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Time, Risk and Control in Musical Performance Practices

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Abstract: Time, control and risk are interrelated concepts that provide a valuable framework for exploring the connections among various performative practices and their cultural functions. By referencing sports, circus arts, and musical performance, this article examines the similarities and differences between musical reproductive performance and improvisation. It focuses on the concept of transformational processes through analogies.

Keywords: performing arts; time; risk; control; reproductive interpretation; musical improvisation

1. Introduction

One of the challenging issues in defining practices such as sports, circus arts, and performing arts—including music, dance, poetry, and theatre—is to pinpoint the specificity that defines the single practice because they are deeply intertwined with two fundamental human capabilities: planning and improvising (Preston 2021 [1]. I sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful observations and suggestions, which significantly helped me improve this text.). Narrowing the scope to music, attempts by musicologists to establish a clear boundary between improvisation and composition have not yet produced a definitive agreement. Instead, they have led to an ongoing stream of contributions and debates, often based implicitly or explicitly on a bipolar model. This model presents improvisation and composition as opposing forces or as a continuum with two extremes: radical improvisation and absolute composition (Dalhaus 1979 [2]; Nettl 1974 [3]; Treitler 2016 [4].). More recently, musicological research has investigated the longstanding entanglement of both practices over the history of Western art music (Guido 2017 [5]; Sanguinetti 2012 [6]; Borio, Carone 2019 [7] Gooley 2018 [8].). To exemplify this point, it is worth mentioning that notable improvisers such as Franz Liszt and Chopin in the 19th century, along with distinguished jazz performers like Dave Brubeck, Giorgio Gaslini, and George E. Lewis, have also engaged in composition. This overlap indicates that these two practices are not as distinct and separate as they may seem.

On the side of music philosophy, Philip Alperson has recently questioned whether music improvisation can be adequately understood through an aesthetic theory centered on the paradigm of European classical music (Alperson 2016 [9].). In turn, in his comparison of jazz standards and musical works of art, Daniel Martin Feige has suggested reversing the perspective, rethinking the concept of a musical work in the light of jazz standards (Feige 2023 [10]).

This article explores the connections between music and other performance forms, such as sports and circus arts, to highlight both their similarities and differences. The goal is to redefine the role of music within the broader spectrum of human activities. This approach encourages us to look beyond the traditional boundaries of 'fine arts', although it does not aim for a systematic or exhaustive comparison, which would extend beyond

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the scope of this article. I argue that mapping the relationships among different practices through a network of interrelated concepts—such as time, control, and risk—offers a valuable framework for examining the interconnections of various performative practices and their cultural significance.

2. Playing with Time

Musicologists and ethnomusicologists are often careful when defining and distinguishing improvisation from composition across different musical and historical cultures. The New Grove Dictionary of Music provides a general definition of improvisation as "the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed" (Art. Improvisation, in Grove Music Online [11]). This definition has become conventional wisdom, but it is nuanced by the addition that it "may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, the elaboration of an existing framework, or anything in between".

Composition can incorporate improvisation during the pre-composition phase, while improvisation may follow some form of compositional plan, usually referred to as pre-improvisation. Furthermore, this definition carries cultural significance. When Arnold Schönberg characterized composition as a "slowed down improvisation", he defended the craftsmanship involved in composing (Schönberg 1950 [12], p. 98.). Conversely, Wayne Shorter's statement that "improvisation is just composition sped up, and composition is just improvisation slowed down" sought to diminish the cultural and racial hierarchy between the two practices while highlighting their connections (Mercer 2004 [13], p. 140.).

This topos is altogether widespread in the philosophical literature about improvisation. Ontologists like Clément Canonne re-interpret it using the distinction Type-token: Composition would be the invention of a type by means of its first instantiation (Canonne 2014 [14].). Alessandro Bertinetto has provided a skillful formulation of improvisation, which tacitly refers also to composition: "Improvisation in the arts are processes in which creation and performance coincide. They are a special kind of processes in which the creative (inventive, ideational) activity and the performance activity occur at the same time and are the one and the same, generative occurrence" (Bertinetto 2012 [15], p. 14). In all of these formulations, the coincidence of creation and performance catches the difference with composition. Time emerges as the crucial factor in distinguishing the practices. Both composition and improvisation, however, have other important relations to time. A composer takes her time, investing it in a durable work, through planning and control of every detail. This investment is also related to the fact that scores are durable objects and musical works of art are supposed to last in time. Both from an economic as well as aesthetic point of view, time is an investment for the future. Recorded improvisations fall back into the same temporal dynamic and tend to gain the status of musical works of art, but even if they are frozen up, the improvisational life of those materials and ideas can serve as the basis of new improvisional elaborations (Caporaletti 2024 [16], pp. 48–50 has investigated the transformation of an improvisation's ontological status in recordings in his theory of neoauratic encoding).

