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## The Problematic Role of “Thingliness” in Experimental Music Canon Formation

The New York School, Free Jazz, and  
Recombinant Ontology

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# The Problematic Role of “Thingliness” in Experimental Music Canon Formation: The New York School, Free Jazz, and Recombinant Ontology

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*Abstract: The variety of compositional and performative practices associated with musical experimentalism and improvisation in the mid-twentieth century highlight problems of identity, thingliness, taxonomy, and canon formation of musical works. Canons of cultural products are valuable in that they work to perpetuate ideological values inscribed in the works they collect. But if there is no “real” body of works, how can a representative canon of experimental and improvised works be constructed? By exploring the idea of domains of conceptual possibility in experimental composition, authorial voice in free jazz, and embodied cognition theory, I arrive at the idea of a recombinant ontology of experimental musical works. While I concede that musical works are not “things,” I argue that a recombinant consideration of a work’s thingliness—to be deployed as is methodologically and theoretically convenient—recognizes the complexity of taxonomization and canon formation. This is an imperfect mediation of the problem, but contributes to the conversation by offering conceptual handholds for how we might talk about these otherwise slippery pseudo-objects.*

*Keywords: Experimental Music, Improvisation, Ontology, Taxonomy, Western Musical Canon, New York School of Composers*

It is not exactly news that daringly experimental musical practices in the mid-twentieth century upset the apple cart of those invested in the cultivated, fine art traditions of Western music. As bodies of compositions, recordings, and practices have accumulated since then, the idiosyncratic output of the New York School of composers as well as the then-burgeoning free jazz movement in New York City sometimes resist the efforts of those who wish to rigorously taxonomize their output. In this paper I will address challenges surrounding the idea of canon formation regarding the above-mentioned musical practices, and how their idiosyncrasies challenge notions about the ontological status of musical works. Much of the music in question deviates from the criteria that would traditionally label it “music” in the Western sense: tonal harmony, steady rhythmic pulse, harmonic or rhythmic structures which imply development, travel, or arrival. Still, the works representative of each musical practice retain some form of reference to musical practice as well as canonizable thingliness due to their varied degrees of conceptual authorial intent and recognizable voice.

The groups of composers and performers whose work I will refer to—the New York School of composers and representatives of the first wave of free jazz—were contemporaries of one another in New York City during the 1950s and sixties. The composers of the New York School to whose compositions my comments will be directed include Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and John Cage. Exemplars of the free jazz community whose works and contexts I will investigate include Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Eric Dolphy, and Albert Ayler in New York City. Before considering the output of these composers and musicians in light of the concept of canon, it is first necessary to define terms and address the nature and use of the concept of a musical canon itself.

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## The Role of Ontology in Musical Canon Formation

Any canon is a taxonomized collection of “things.” Yet, the question of whether musical works exist as material things available to taxonomization remains a point of debate in music scholarship and criticism. The ontological status of a works’ thingliness is problematic, as works can technically only exist as consistent “things” in their composed state as texts. Still, our experience of musical performances is a case in which the map is not the territory, as the text and the performance of a work are implicitly non-identical. The non-identity of a performance with its written text has generally been established by theorists, but anecdotally, scholars still often talk about musical works as things and are left with the sticky question of just what kinds of things musical works are.<sup>2</sup> If texts are non-identical with performances, can works as such be said to exist in a traditional adequational sense? Are performed works instantiations of Neoplatonic *a priori* forms? What about improvised works with no written texts, or heavily interpreted works? We can see that the notion of a musical canon considered this way is problematic as it must somehow freeze in-time (and concept) aesthetic experiences which are by nature temporally ephemeral, and always in radical processes of becoming and passing away.

