

2019 Schillinger Essay Competition

Runner up

“EXACT MUSIC,” JAZZ AND THE UNCONSCIOUS: IMPROVISATION AS THE ESSENCE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

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When I was a child, Leonard Bernstein’s *Young people’s concerts* were televised on Sunday afternoons. Beamed into our Midwestern home from glamorous New York City, the program featured the charismatic conductor of the New York Philharmonic lecturing about various aspects of classical music to his young, sophisticated audience.

“Do you know what that is?” Bernstein (1959) asked the children after the orchestra played and excerpt.

“Scheherazade!” the children called out.

I was enchanted by this exchange, and not a little intimidated by the audience’s familiarity with these orchestral works.

The topic that day was “What is classical music?” Bernstein observed that this term, “classical music,” was used colloquially in reference to a certain kind of music—not to define compositions written during the classical period, that is roughly between 1750 and 1820, between the Baroque and Romantic periods—but to identify music that is... well... what?

“Everybody thinks he knows what classical music is...” declared Bernstein. “People use this word to describe music that isn’t jazz, or popular songs, or folk music, just because there isn’t any other word that seems to describe it better.” Bernstein questioned this terminology, suggesting that people refer to “classical” music as “good music;” but isn’t there such a thing as good jazz, or a good popular song, he wondered? Then people use the term “serious music” when they mean Handel or Beethoven, but there is some jazz that is very serious, he pointed out. Other people refer to classical music as “highbrow,” which means that only well-educated people can appreciate it; but Bernstein knew folks who aren’t exactly Einstein who love Beethoven. He went on to consider and reject terms such as “art music,” “symphony music” and “long-hair music” to describe what most orchestras are performing.

If all these terms were wrong, then what was the correct word to define this genre? Bernstein settled on the word “exact.” When a composer notates a score, he or she writes the exact notes, exact instrumentation, and exact instructions as to what is to be played, and classical musicians do their best to honor the composer’s intent by following these instructions as exactly as possible, while still playing musically and artistically. “This music is permanent, unchangeable, exact,” he concluded.

In contrast, there is no end to the different ways a popular song can be played, said Bernstein. None of the different renditions of a popular song were wrong; in fact, a popular song should not be played the same way every time—how deadly dull that would be! The same is true for folk music. “And as far as jazz is concerned,” he said, “well, of course it changes all the time, because that’s what jazz is all about: improvising, making the music up as you go along, and hardly ever even bothering to write it down.”

Making the music up as you go along was not something I could relate to; I could not even imagine where to begin with that. But “exact” music—that made sense to me. I could follow instructions, I could and did play the notes written on the score when I sat down at the piano. The sacred duty to honor the composer’s intent became my beacon as I studied classical music in high school and college. In the end, though, my preoccupation with exactitude was my undoing, as the music became less important than a flawless performance. Crushed by the weight of my own perfectionism, I left the study of classical music behind, seeking self-understanding through psychotherapy.

My initial attempts as a therapy client were similar to my efforts as a music student: I sought precise answers to my questions about myself, my feelings, my direction in life. My therapist grew weary of my requests for recommended reading. Later, my experience as a clinician in training was similar; there were psychological theories and therapeutic modalities aplenty, but which ones were applicable to my internship clients? The problem I kept encountering was that of patients saying and doing the unexpected; no sooner had I formulated an “answer” to their struggles, than they surprised me with a new wrinkle in the fabric of our work. My efforts to approach the therapeutic encounter with scientific exactitude, as per my interpretation of Freud’s (1912) recommendation to his colleagues to model themselves after the surgeon, who puts aside his feelings in order to perform the operation as skillfully as possible, were threatening to take me down the same path I had travelled as a failed classical musician.

While I was struggling with my own inner classicism, various psychoanalytic theorists were exploring ways to access greater freedom in their work, and found themselves drawn to jazz as a model for an improvisatory approach—but not before cultural views on jazz underwent a significant evolution. In the early 1950s, a few years before Bernstein’s lecture on “What is classical music,” Aaron Esman (1951) and Norman Margolis (1954) published papers in *American Imago* concerning the cultural conflict and psychology of jazz. Both authors acknowledged the improvisational nature of jazz, and approached this artistic freedom with a mixture of admiration and skepticism. Esman and Margolis traced the origins of jazz back to the years immediately following the Civil War, when a blending of the work song and the spiritual gave birth to a new art form: the “Blues.” In the last two decades of the nineteenth century in New Orleans,

a form of playing evolved whereby the first chorus of the melody was collectively improvised by the entire group, followed by improvised solos on each instrument individually for as many choruses as the musician felt capable of producing, and the last chorus would again be collectively improvised. (Margolis, 1954, pp. 266-267)