In improvisational practices, the relation to time is not related to the parameter of duration. Although improvisations are processes that unfold over time, as noted by Levinson, Bertinetto, and Canonne among others, they have a "performative" relationship with time. This means they capture the moment and seize opportunities while also shaping expectations, often introducing an element of surprise with a swift action. In fact, improvisation, as an artistic practice, requires the capability to select and activate knowledge for an action that is due in the right moment. In this sense improvisations relate to kairos as appropriate time.

There is a third aspect to highlight in exploring the relationship between improvisation and time, regarding the prerequisites of improvisation. While composition requires time, improvisational creativity coalesces in the process of performing, but it draws on expertise, exercise and experience, which can be described as a protracted process of investigating different possibilities and solutions. The capability to improvise, and more importantly, to perform significant and original improvisations is therefore rooted in a lifelong process. Without indulging in the Heideggerian perspectives on which Gay Peters draws, the following quotation shows a deeper sense of what precedes improvisation: "the performative moment of improvisation is not its actual beginning, and while it might be true to say, with Niklas Luhmann, that art (and particularly improvised art as the dramatization of this) is the 'making of an unmarked space', the moment of this making is not the start of the improvised performance or action but the beginning marked by the prior initiation of a process of trial and error, erring and pre-cision" (Peters 2017 [17], Kindle Edition, chapter 5).

3. The Composer Control

Expertise, exercise, and experience represent capital that has been accumulated in the past and can be invested in the present. In contrast, control is intended to mitigate risks that may arise in the future. This establishes a relationship between the concepts of time, control, and risk. Furthermore, control is intrinsically linked to its opposite—non-control. It is widely accepted that excessive control can stifle creativity, while its complete absence can lead to chaos. Stefano Velotti (Velotti 2024 [18]) has recently explored the complex relationship between control and non-control, which is essential in both individual and social contexts. He argues that artistic practices serve as unique arenas that highlight the contradictions inherent in the interaction between control and non-control. In the context of Western art music, the dynamics of control and non-control play a fundamental role in shaping the power relationship between composers and performers.

Being in control as a composer implies using all the possibilities of the musical notational system for prescribing to the performer all the details of the compositions in the clearest way possible. The relationship between composer and performer is therefore hierarchical. In the history of Western music, the contribution of the performers in extemporizing parts of the composition varied according to period, place and genre, but from the Nineteenth century onwards composers tended to fixate exactly every possible detail according to the notational system in use. In the 20th century, composers like Varèse and Křenek fantasized about the possibility of avoiding the mediation of a performer for exerting total control of their work. Avantgarde composers in the Sixties, like Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Sylvano Bussotti, Mauricio Kagel to name only a few, explored the possibility of negotiating spaces in which the performer could contribute to the form of a composition giving the freedom to choose between different solutions and the order of fragments in a composition. Domenico Guaccero in the *Variazioni* n. 3 (1968) expanded the issue of negotiating the control on the score, individuating sections, where the musicians are supposed to order the musical material according to their own choice, and zones of improvisatory interventions.

From a manuscript draft for the performance of 1969, the composer entrusted musicians trained in the radical improvisatory practice of GINC (Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza) like Walter Branchi, Michiko Hirayama, and Egisto Macchi, to shape the material according to their improvisatory practice (The score is manuscript and a description is available here under the: http://www.guaccero.lim.di.unimi.it/scheda_opere.php?a_id=113 (accessed on 2 December 2024)). This distinction marks the difference between a generic freedom accorded to musicians in shaping details of the composition, and the request of a particular expertise, habitus and experience developed by musicians

who share a common practice. More recently, Clara Iannotta in *When the Dark Earth Bends* by (2022–2023), prescribes zones of improvisation in the productions of special sonority, particularly to the two trombone soloists, which are indicated in the score with the names of the virtuoso trombone improvisers: the duo "The Rage. Thormbones", featuring Weston Olencki and Mattie Barbie (Iannotta 2022–2023 [19].). The composer has defined the typology of sound required in the score, but relies on the improvisatory experience of the two musicians for shaping their interventions, which are rooted in a specific sound research aimed "to shift the role of brass instruments away from vocal virtuosity and more toward their true selves as improvising organic air compressors—physically modeled synthesis transcribed back into the acoustic domain" (See (https://ragethormbones.com/ABOUT.php (accessed on 2 December 2024)).

