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# Free musical improvisation as an alternative model for organization.

Stéphane Robin<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *We explore the potential of free musical improvisation as an organizational model. We identify four constituent parts to this model: (i) it involves improvisation at its highest degree, (ii) it allows for the emergence of ex post structures and organizational forms, (iii) it proposes to engage with others through self-discovery and (iv) it relies intensively on bricolage. It is also inherently protean, which makes it fit various types of organizational improvisation. It can thus be episodic, subversive, resistive and it may even appear in a semi-structured context. Empirically, its locus lies in organizations where creativity is the prime directive. We highlight two limits of the model: First, it cannot apply to organizations where safety is a major concern. Second, it may come at the cost of increased job insecurity, which restricts its acceptability to specific segments of a society.*

**Keywords:** organizational improvisation, musical improvisation, non idiomatic free improvisation.

## 1. Introduction

Although early traces can be found in Cyert and March (1963)'s garbage can model for organized anarchies, using the notion of improvisation to analyze organized action in fast-changing contexts (e.g., crisis, innovation, creative industry) really gained popularity in organization theory in the 1990's. Improvisation thus appears, together with tinkering, as a factor of resilience in Weick (1993)'s seminal article. For Ciborra (1991, 1996), "bricolage" (defined as an ad-hoc form of tinkering with the resources at hand in Ciborra, 2002) and improvisation are key factors favoring the adoption of new technologies (especially information technologies).

This newfound interest in improvisation seemingly culminated in a 1998 special issue of *Organization Science*, edited by Meyer *et al.* (1998) and entitled *Jazz Improvisation as a Metaphor for Organization Theory*. Contributors included professional jazz musicians alongside organization theory scholars. Taken together, the various contributions put forward the proposition that jazz improvisation is a fruitful metaphor for analyzing organizations in rapidly-changing contexts characterized by a high degree of complexity and/or knowledge-intensive work (Berniker, 1998). The general tone of this special issue was enthusiastic and very optimistic as far as the future of the metaphor was concerned. However, more than twenty years afterwards, a quick glance at the literature reveals only sporadic references to jazz improvisation, even though the concept of organizational improvisation has become part of the organization theory canon (Hatch, 2008). Improv theater, already featured in Crossan (1998), is often used as an alternative (e.g., Vera and Crossan, 2005; Robson *et al.*, 2015). Kamoche *et al.* (2003) stress the possible dangers of relying on a single metaphor (such as remaining locked in the same, and ultimately sterile, way of thinking) and propose three alternative models of improvisation: classical Indian music, music therapy and

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role theory. Interestingly, while these authors acknowledge the existence of free, non-idiomatic musical improvisation and quote one of its most well-known proponents (Bailey, 1992), they do not exploit this approach to music as an alternative organizational model, leaving this challenge for further research.

In the present research, we propose to address this challenge, relying on insider's knowledge as listeners and practitioners. We first argue that, because it is protean and not tied to any specific idiom, identity or culture, free musical improvisation (a.k.a. free music) is at least as good a metaphor for organizing as jazz improvisation. We then contend that, in the economies and societies of the 2020's, organized action modeled on free musical improvisation may be more pervasive than it *a priori* seems. Our reflection will weave together relevant strands of literature in organization theory as well as in musicology. We will find valuable empirical material in published interviews of improvisers and will occasionally borrow from our own experience and encounters to provide anecdotal evidence.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we give a very brief sketch of free improvisation as a musical practice. Sections 3 and 4 make up the bulk of the paper. In Section 3, we examine how the free improvisation model unfolds along the three organizational dimensions (degrees, forms and cognition) highlighted by Weick (1998). We also emphasize that it incorporates a fourth one, bricolage, in the sense of Ciborra (2002). In Section 4, we show that, contrary to jazz improvisation, free improvisation provides a model that is malleable enough to fit within the more sophisticated typologies of organizational improvisation developed over the last decade (e.g., Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2104, 2015). In Section 5, we examine to which extent the free improvisation model is relevant in contemporary industries. In Section 6, we consider the limits of the model. We conclude in a final section.

