysis, and the way forms of accompaniment, found by the analyst in the uniqueness of the dyad, can have a transforming effect. Considering communication among jazz musicians in performance brings this into relief--particularly the differing styles of support and accompaniment. Internal work is required by the analyst to be receptive in improvising right form. This is not easy work. Yet attention to this register opens up novel and important ways of engaging the patient.

Improvisational accompaniment in an embodied way marks an area of great importance for the analyst to attend to. It is easy to neglect or assume we know this through intuition, because it forms the natural background or 'underneath' of the interaction. Unfortunately, embodied awareness is not something often taught as part of

analytic technique. It actually requires directed attention and internal perception into order to grasp essential information about the pulse of the relationship, and the specific form of accompaniment called for in the moment. This sphere of attention opens up novel ways of improvising on the analyst's part, to initiate or restore accompaniment.

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2. Paul Motian, *River's Run*, Mark Copland New York Trio Recordings, Vol. 2: Voices, Pirouet, 2007
3. Miles Davis, *My Funny Valentine*, Live at the Plugged Nickel, 1965
4. Cecil Taylor, *Lena*, Nefertiti, the Beautiful One Has Come, Revenant, 1962
5. Miles Davis, *Nefertiti*, Columbia 1968
6. John Coltrane, *The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, Meditations, Impulse 1966

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