Although the above-mentioned examples are symptoms of a crisis in the hierarchical labor division between composer and performer, a crisis manifested by the grounding of GINC itself, the hierarchy survived even in these examples in which, the improvisatory interventions notwithstanding, the full control of the piece structure and articulation remains in the hand of the composer, according to the "game's rule" of the genre.

Control over the music production in a way that the composer maintains full control over the project is only part of the issue. In everyday life, as well as in music, control is a strategy to avoid risks. In Western art music culture, the development of musical notation enabled a process that involves careful planning, selecting from various options, and meticulously checking every detail. Is this emphasis on accuracy a strategy to avoid risks? If so, what kind of risks are we talking about? The most straightforward answer is that the writing process helps prevent the risk of making hasty decisions without enough time for reflection, which could lead to overlooking the inner logic of the piece, as I mentioned earlier. However, there is more at stake than accuracy in a work of art. The whole music aesthetic tradition has been in charge of defining this point, and I draw upon a late definition by Adorno, which dramatizes the symbolic risk at stake in producing a work of art: "The concept of an artwork implies that of its success. Failed artworks are not art: Relative success is alien to art; the average is already the bad. The average is incompatible with the medium of particularization. Middling artworks, the healthy soil of minor masters so appreciated by the historians of a similar stamp, presuppose an ideal similar to what Lukács had the audacity to defend as a 'normal artwork'" (Adorno 2013 [20], p. 257.). If accuracy relies on time, expertise, attention, and thought, then aesthetic success defines how an art product performs within a symbolic economy. The success of a work of art, however, depends not only on its inherent qualities but also on how it relates to the history of its genre and the broader historical context. Therefore, works of art possess their own "kairos", which is essential for their success or their failure.

4. Risk and Control in the Performative Practices

Performance is the result of body-mind coordination and therefore is exposed to the physical and psychical momentary shortcomings, failures and unexpected obstacles in the outer world. To act means to be exposed to the uncertainties of life, due to the unpredictability of the future, like every action in everyday life: something can go wrong, and the possible causes of errors, failure and disasters are always lurking behind our actions. In the modern world, the slippery science of risk management has become the loyal partner of entrepreneurship, to minimize risk and maximize gain (For a synthetic introduction to the question of risk in the modern world see Bertinetto, Monginot, [21]; see also Monginot, Oliva, Wit, 2021 [22]; Bertinetto, Andrzejewski 2021 [23].). Practices like sports, circus art and performative arts like music, theatre, dance, body and vocal performance arts, and spoken word poetry, in turn, display the risk of failure as a crucial

aspect of every performance. The rational management of risk is reduced to avoid physical injuries. Paradoxical enough, however, the performative practices which, according to the paradigm of the economic world, "work for nothing" in the sense that they are do not produce goods or services, are nevertheless inserted in the burgeoning economy of the world of sports and entertainment, or the humbler economies of smaller worlds of art.

At a basic level, all of these practices are cultivated through exercise, which has the shape of continuous repetitions to master difficulties and fully embody the routine. Training and drill are common in all of these practices, but some sports have developed in the Nineteenth century a contiguity to the world of art, like artistic gymnastics, and circus arts like trapeze and different forms of acrobatics (Although a systematic comparison among very different performance practice has not been undertaken, there is a rising interest in the aesthetic and cultural value of sports and circus arts and particularly to the issue of risk. See Steinworth 2009 [24]; Guttmann 2014 [25]; Fuchs, Jürgens, Schuster, 2020 [26]; Tait, Lavers, 2020 [27]; Holmes, 2021 [28]; Trapp 2022 [29]; Trapp 2023 [30].). These specialties developed free-flowing styles articulated in less structured forms and schemes from techniques used in military training. Compared to other sports this kind of discipline aims to disguise the labor, the struggle, and the difficulties of the performance in an effortless flow of movements, from this point of view very similar to the dance (About the differences and similarities between sport und dance see the sociological inquiries by Ingram 1978 [31] and Markula 2017 [32].). Athletes and circus artists at a professional level, while perfectly trained, are nevertheless exposed to contingencies (due to inadequate control in performing a detail or to a physical failure). Contingencies can affect an athlete's career and even put it to an end. However, the challenge they face is not only to perform faultlessly and effortlessly and therefore "beautifully" the exercise or "number", but to perform an exercise that is on the verge of impossibility. This is the risk they face. The dullness of repetitions, the aimless effort to perform a scheme, and the vanity of entertaining an audience are neutralized by the challenge to overcome personal and collective psychophysical limits.