## **2. Free improvisation as a musical practice**

The metaphor of jazz improvisation, as highlighted in Hatch et Weick (1998), has been rejected by some critics who point out that an organization differs in many respects from a jazz band. This is acknowledged by the literature we briefly reviewed in the introduction, which states that the jazz improvisation metaphor is best suited for situations such as crises or contexts which require "thinking out of the box" or "breaking out of a rut". Given that such situations and contexts occur fairly often in the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization, it is interesting to understand why the jazz metaphor has not snowballed more from its initial momentum.

Karl Weick himself provides a lead at the end of Hatch and Weick (1998): "*We're touting improvisation and resilience as an alternative to planning and anticipating. Jazz is a convenient illustration of how it works, but so are improv theater (Crossan), production scheduling that has to be reconfigured in real time (Barry Turner), non-routine work (Reuben McDaniel), and emergent strategies (Henry Mintzberg). (...) We're, or at least I'm, not pushing jazz as much as I'm pushing improvisation, which is visible and easy to grasp in modern jazz.*" (Hatch and Weick, 1998, p. 604). This line of reasoning suggests that the jazz metaphor was not as largely adopted as it was initially expected to be because jazz improvisation remains a very constrained and codified form of musical improvisation, rooted in a specific idiom and identity/culture: "*The whole point of a jazz player's improvisation is that he works within a clearly accepted and circumscribed idiom. And he accepts these boundaries, in fact revels in them, because they define his music.*" (Bailey, 1992, p. 114).

However, other, more radical, forms of musical improvisation exist, such as free jazz and, ultimately, free improvisation (a.k.a. free music). We put forward the proposition that a "free improvisation" model would be at least as appropriate as the jazz improvisation metaphor to describe organizing in quickly-changing contexts. In order to understand why, it is first necessary to briefly present the emergence of contemporary free improvisation as a musical practice/current.

In the field of music, free improvisation is an art form which consists in spontaneously producing and organizing, without conduction nor any written support, an individual or collective sonic output. Practitioners describe free improvisation as "*a music without score, notation, image or text, composer, director or conductor*" (Toop, 2016, p. 15), a music for which there is "*no conductor, no decider*" (Léandre, 2011, p. 76), a music performed "*without a safety net, without a music-stand, without a score, without anything.*" (*Ibid.*). This musical practice is far more radical than tonal improvisation within a fixed harmonic structure (typical of jazz music) or modal improvisation (which characterizes non-European classical traditions, such as Indian classical music, especially in the Carnatic tradition).

Indeed, free improvisation does away with harmony and rhythm (in their conventional sense) and incorporates "sounds" and "noises" (instead of, or in addition to, musical notes) in its sonic language: "*(...) we can see in the performance that pure sound, divorced from any system or language, not the note, is the molecular material put into play through interaction between the musicians and that, despite the absence of a pre-established system, somehow the sound-flow tends to get consistency.*" (Costa, 2011, p. 129). It tends to "*reject all tonal, modal and atonal organisation in order to leave the way free to organise only through the powers of improvisation. And to facilitate this the vocabulary [has] to be built up from what I can only describe as non-tonal materials*" (Bailey, 1980, quoted in Lash, 2011). The music thus created dictates its own form (Bailey, 1992), is liable to change from one moment to the next, unexpectedly taking new turns and new directions (Costa, 2011). Unrooted in any specific musical idiom such as blues, Carnatic music, flamenco or jazz (Bailey, 1992), free improvisation should be regarded, according to its tenants, as a way of making music, a practice (Bailey, 1992; Lash, 2011) rather than as a style of music. Bailey (1992, p. x) even suggests that "*improvisation has no existence outside of its practice.*" He introduces and emphasizes the distinction between idiomatic and non-idiomatic improvisation. While the former "*is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz*" (Op. Cit, p. xi), the latter "*has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called 'free improvisation'*" (Op. Cit, p. xii).

This free, non-idiomatic, improvisational approach to music-making emerged in the late 1960s/early 1970s in several European countries (primarily in Germany and the UK, but also in Benelux, France, and Italy). For this reason, it was first baptized *European Free Music* before being simply dubbed *Free Improvisation* as new generations of free improvisers, from all over the world, followed in the footsteps of the European pioneers. Retracing the history of this approach down to its current developments would be far beyond the scope of the present research. Bailey (1980, 1992), Watson (2013), Saladin (2014) and Toop (2016) will provide the interested reader with thorough information and ample details. More modestly, we will now turn to highlighting some key differences between free improvisation and jazz improvisation and investigate the relevance of the former as a model for organization theory.