I continue with a few characterizations of the roles of aesthetic canons in society. Asserting that musical canon formation has a socially concretizing effect, Anti-Ville Kärjä (2006, 4) quotes Philip V. Bohlman’s insight that “canons represent a way for members of a community to express their shared values.” Noting an isomorphism between canons and the publics that form and preserve them, John Guillory (1993, 23) offers that, “[c]anonical and noncanonical authors [and by extension, composers] are supposed to *stand* for particular social groups, dominant or subordinate.” In this sense, canons serve to perpetuate ideological values inscribed in the works they collect. To that end, Esteban Buch (2003), in his consideration of the canonicity of Beethoven’s works, suggests that the risk of forgetting said ideological values inscribed in evanescent, temporal musical works has been mediated—and the notion of the thingliness of musical works has been propped up—by the advent of recording technology. Such technology has been “seen as a way to reverse the tide of forgetfulness and create a musical monument oblivious to the passage of time” (181). This critically agreed upon monumental role of the canon, about which Joseph Kerman (1983, 112) echoes: “Repertoires are determined by performers, canons by critics,” seems to agree with the importance of critical agreement (by those who claim to be able to speak for a social group) regarding a work’s socially representative value. But in relation to Buch’s insight about the role of recording technology, Kerman notes that, “[t]he idea of a canonical work of music has to imply the idea of a canonical musical performance” (113). We can see, then, that recording practices have been instrumental in attempts to lift musical actions out of the slipping current of temporal “becoming” and place them soundly in the realm of “being,” where they can be “things” with a quality of temporal persistence, a character of *Werktreue* (the fidelity or authenticity of a work to authorial intent), and permanence. Hence, canonized musical works become things around whose qualities identity-bolstering traditions can be built. It seems evident, then, that for any canon of musical works to exist, there must be an understanding of musical works as non-changing, representative, and exemplary things.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See: Joseph Kerman “How We Got Into Analysis, and How to Get Out” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (1980): 311–31, for some of the first shots threatening the relevance of text-based analysis and work/text identity which later flowered in the New Musicology of the late twentieth century.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the history and problems of the notion of a musical work as an object, see: Lydia Goehr, 1992, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), and in Roman Ingarden, 1989, *The Ontology of the Work of Art: The Musical Work, The Picture, The Architectural Work, The Film*, Trans. by Raymond Meyer and John T. Goldthwait (Athens: Ohio University Press).

## Ontological Status of Works and the New York School

The term, “New York School”, applies not only to the composers already noted, but also to a group of painters alongside whom those composers socialized, theorized, and created. These experimental painters include Mark Rothko, Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg. The painters and composers met often in Manhattan as part of a club, “The Club,” which met intermittently from the late 1940s until 1962 in a location on Eighth Street in downtown Manhattan. There, both the painters and composers would socialize, lecture on experimentalism, offer criticism of the intellectual climate, share their works, etc. The influence of the painters of the period and their experimental attitude toward art objects and the nature of creation had a great effect on the composers and their understanding of the ontological status of musical works.

An example of this inspiration is found in Earle Brown’s statements regarding his aleatoric graphic-score work, *December 1952*. Brown was inspired by sculptor Alexander Calder’s mobile sculptures, and wrote of Calder’s idea “of making ‘two or more objects find actual relation in space.’ This was the first feature of his new approach: the organization of contrasting movements and changing relations of form in space. It seemed to me that it might be possible to bring about a similar ‘mobility’ of sound-objects in time” (Johnson 2002, 6). Brown is here clearly attempting to remove his notion of authorial voice regarding particular performances of his composition. But still, he is setting up the parameters for a composition as a concept-thing; a “time-object” in which to create the possibility for “objects” to find relation in space. In the experimental tradition, the valorization of indeterminacy and negation of the authority of the author is key. John Cage (1961, 69) wrote in his *History of Experimental Music in the United States*, that: “[M]ore essential than composing by means of chance operations, it seems to me now, is composing in such a way that what one does is indeterminate of its performance.” By way of this model, works still exist not as texts, but as authorially contrived concept-things (time-objects) prescribing action or non-action.

While the repeatability and exemplarity of performances of experimental works is impossible, thus denying the possibility of a recorded canonical musical performance as Kerman suggests is necessary for canon formation, still the authorial, conceptual prescription of action props up a kind of thingliness to the concept as a domain of possibility. I disagree here with Michael Nyman (1999, 4) who suggests that the New York School’s works replace the concept of the “time-object” with the anti-teleology of “process.” The goal, then, in this type of work is not the *thing* arrived at as a perceived synthetic whole, but rather the act and process of performing and undergoing sound itself. Supposedly this focus on process negates the thingliness of the composition. Still, while Cage’s statement above suggests an attempt to break with authorial will in the performance of a piece, the constraints and process of an experimental work still bears the stamp of the author and is therefore identifiable as the work of such and such a composer. Regardless of any attempt by the composer to hide from it, the authorial nature of the concepts of works places them in an imaginary museum of a composer’s musical concept-works. Perhaps a new question could be: Can a canon of musical concepts exist? I will explore this question further below.

