Improvisation: Critical Studies

Course Description

“Improvisation”: when we hear this term, we think of real-time performance. We think of skill, inspiration, passion. With a little more reflection, we think of the hours of preparation that lie behind every action of the improviser. We think of licks, tropes, patterns. But if musical improvisation is determined by a larger aesthetic system, how is it any different from other species of performative action? Is improvisation only improvisation by virtue of not (yet) being on paper? The term can be so broad that it becomes unwieldy; it expands until it no longer fits in our hands. We can name very few intrinsic characteristics of improvisation, but we know it when we see it—in other words, it is controlled by the vast network of social and cultural signs that underlie its performance context.

“Improvisation,” in music, is a Western term that has been associated in the 20th century with Black musical forms. Because of this, the term “improvisation” undergoes a process of racialization—representing the body as opposed to the mind, the irrational as opposed to the supposed rationality of composition. But at the same time, we can see the presence of improvisation in other performance cultures, including European art-music up to the nineteenth century. Improvisation, even though it is theoretically unwieldy, is an electrifying experience in practice. But we can’t let this electricity distract us. Scholars of improvisation must be mindful of the imbricated binary structures—free and unfree, written and unwritten—that are part of a racialized legacy.

Can musical improvisation give us a model for newer, more egalitarian social structures? Or does the very word “improvisation” represent a modernist myopia, a failure to see some human substance that undergirds all musical activity (spontaneous or not)? These questions are the domain of critical improvisation studies.

Course Objectives

At the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Appraise and question presuppositions about improvisation that exist in journalistic or literary writing.
- Describe and discuss specific improvisatory traditions and techniques in a scholarly register. These will include 19th-century European traditions, 20th- to 21st-century jazz traditions, and 20th- to 21st-century experimental traditions.
- Compare and evaluate descriptive and prescriptive definitions of what improvisation is and can be.
Overview of Course Structure

**PART 1: PEOPLE**

**WEEK 1**  An introduction
**WEEK 2**  Methodology and the other
**WEEK 3**  Gendered improvisation
**WEEK 4**  Queer sexualities and improvisatory praxis
            Class Performance: Oliveros, “Extreme Slow Song”
**WEEK 5**  What is a Black aesthetic?

**PART 2: SYSTEMS**

**WEEK 6**  Free jazz getting political
            Presentations: final project
**WEEK 7**  Black improvisation under erasure
**WEEK 8**  Creativity or exploitation? Monetizing improvisation
            Class Performance: Terry Riley, “In C”
**WEEK 9**  Games and rules: the ludic impulse
**WEEK 10** The rise of the European “improvisation imaginary”
**WEEK 11** Final paper due in week 11
            Final reflection essay due in week 11

**SUPPLEMENTARY TOPICS**

A  Monetizing improvisation, continued: commercialization and canonicity
B  18th- and 19th-century European practices

**Monday (before class)**
Discussion leaders submit prompts; others write and turn in short responses to prompts
Respondents comment on this week’s blog

**Wednesday (before class)**
Non-respondents now comment on this week’s blog

**Friday (by 8pm)**
Discussion leaders create blog post for next week
Discussion Leading

Each week, a group of three students will be discussion leaders. This group of discussion leaders will read the readings in advance. Discussion leaders have two main tasks: first, to write four prompts for their colleagues to answer before the readings are discussed, second, to write a blog post related to the topic of the week.

Prompts

Your four prompts should deal directly with the arguments presented in the readings. Include two types of questions: those that ask your colleagues to respond directly to the claims of the readings, and those that probe larger theoretical or cultural assumptions. Your colleagues will answer your prompts before Monday’s class.

Blog post

The blog post, on the other hand, gives you latitude to introduce the class to material you’ve found elsewhere (music, art, pieces of writing, etc.) and relate that material to the topic of the week. Think of it as a standalone piece of writing that deals with the same concepts found in the readings. It will be around 500 words long. Your colleagues will leave comments on your blog before Wednesday’s class.

Reflections

Twice this term, we will perform collaborative improvisatory pieces as a class. We will reflect on these performances in class through short writing exercises, and then we will share our thoughts. These writing exercises will describe your experiences of these performances and evaluate the pieces we performed. Use your critical voice and engage at least one assigned reading of your choice. Your essays might cover the following topics:

- What was your experience (bodily, emotional) of performing this piece?
- How did you interact with the other participants while performing?
- What ideas from our assigned readings did the piece (and your experience of it) support?
- What arguments from our assigned readings did the piece (and your experience of it) challenge or weaken?