Thus jazz was born, a form of music that gave the soloist “a complete freedom unknown in European music,” (Esman, 1951, p. 221). Both authors pointed out that the majority culture in America, made up of European descendants steeped in Puritan, Anglo-Saxon traditions, responded to this new art form with amazement and anxiety—an anxiety that arose in relation to the fact that the “unknown” was equated with the Id drives that had to be repressed. Margolis (1954) concluded that “jazz came to symbolize the Id drives that are constantly attempting to overcome the controls of the Superego and its social counterpart, the culture,” (p. 289), and Esman (1951) observed that jazz’s audience consisted primarily of intellectuals, African-Americans and adolescents—that is, “individuals who, consciously or unconsciously, regard themselves as outside the accepted cultural framework and as unbound by many of its conventions,” (p. 224).

Forty years later, at a point when jazz had worked its way into the mainstream culture, David Lichtenstein (1993) took issue with the “condescension” and “subtle racism” implicit in Esman’s and Margolis’s papers, pointing out that “complete freedom is not at all the point of most jazz improvisation,” (p. 229) and that while improvisation does involve taking liberties with form, there are rules and structures through which these liberties are taken. “Improvisation is highly respectful of form even as it reworks its previous instantiations,” (Lichtenstein, 1993, p. 229). Lichtenstein’s paper compared musical improvisation in jazz with free association in psychoanalysis. In jazz, the text is provided by the chord

progressions of a song, its rhythmic design, and its melodic nuances. Anchored by this structure, the jazz musician improvises variations on a theme; Lichtenstein used John Coltrane's "Giant Steps" as an example of how this works: The theme is established by having Coltrane's sixteen bar song stated twice, after which Coltrane plays a series of ten improvised variations on that theme, followed by a brief piano variation, then two more variations, and finally a restatement of the theme. Implicit in this illustration is both the rules and structures to which Lichtenstein referred earlier in his article (this is no free for all!) and the artistic freedom employed by the musician as he improvises each variation.

In like manner, there is structure in psychoanalysis: An analysand's theme may be a particular object from memory; variations consist of metaphoric and metonymic substitutions. In the author's case example, the theme consists of a patient's dream, recounted during an analytic session, while the patient's free associations to his dream supply the variations. Lichtenstein (1993) concluded,

If it is true that the efficacy of psychoanalytic work is in attaining a certain fullness of speech, a fullness where affect and meaning are rejoined, where the impact of desire is experienced through speech, then it is through the tropes of improvisation that this relinking takes place, these tropes that have the form of the primary process that allow us to say more than we know and to discover that additional meaning upon hearing it said. (pp. 251-252)

Around the turn of the century, Steven Knoblauch, a psychoanalyst and jazz musician, expanded the concept of improvisation in psychoanalysis (2000). While Lichtenstein conceived of analytic improvisation as the patient's ability, with the help of his analyst, to free associate, Knoblauch conceptualized a more interactively co-constructed approach. Knoblauch's focus was on the non-verbal, the unspoken, the unformulated. Like the musician that he is, he listened to the rhythm of the client's speech and breathing, and the tone of her voice, as well as his own. Knoblauch slowed the pace of his breathing and speech when he intuited that his patient, "Lenny," was feeling squashed by Knoblauch's self-assured clinical assessment. Lenny's breathing, which had been short and quick, eased, and his rhythms slowly began to resemble Knoblauch's:

I needed this shift in time to find space for reflection about how I had contributed to this moment. He needed this shift so that he could begin to free himself from the unconscious repetition of choking pressure and deadening confusion he had learned as part of his father's world... (Knoblauch, 2000, p. 3)

With "Lacy," a strident, confident professional woman who feared pregnancy, Knoblauch shifted his tone of voice when he heard a girlish quality in hers: "Now that the song in my voice was in flow with hers, we playfully laughed about, and hesitantly tried to imagine how she might feel and look to others if she were carrying a child..." (Knoblauch, 2000, p. 18). He attended to turn-taking and pacing in conversation with his patients, intentionally calling upon his experience as a jazz musician:

One of the central dimensions of jazz that affects the listener is the interaction between the soloist and the accompanist. In other words, the sound of surprise, of vitalization and confirmation of spontaneous human experience that jazz carries, is not just catalyzed by the freedom of the improviser endlessly spinning her spontaneously expressed variations on a particular theme or tune form. This patterning is powerfully brought to life and further enriched by the often unacknowledged background responses of the accompanying musician or musicians continuously interacting with the improvising soloist... Accompanists can anticipate the soloist by expressing a melodic figure, a brief phrase for the soloist to echo or vary. Such a moment of exchange is much like a therapist's offering a phrase or word to the patient and the patient either building on that phrase or offering a different or altered construction in response in order to sustain and continue the process of unfolding and expanding feelings and meanings emerging within the treatment. (Knoblauch, 2000, pp. 36-37)

In this way, Knoblauch (2000) tracked how he and his patients were “shaping and being shaped by each other in a bidirectional intersubjective affective moment,” (p. 40). Here, the concept of improvisation in analysis was no longer that of the analyst encouraging the client to produce variations on his thoughts and dreams through free association; the author’s “musical edge”

focuses the clinician on the *patterns and shifts in patterns* of continuous process contours (volume, tone, tempo, rhythm, and turn-taking) that emerge in dyadic interaction and the particular subjective meanings that are both created and subjectively organized by analyst and analysand with these subtle, complex patterns. (Knoblauch, 2000, p. 60)

We are now securely in the territory of a two-person psychology, where not only improvisation, but also uncertainty reign as never before. Knoblauch (2000) went on to observe, “There is a recognition that some significant meaning is being constructed, but the content of that meaning is not presumed. Rather, it is observed from the intersubjective constructions that contextualize the scene in patterns of nonverbal, continuous-process contours,” (p. 60).

This is not “exact music!” The impossibility of the analyst, as a blank screen, offering the precise interpretation of the patient’s unconscious motivations based on his assessment of the patient’s dreams and free associations is now acknowledged. Uncertainty rules in the therapeutic dyad: The analyst does not know what the client is thinking or feeling, or what he is going to say next. She cannot be sure that her conclusions about his dreams or repressed memories are accurate. She may not even understand what she is thinking and feeling about the patient, herself, her countertransference, or her own dreams about their work together—she has an unconscious too! Intersubjectivity and co-construction of meaning, the bi-directional nature of interactions in the therapeutic dyad—these things have now become the guiding principles for many analytic therapists, and as such, a more improvisational approach makes sense.

As psychoanalysts were grappling with improvisational themes and theoretical shifts, I was growing as an adult, both personally and professionally. I found as a mother of two children that there was little about good parenting that was carved in stone, and as an analyst I was of necessity focusing more on nurturing therapeutic relationships and entering into the inner lives of my clients than on finding and imparting answers. It was into this changing landscape that Angela entered.

Case Material

Angela began therapy after her most recent brush with death, due to her struggle with drug addiction. I found her to be a thoroughly likable person, although very different from me in temperament. Angela’s approach to life is... improvisational. Whereas I organize my schedule with tight rigidity, Angela moves through her day with a kind of flexible grace. While my attire is tailored and plain, Angela’s clothing is stylish and flowing. I follow instructions to the letter when I cook; Angela creates delicious meals without recipes. I attend symphony orchestra concerts; Angela goes to Beyonce shows. Despite our differences, we formed a bond (although recently Angela admitted that when we first met, she thought to herself, “This is never gonna work... But it was nothing about you,” she was quick to add.) As I became very fond of her, she grew to trust and respect me, and perhaps it was in our mutual affection where we found the improvisational music in our work.

Not that I ever abandoned classical music. The fact that it is “exact music” does not rob it of its passion. I still tear up whenever I listen to the *Lacrimosa* from Mozart’s *Requiem*—a mournful lament about judgment day, penned by the composer on his deathbed, the last-known work written by this young genius. And I am always filled with foreboding when I hear Brahms’ *Piano concerto no. 1*, as the timpani announce in the distance the approaching storm toward the end of the first movement. I smile whenever I remember introducing Saint-Seans’ *Carnival of the animals* to my daughter, and her peals of laughter when she heard the lion’s roar in the piano’s bass octave runs. And I still laugh out loud at the final measure of Rachmaninoff’s *Paganini variations*—a flourish of a few light notes after the brass

section's ponderous rendition of the *Dias irae*, the Day of wrath—a wink and a musical thumbing of the nose at the fearsome Grim Reaper.

But here's the thing: *the punch line is always the same!* This is “exact music;” the jokes never change. Some people find that tiresome. I find it reassuring; it grounds me to be able to depend upon certain constants in my life and in the arts. And there are aspects of this dependability and predictability that have helped me as a parent and as a therapist. But there are other times when I am left stymied by something unexpected.