While sports like climbing, sailing, and solo swimming at the highest level, can literally put one's life at risk in the struggle with active and passive natural forces, circus artists have mitigated the risks associated with their performances by using specialized techniques and implementing safety measures. Nevertheless, the most spectacular circus numbers imply death-defying acts. Athletes struggle, as well, for complete control over their bodies, counteracting, as circus artists the force of gravity. In short, all of the practices I have referred to involve the dominance of the performer over the inner and external nature; in other words, the body, mindset, emotions, and the physical forces of the external world. This struggle is dramatized in that nothing useful is achieved unless we acknowledge that certain limits have been pushed further, thereby achieving a broader realm for humanity. As the unchartered earth shrinks, the challenge to overcome new limits becomes harder. The solo swimmer Diana Nyad, after her third failed attempt to swim from Cuba to Florida in 2012 captured the drive to push the limits in a very impressive way during a TV interview: "All the mountains have been climbed, all the deserts have been crossed, but this piece of ocean has never been done—without a cage" to protect her from sharks and jellyfishes (Quoted by Leanne Shapton in her review of Diana Nyad's memoir [33], p. 6.). Recently, the proclivity to death-defying undertakings has been percolated in the body performance art, as many performances by Marina Abramović show (The topic has been explored by Emanuele Arielli [34].).

Beyond the seduction of the perils, the pride of bravery, the self-affirmation of the individual through the absolute control of inner and outer nature, all traits that characterize modernity, an alarming core rests in all of these practices: the obsessive repetition of a death-defying act. Every challenge and risk we face confronts our human shortcomings

and limitations, reminding us of the inevitability of death. However, the repeated nature of these acts in our current culture ironically highlights a ritual denial of our vulnerability and mortality. Successful extreme performances in sports symbolize a triumph over death, as if we could ultimately conquer it.

Extreme sports and challenges involve real risks, while performative art practices involve symbolic risks. However, as I stated earlier, sports also convey symbolic meanings. In a brief remark, Adorno drew a compelling analogy between circus and performative arts. He pointed out the paradox of repeatedly showcasing a risk that is "mortal" for art, meaning that with each performance, the very existence of the work of art is at stake: "at the highest level of form the detested circus act is reenacted; the defeat of gravity, the manifest absurdity of the circus–why all the effort—is in nuce the aesthetic enigma. This comes to bear on questions of artistic performance. To perform or play a composition correctly means to formulate it correctly as a problem in such a fashion that the incompatible demands it makes on the performer are recognized. The task of a rendering that will do justice to a work is in principle infinite" (Adorno 2013, [20] p. 253.). This passage presents an extreme philosophical view of the symbolic risk in performative art practice. However, it emphasizes the paradoxical dialectics that underlie different performative practices.

In summary, the comparison of various performing practices reveals both differences and similarities among them. Artistic sports, circus arts, and performing arts, such as music, show distinct characteristics, yet they share common elements. These forms of performance typically involve repetitive training and the flawless execution of routines or scores. A key difference is that performing Western art music, portraying a character in theatre, or executing a choreography in classical or contemporary dance involves a process of interpretation that goes far beyond the artistic elements found in performing a sport or in a circus exhibition. However, the contemporary circus aspires to be recognized as an autonomous high art form (Dumont 2021, [35]).

Competitions and championships establish rankings for the performers. The relationships involved in these practices often reflect a hierarchical structure, where the roles of coach, master, and composer, are clearly defined. Despite this hierarchy, it is ultimately the performer who receives the applause and recognition following a performance. Additionally, while the risk exposure associated with performance has recently been viewed as symbolic in artistic sports and circus arts, it represents an inherent symbolic aspect of the performing arts, particularly music, of the Western high art tradition.