Final Reflection Essay: Review of a Performance

Your final reflection essay (also 500 words) will review a performance of your choice. This may be an on-campus performance or a performance elsewhere in the city. In this essay, you will reflect on how this outside performance supported or challenged arguments presented in our assigned readings.

Final Project

Your final project may be either a creative project or a research paper. In either case, you will give a short presentation to the class on your final project topic in Week 5 (less than 5 minutes), and you’ll write a 250-word proposal and submit it to me for more detailed feedback in week 6.
• **Creative project.** Your creative project must be accompanied by a critical write-up of at least 1250 words, citing at least 3 of our course readings. This option is open-ended in format. Some possibilities include: composing a musical piece with robust instructions for improvisation, or giving an original musical performance (on video, or live) that engages with the critical ideas we discuss.

• **Research paper.** Write a final research paper on an improvisation-related topic for which some secondary literature exists. Your paper will be 10–12 pages in length (2500–3000 words) and will cite at least 3 of our course readings.

**Inclusion Statement**

I want all students to get the most that they can out of our time together in class. We (you and I) might benefit from having a one-on-one conversation about potential accommodations. There are some changes I can make immediately if requested: for example, finding alternatives to cold-calling, screen-sharing as an alternative to viewing a projector, or receiving large-format printouts. You might get more out of arrangements beyond the ones I’ve just mentioned. As a first step, let’s talk, and then you can consult with the Office of Student Disability Services ([http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/](http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/)) so that we can develop a plan (via an Accommodation Determination Letter) together. Student Disability Services is located at 5501 S. Ellis Ave.

We all have a right to a safe learning environment. My goal is to go a step further and collaboratively create an environment where everyone in the room feels courageous enough to speak their thoughts. Please join me in fostering a respectful, compassionate classroom environment that can support both critical discussion and intellectual growth. If you have a concern about our classroom climate, I want to hear it so I can take steps to fix it.

Harassment and any form of micro-aggression can harm the well-being of anyone at the university. The University’s policy on discrimination, harassment, and sexual misconduct is here: [https://csl.uchicago.edu/get-help/discrimination-harassment-sexual-misconduct](https://csl.uchicago.edu/get-help/discrimination-harassment-sexual-misconduct).

**Classroom Policies**

**Attendance**

If you know you will be absent due to illness, professional travel, or religious holidays, please communicate with me. Unexcused absences or a pattern of lateness to class will lower your grade.

**Technology**

You will not need to connect to the internet during this class, with the exception of in-class presentations. Please set your phone to silent mode and keep it in your bag during class. You can view class readings on your laptop or on a tablet with the internet connection turned off.
Weekly Schedule

1. An introduction
   No assigned readings on the first day of class. For the second day, please read:

   Alternative: video interview with Lewis hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000540985.html

2. Methodology and the other
   How can modes of musical description equitably address the differences between people?


   Supplementary:


3. Gendered improvisation
   If “improvisation” is racialized, can it also be gendered? Do we hear women’s improvisation differently?


   Supplementary:


4. Queer sexualities and improvisatory praxis

**Can we view sexuality as a system of performances rather than as an identity? If sexuality is a performance, can it be improvised?**

Class Performance: Oliveros, “Extreme Slow Song”


**Supplementary:**


5. What is a Black aesthetic?

**What aspects can tie the concept of a Black aesthetic together, and what purpose can such a concept serve? Who is represented in this conceptualization, and who is ignored?**


**Supplementary:**

6. Free jazz getting political

Can jazz be political in the absence of words or even formal conventions? Is it possible to draw causal connections between social movements and musical practices (or vice versa)?


Supplementary:


7. Black improvisation under erasure

Why does the historical label “avant-garde” seem so white?


Supplementary:


8. Creativity or exploitation? Monetizing improvisation

How can “improvisation” be co-opted into the service of capital?


Supplementary:


9. Games and rules: the ludic impulse
Is game-playing “improvisatory”? Is music-making a form of game-playing?

Class Performance: Terry Riley, “In C”


Supplementary:


10. The fall of improvisation and the rise of the “improvisation imaginary”
How did the practice of improvisation decline in the 19th century? If 19th-century authors praised it so much, why did it fade in practice?


Supplementary:


Supplementary Topics

11. Monetizing improvisation, continued: commercialization and canonicity

12. 18th- and 19th-century European improvisation
Supplementary:

All Supplemental Reading