One such time was a dream I had recently:

I dreamed that I left my two children in a bassinet on the railroad tracks. In my dream, they were one and three years old. The bassinet was a woven basket resting on an aluminum stand, the kind that might support a TV table. I was with my husband and our friend, Sheldon, and depositing the children on the train tracks in a rural area seemed to make sense to all three of us. After tucking the girls in, we sauntered off, back into town, for a leisurely lunch. It was not until I was dropping off to sleep that night that the sheer insanity of what I had done dawned on me. I reared upright in bed, gasping for air, screaming, “I have to go get them!” I jammed my feet into my house shoes and raced toward the front door, quickly realizing as I exited my house that I was never going to make it to the tracks in this frigid weather without my coat. In the way of dreams, it seemed to take forever to work my arms into my jacket sleeves, and although, once outside, I was trying to run, I felt as if I were swimming in slow-motion through molasses. My mind reeled with anguished thoughts as I reached the edge of town: what would I find when I got there? Would I see a speeding train bearing down on my precious children? Would I find emergency vehicles dealing with the aftermath? Would the bassinet be empty? What if nothing were there at all?

As I approached the site where I had left my children, I found a little wooden structure erected on the tracks. I entered the house and saw several women whose job, I somehow knew, was to care for my children. Opposite the door was a man wearing earphones, sitting at a control panel and looking through a picture window into the next room. I walked through the door next to the picture window to find a second, smaller room, built directly on the tracks, enclosing a protective space around the bassinet. I was flooded with relief to find both children still lying obediently in the bassinet, and looking a little bored. They sat up quickly upon noticing me, and when I saw their faces, looking at me with joy and love and pain and betrayal, I knew I would never forgive myself for leaving them there. I was acutely aware of the women and man in the next room, watching me through the picture window. They had to know, from my children's reaction to me, that I was the mother who had committed this atrocity. I was filled with gratitude to them for saving my children, and overwhelmed with shame for what I had done. I loved them for protecting my babies; I hated them for witnessing my crime. As my children began to cry for me to pick them up, I turned away, trying to make sense of what I had done.

Why did I do it?

Why did I do it?

Why did I do it?

I sat bolt upright in bed, much as I had done in my dream, my hands flailing wildly in the darkness, reaching for my children. *Where are they? What have I done?* My mind slowly cleared as I struggled to understand what had just happened. *My children are not here. They don't live with me anymore. They are adults now, they have homes of their own.* I reached for the bedside table and turned on the lamp, squinting in the brightness at the familiar surroundings of my bedroom. *My children are safe; no harm has befallen them.* “No thanks to you,” came the dark reply from the back of my mind. That's right, I abandoned them, and someone else had to take care of them. I leaned forward in bed, doubled over with pain, an agonizing quality of which I had never experienced before. Wait... no, I

never abandoned them... that was all a bad dream. That never happened... Strangely, that realization brought me no relief. I got out of bed, unable in my agitated state to lie back down. Where did this nightmare come from? I had always thought of myself as a good mother—loving, careful, if anything, overly protective. But look at that dream... what kind of a monster was I?

Why did I dream it?

Why did I dream it?

Why did I dream it?

In his book about discovering jazz in the resonant psyche, Daniel Saper (2012) suggested that Freud did not “get” music in the way he “got” dreams: Freudian interpretation consists of the un-doing of dreamwork, the breaking down of its metaphors into the libidinal wishes for which they stand. Music, which to Freud was purely sensual and devoid of content, gave him nothing to un-do. Saper (2012), however, posited that music does not simply serve the pleasure principle, and that

dream, art and analysis are places for the reconciliation of turbulences into coherent and meaningful experiences that nourish consciousness. Dream, music-making, and analysis are heightened moments of presence, each an intense *now* in which our ability to *be present* is challenged. (p. 122)

In an effort to decipher a meaningful experience from the turbulence of this nightmare, I searched my thoughts for significant events, both past and recent, as well as challenges to my ability to be present. I remembered close calls and near misses from the children’s younger years that had frightened me and caused me to question my competence as a parent. I thought about my daughters’ fearless young-adult adventures over which I had no control, and which had contributed to many a sleepless night. And I wondered about the day-residue: What had I experienced the day before the dream? I had seen a number of clients that day... My mind drifted to Donnel Stern’s concept of the analyst’s unformulated experience of patients:

The very nature of the analyst’s experience of the patient contributes to his difficulty in knowing it. Reactions to others occur in a form with which words are not easily compatible. It is a different kind of experience than words—like music, say—and so putting it into words is problematic, and the result of the attempt is generally an incomplete representation. We cannot speak music or painting. (Stern, 1989, pp. 2-3)

What kind of music had played in my sessions with my clients, that day before my dream? Stern (1989) went on to reference Tauber and Green, who discussed the analyst’s pre-logical thoughts, and “urged an appreciation of the dream and other nonpropositional material for its own sake, the way one appreciates art,” as well as “the judicious sharing with the patient of the analyst’s dreams and countertransference reactions,” (p. 5). Had an unformulated experience with a client gotten expressed in my dream?