5. Risk and Control in Musical Reproduction

Contingencies are the bugbear of performers. Glenn Gould is an extreme example of this: he retired from live performance just because he was terrified by the unpredictability of the concert situation (distractions, variable physical conditions, a disturbing audience etc.) preferring the controlled space and the technological possibility of the recording studio. Solo performers are nevertheless trained to manage the uncertainties of the performance (not without stress), and the concert space and conventions are designed to grant the maximum concentration to the player. In the art music tradition, the most important challenge is the tension between the faultless repetition of a well-known repertoire and the demand for originality. As Adorno stated, merging hermeneutics and critical theory, the task of interpreting a work is in principle infinite, which means that every interpretation is marked by an impossibility to achieving once and for all its goal. The space of creativity is therefore as tiny, as it is risky. It is encompassed by what Roman Ingarden called "places of indeterminacy" and from another perspective, and in a more precise formulation, by what falls out of the notational prescription of a score (Ingarden 1989 [36]). The dynamic between creativity and control pushes in the direction of the control, a control enabled by countless

repetitions of the same piece during the training period as well as in the performer's career. It is worth noting that the convention for concert soloists to play by heart, inaugurated probably by Clara Schumann, and Franz Liszt in the Nineteenth century and consolidated by the pianist Hans von Bülow, highlights the claim of unbound creativity even in pieces that do not imply actual improvisation (Gooley 2018 [15] pp. 268–71). Interestingly enough this convention began in a period in which concert improvisatory practices (still embraced by Clara Schumann and championed by Franz Liszt) were declining in favor of flawless executions of full written scores (Bitzan 2015 [37], p. 621.). Many conversations with performers, however, have confirmed to me that playing by heart grants more freedom than reading a score while performing which can remind of a plan established in advance. Because memory is subject to slight transformations due to perceptions and emotions of the moment, by heart performances show a contiguity to improvisational practices, without denying the fact that the reproductive task is dominating. Another contiguity with improvisational practices rests on the fact that performing a score requires a process of internalization and embodiment of gestures, the activation of procedural and implicit memory which enable the performer to acquire the condition of flow, without relinquishing the full control of the process (The seminal work of Varela et al. 1992 [38] and Csíkszentmihályi 1996 [39] have deeply impacted the research about musical improvisation. See Iver 2004 [40]; Mazzola, Cherlin 2009 [41]; Van Der Schyff et Al. 2018 [42]; Høffding, Snekkestad 2021 [43]. About memory processes see Berkowitz 2010 [44].). The convention of playing by heart dramatizes therefore the acrobatic task of achieving change through repetitions.

6. Risk and Control in Musical Improvisational Practices

Risk is often considered a characteristic of improvisational practice, because of the alleged lack of a plan of the performance. This belief is mostly grounded in a misunderstanding: pure improvisation is ineffective, as implied in the pejorative sense of the term, acting without experience and a goal; it would be an antieconomic practice, which has to start every time from scratch its relation to the world of sounds. On the contrary, the term musical improvisation refers to different historical practices which rely on expertise, exercise and experience. Like classical music performers, skilled improvisers should not fail in the sense of committing banal errors according to their performative style. If this happens, improvisers can even turn mistakes to good use by exploring new opportunities. Gary Peters puts this in a very convincing way: "Improvisers routinely reference and, perhaps, exaggerate the risks in improvising. In truth the 'failure' rate is very low, and anyway, not to play one's best is not to 'fail'; it is to underachieve, and a lot of improvisers manage that, just like everybody else (especially those on the checkouts at my local supermarket)" (Peters 2017 [17], Kindle edition, chapter 22.). Effectively dealing with a brief failure in performing or improvising music relies on the general human ability to improvise, drawing on the specific expertise of improvisators and performers. Moreover, a minor lapse of memory, a banal response, or a single moment of underachievement do not affect the whole performance. But a more radical risk lies at the core of a practice that is more similar to sport games than artistic sports. Training, strategies, and repetitions are preparations for playing with a complex net of retention/protensions, and affordances of past and present sounds, moods and space resonances. Drill in game sports is based on learning by repetitions, techniques, and schemes, but also on training devoted to improving the promptness and quickness in responding to the affordances of the game and—as I suggested before—to catch the right time, the kairos, of an action, in other words to face the risk of the game. Therefore, failure and success are measured by the extent to which improvisers take advantage of a complex net of opportunities.

Regarding success and failure, there is a further crucial aspect to tackle, which is specific to musical improvisation. According to neurologist Aaron Berkowitz, "Improvisational rehearsals teach the musician how to forge, recall to mind and combine musical ideas on the imprint, in the moment, both by creating new connections between elements in the network of knowledge as well as new aural and motor pathways in brain networks" (Berkowitz 2010 [44], p. 89.). These connections, however, are not built according to the principle of identity, but on that of similarity. Improvisations exhibit a musical kind of lateral thinking, which implies the unexpected discovery of similarities and differences, and the favor of kairos. In this sense, improvisation requires letting go of the intellectual control of actions, which functions on the principle of identity, without discharging attention and concentration to the ongoing process of improvisation. Improvisational practices therefore engender transformative instead of reproductive processes.