## Ontological Status of Free Jazz Improvisations

Similar perplexities arise when interrogating the activities of the American free jazz musicians of the 1960s. For the free jazz artists, though, authorial intent is necessarily part of the identity of a work; not as a composer outlining actions for others to perform, but rather as musical acts composed and performed simultaneously in real time. In this musical practice, there is often minimal or no planning, no germ of melody, no organized “work,” only the intertextuality of the performer’s musical knowledge, social situatedness, instrumental competency, etc. The musical

practice of free jazz is necessarily, then, personal and authorial. By most accounts, jazz practices include elements of improvisation and interpretation and hence the concept of *Werktreue* in jazz simply cannot exist. Thus, perhaps the sphere of jazz is populated not by works, but by actions, or, “non-works” (Brown 2001, 430). Or perhaps by recognizable authorial voices related by family resemblance?

Considering the authorial role of the improviser and complexity of free jazz, David Borgo (2005) offers a useful allegory of free improvisation to nonlinear dynamical systems theory. Therein he likens the improviser—mind and body, moment and place, emotion and intellect, preparation, experience, and spontaneity—to an identifiable nonlinear dynamical system (2005). Each improviser (composer/performer) has an ever-changing (within boundaries) musical fingerprint replete with attractors (a musician’s musical proclivities), limit cycle attractors (common behaviors of systems in fixed or limited range), and strange attractors (chaotic/unpredictable musical behaviors) which occur in phase spaces (the temporal space of the improvisation) (2005). I suggest that the particular makeup of each improviser serves to stamp their improvisations with a recognizable family resemblance which effectively imbues them with an air of identity and authorship. Especially when these improvisations are recorded, catalogued, broadly disseminated, and listened to repeatedly, the improvisational language and logic of different improvisers becomes clear and distinguishable. For instance, a sophisticated listener would never confuse Ornette Coleman with Evan Parker any more than the colors blue and red. Any definition of free improvisations as works, then, seems to draw the thingliness of an improvisation from the authorial voice and recognizable improvisational proclivities of the improviser.

Thus, for any canon of free jazz to exist, it seems it can only be as a body of exemplar recordings (things) pregnant with the recognizable, authorial stylistic proclivities of particular improvisers which, in their recognizability, are imbued with an air of thingliness. So what, then, is the ontological status of improvisations? Can we say in any consistent way any more than for the experimental music of the New York School?

## The Imaginary Canon of Musical Concepts

Above I asked the question: Can a canon of musical concepts exist? This question is complex and could be addressed from the perspective of many disciplines and their ideas regarding the nature of reality and the role of music in said reality. But to briefly (and most directly) address this question, I will restrict my comments to a relatively recent cross-disciplinary and cross-epistemology movement and its import to the question at hand. One of the most potentially fruitful lines of research to the question of “What is a work of art?” or—more to the point of this paper—“What is music, and why is it meaningful?” is recent work in embodied cognition theory. Mark Johnson (2007, 238) asserts about music that it, “does not typically *re-present* anything...[its] function is, instead, *presentation* and *enactment* of felt experience.” In his landmark book relating embodied cognition theory to aesthetic inquiry, *The Meaning of the Body*, he draws on the work of many researchers regarding the relationship between abstract concepts and embodied meaning. Salient to the question about a canon of musical concepts, Johnson offers Daniel Stern’s work which defines what he calls vitality-affect contours. These are cross-domain mappings of “patterns of process and flow of our felt experience, such as the buildup of tension and its release, the sense of drifting, the energetic pursuit of a goal, the anxious anticipation of some coming event, and the starting and stopping of a process” (238). Understood this way, our experiences of music could be understood to leverage in our cognitive processes a complex relationship between our embodied knowledge about the world and our abstract concept of said knowledge. In light of this understanding of music, if there can be any “canon” of musical concepts, I suggest that at its base it would be nothing other than our very embodiment and the knowledge of the world we gain thereby. In this way, the conceptual canon

is perhaps not imaginary at all, but rather is the one we access each time we listen to, remember, or compose music. Theoretically speaking, the New York School was perhaps attempting to access the embodied index (canon) of vitality-affect contours in a curatorial sense (in domains of performative possibility). Still, where does this leave us on the question of the ontological status of experimental or improvised works?