Then it occurred to me: I had met with Angela.

Angela had grown up in a household in which hunger, abuse and chaos ruled the day. Defying all expectations, she had constructed a stable adult life for herself, which included a loving marriage, a financially secure household, and two adorable children. She was a doting parent, showering her children with all the love and attention she had longed for as a child, but never received. Although her nemesis, drug addiction, threatened to rob her of everything she held dear, Angela had fought just as hard for sobriety as she had for a loving family and stable home. But the previous week, a triggering encounter had catapulted her into her chaotic past. Her sobriety lapsed, and in her impaired state she had attracted the attention of law enforcement.

The day before my dream, she sat miserably in my office, trying to sort through the sequence of events following her lapse. She had been fingerprinted the day before, and received a call from Children and Youth Services, asking to schedule a home visit. She was terrified of losing her children; she, who should have been removed from her childhood home and placed in foster care, but never was, now faced the possibility of having her well-cared for son and daughter taken from her. Her attorney had informed her that she would most likely face some jail time. Her children were shaken, but unharmed; nonetheless, she was overwhelmed with shame and regret for putting them at risk. At this juncture in our conversation, she was filled with dread at the prospect of jail, imagining hard time with violent offenders. I did not think that scenario was likely, but my attempts to soften her bleak jailhouse vision sounded lame and naïve, even to me. Angela leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, bowing her head over her clenched hands for a few moments, then looked up at me with a pleading expression.

“Can you come with me?”

Confused by this question, I momentarily froze. Angela took in my blank expression, then burst out laughing.

“Can you come with me?” she laughed. “Do you think they’d allow that? Can I bring my therapist with me?”

Angela was playing, and I suddenly caught on to her vision of a jailhouse slumber party, with the two of us in our pajamas, sharing a cell, eating popcorn and staying up all night talking and giggling. I started to laugh too, in spite of myself.

“Oh my gosh, wouldn’t that be fun?” I replied. We continued riffing on the sleepover theme, complete with soda, stuffed animals and movies. We were playing jazz, improvising our shared musical theme, tossing it back and forth, co-creating a fantasy of sisterly fun.

As our laughter subsided, Angela sank into silence, closing her eyes in private reverie. Two large tears coursed quietly down her cheeks. The jazz improvisation had evaporated in the stillness; I heard the timpani from the great Brahms *Piano concerto no. 1* rumbling in the distance, warning of the gathering storm.

Angela opened her eyes and looked at me again, this time through a veil of anguish.

“Can you...” she began hesitantly, almost in a whisper. “Can you...feel the pain?”

I quickly assured her that I could, that I did not want her to feel alone in her suffering. But could I really feel her pain? Had she not sensed my emotional distance in that moment? Why else would she have needed to ask? What had happened just then, as I had drifted off into the Brahms? I was feeling a sense of foreboding, of something terrible around the edges threatening to break through. The timpani in my ears sounded a warning of something that had been far away, but was now getting closer.

Can you... can you feel the pain?

Could I feel her pain? And if not, why couldn't I? Because I had never been in the kind of trouble she was in? How could I know how that felt? Or was I warding off some other pain, something closer to home? Was it that I knew deep down that any of the near-misses I had experienced with my own children could have ended in tragedy? Or that the chaos in my own childhood was threatening to surface, the traumas that had led my father and my brother down the road to perdition? Or the knowledge that, with a different roll of the dice, I too could have escaped into a haze of substance abuse, as they had, rather than finding refuge in obsessive efforts to control my environment? Perhaps I did not want to acknowledge that Angela’s past and mine had more in common than I cared to admit... No, no... her life had been much harder than mine; it seemed presumptuous to compare my pain to hers. My life was

orderly, my cooking followed the recipe, my music was exact music—how could I possibly know how her pain felt?

Little did I realize, that day before my dream, that in a few short hours, that very night, I was going to find out.

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