To an extent, both reproductive performances of a score and musical improvisations share processes of transformation, as anthropologist Francesco Remotti maintains in an insightful passage: "The inseparable mixture of similarities and differences (. . .) is exactly the 'aura' Benjamin spoke of, that is, the 'singularity' of the artistic event, its inherent temporal unrepeatability. Even when music has relied on writing, on signs written on the staff (or other devices) to guide a performer's reproduction of a piece of music, what has dominated is the principle of similarity, not identity" (Remotti 2022 [45], pp. 11–12.). Yet, in the dynamic between repetition and innovation, reproductive practices point towards identities more than similarities, and improvisational practices, vice versa, point in the opposite direction. The transformation of material in improvisational practices, implies a transformation of the self in the ongoing process of coping with the loss of cheered practices and sound configurations, the loss of singularities, and an open attention to the emergence of new configurations. In this kind of process musicians are exposed alone, even if they play in a group, to the risk of succumbing to repetitions, to fail the challenge of renovation and improvement which time offers simultaneously with its annihilative force of singularities. Michal Gallope, captured this fundamental risk in improvising music in utterly dramatic terms:

"A theory of complex temporality (. . .) can offer us a conceptual basis for understanding improvisation as a furiously active locus of complex mediations. In replacing the interpreted reproduction of a notated work with the injunction of consequential real-time decisions, improvisers, according to this logic, can be understood to affirm a constitutive absence at the heart of musical practice itself. According to this view, one improvises onward without a commonly agreed upon medium like notation or without the regulatory grid of a single musical idiom; and that would be the point of improvisation—to expose the ground of music to our survival instincts, to our idiomatic proclivities, to our historicities, to our notably faulty efforts and to our embarrassing mistakes, and, in some cases, to our utterly transformative experiences" (Gallope 2013 [46], p. 317–318. In this context it is worth noting the brilliant investigation of improvisation as "adventure by Alessandro Bertinetto [47].).

7. Conclusions

Reproductive performances and improvisations are different and complementary practices grounded in basic human capabilities, that have been differentiated in historical practices which require highly specialized skills acquired through exercise and study and are defined historically and geographically according to specific game rules, explicitly or implicitly shared (Caporaletti 2024 [16] has investigated musical improvisation from the perspectives of the body-mind relationships in the Western tradition, which offers a dualistic insight into the different cultural paths which marked the development of im-

provisation and reproductive performances.). As I have attempted to demonstrate, they reveal similarities and differences which manifest themselves in specific points of proximity. However, they serve different cultural purposes. The primary aim of reproductive practices is to save cultural singularities, whether they are musical works of art or bodily configurations (in dance, artistic sports, and circus arts) from fading into obscurity. However, reproductions are subject to slight transformations that allow them to interpret the original work of art in relation to different time horizons, as explored by the hermeneutical tradition. Reproduction embodies the struggle against the negative force of time, working to maintain and transmit the unity of a culture.

On the other hand, improvisational practices in the arts, particularly in music, highlight the uncertainties that human actions encounter and the ambivalent impact of time, both as loss and as an opportunity for transformation. Therefore, music improvisation celebrates the transformative power of time in personal growth and in cultural transmission. Improvisation requires both the transformation of the musical material and the musician herself. No musical re-configuration would be possible without personal, long-life cultivation involving an increasing disposition to let go, an openness to the future, and a readiness to experiment with innovative musical solutions. In this sense, improvisation practices are akin to the technologies of the self like meditations and spiritual exercise—as Arnold I. Davidson has brilliantly illustrated (Davidson 2016 [48].)—even if they are not practiced with the specific aim of self-improvement. Nevertheless, playing as a meditative or spiritual practice are attitudes also shared by many music performers, including renowned interpreters of classical music, like Sergiu Celibidache and Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli. However, they represent exceptional instances of the connection between the two types of practices.

In conclusion, while sports champions, circus artists and virtuoso musicians often portray an image of human omnipotence in surpassing inner and outer limits, musical improvisation—engaging with time—reminds the audience of the intertwined nature of strength and vulnerability that defines the human experience.

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