## Recombinant Ontology of Musical Works

In her rigorous monograph on the ontological status of musical works, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, Lydia Goehr (1992, 243) explores the limits of explanation regarding the authentic being of works (*Werktreue*) and decides that, “speaking about music in terms of works is neither an obvious nor a necessary mode of speech, despite the lack of ability we seem to have to speak about music in any other way.” I will then take advantage of the vague ontological status of musical works to suggest an indeterminate ontology of works. Borrowing from Robert Fink’s (2005) notion of recombinant teleology—in which works, dependent upon their relationship to the teleological nature of traditional Western harmony, can be partially or inconsistently teleological—I will here present a notion of recombinant ontology.<sup>4</sup> This idea is based upon varying degrees of thingliness bestowed upon musical works either by appealing to the multiple criteria noted above as well as, for the two musical practices in question, the seemingly heavier and heavier weight of authorial intention. Thus, the concept of recombinant ontology regarding experimental, indeterminate, and improvised works shows that these works display varying degrees of ontological status whenever and however it is asserted or contextually useful. The criteria for this status seems to depend heavily upon, regarding composed works, recognizable degrees of authorial concepts and proscribed domains of possibility (what composer Michael Winter calls “concept to precept transparency,” or in the case of improvised works performed spontaneously by their composers, recognizable authorial voice).

The idea of recombinant ontology relies upon culturally concretized notions of the importance of authorship and its role in valorizing works to support their ceremonial presentation in the Western art tradition. Though they attempted to flee the notion of authorship, the fact that the New York School’s experimental works are associated with their composers’ identity, context, body of work, and relationship to institutionalized preservations and presentations of musical practices, an air of authorship—and hence thingliness—unavoidably creeps in. The musical output of free jazz musicians gains a similar mix of identifiable authorship, concept, and—when added to the monumentalizing function of recording technology—is thereby inscribed with a kind of practical thingliness.

## Exemplar Works, Recognizable Voices

Neither the New York School nor the practice of free jazz have gained a repertory or a performing canon, per se. In the case of the New York School, exemplar concepts and compositions do exist and, though definitive performances of said compositions and concepts ostensibly cannot exist, they continue to inspire composers and performers. Due to the power of authorial voice in recordings of free jazz, a recorded canon has indeed arisen if, for no other reason, as an exemplar of the practice and values concretized therein. In each tradition the ontological status of works is inconsistent and can be said to have a character of recombinant ontology; utilizing an inconsistent variety of conceptual thingliness if only when convenient due to the practical vagaries of how we talk about musical works.

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<sup>4</sup> Joanna Demers also addresses the tricky ontology of experimental works in “Materialism, Ontology, and Experimental Music Aesthetics” (2014). Her description of an “integrated ontology of art” (262), though, primarily addresses problems of content and materiality in experimental works, whereas I focus on intertextuality, authorial voice, and agency.

I have shown that even these purposefully ephemeral musical works—though intentionally obfuscating ideas of authorial voice, agency, form, score, and repeatability—are perhaps taxonomizable by the conceptual outline wrought by their composer, and/or the idiosyncratic collection of attractors in their author’s nonlinear dynamical system. The idea of identifying musical works for the purpose of canon formation regarding the above-considered musical practices will remain problematic as long as we insist on treating musical works as “things.” Still, the conceptualization of musical works as material, catalogue-able, and exemplar “things” will remain attractive and useful. In spite of the non-identity of musical works with their scores (or lack thereof), perhaps we need in our often materialist, neoliberalist, free market world, to consider musical works as graspable, consumable commodities. While experimental musical practices clearly do not produce “things” in the traditional sense, it is likely we will continue to speak of them as if they are. To that end, this recombinant ontological approach recognizes the complexity of the task and begins to offer conceptual handholds for how we might talk about these otherwise slippery pseudo-objects.

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