### 3. Non-idiomatic improvisation as an organizational model

It may well be that organization theory has not fully embraced the jazz improvisation metaphor because of a misunderstanding, linked to an ambiguity that can be traced in the titles of some key contributions to the aforementioned special issue of *Organization Science*. Thus, Berniker (1998), Hatch (1998) et Hatch et Weick (1998) refer in their respective title (maybe for the sake of concision) to the "jazz metaphor" rather than to the "jazz improvisation metaphor", despite Weick's claim (quoted in the previous section) of pushing improvisation, not jazz. This limitation is all the more salient since much of the early theorizing on organizational improvisation was based on traditional jazz/swing rather than on the most open and improvisatory variants of jazz such as free jazz (Zack, 2000). Relying on free musical improvisation as a model for organizing should allow one to overcome this limitation. Jazz is clearly a musical idiom, inscribed in a specific historical and cultural context, from its emergence as an artistic expression of early-20th century Afro-Americans to its worldwide recognition as a musical style taught in conservatories in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The jazz idiom incorporates a certain degree of improvisation, which may be an important musical parameter but no more so than, e.g., the elusive concept of "swing".<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, free improvisation is by essence non-idiomatic (Bailey, 1992) and, not being inscribed in any specific musical "language" or context, remains unbound by stylistic connotations and associated images. Practitioners may come to it from a wide array of backgrounds, both musical and non-musical.<sup>3</sup> If one wants to establish free improvisation as a distinct organizational model, it is important to characterize this model. This is what we intend to do in the present section, by examining how the model unfolds along the three dimensions of the 'improvisational mindset' identified by Weick (1998): degrees, forms and cognition. We will also see that, to these three dimensions, we can add a fourth one pertaining to bricolage.

#### 3.1. Improvisation at its utmost

As far as degrees of improvisation are concerned, Weick (1998), inspired by jazz saxophonist Lee Konitz, considers a continuum going from the simple *interpretation* of a musical theme to proper *improvisation* (i.e., the creation of new melodic developments that do not resemble the initial theme anymore), and encompassing *embellishments* and *variations*. Jazz improvisation, as understood and presented by the professional musicians who contributed to the 1998 special issue of *Organization Science*, may go through any of the four phases of the continuum (sometimes in the course of the same performance). It generally starts from a melodic starting point: the theme of the jazz standard (or composition) being played, which is classically stated at the beginning and end of a performance, often by several melodic instruments in unison. This theme provides an often rich and complex harmonic structure, i.e. a series of chords (or "changes" in the jazz jargon) which guides (some would say constrain) the improviser in his/her choice of notes. Very few jazz

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2 As made explicit by famous jazzman Duke Ellington in the title of his composition *It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)*. Whether an organization can swing, rather than, e.g., perform a military march, is a topic for further research. Let us just note here that many free improvisers stand by the motto "rhythm is fascism".

3 Pioneer Derek Bailey played in jazz bands before exploring non-idiomatic free improvisation, while members of free improvisation group MEV trained as contemporary classical composers. Dutch punk-rockers The Ex adopted free improvisation as part of their onstage practice, while electronic collective Excepter are noted for their amorphous improvisational approach. Peter Brötzmann and Keith Rowe both have a background in visual arts.

musicians, however, actually derive proper improvisation in the sense of Weick (1998) from this harmonic structure: many rely on ready-made musical phrases (called "licks" in musicians' jargon) to navigate difficult changes<sup>4</sup> at breakneck speed, which make exceptions such as Lee Konitz all the more remarkable.<sup>5</sup>

At worst, in lieu of truly improvising, lesser jazz musicians may rely on a repertoire of licks which they combine only slightly differently from performance to performance, ultimately leading to musical stagnation with soundalike solos day after day (or night after night). In organizing, the equivalent would be an organization member who is expected to be able to improvise in uncertain circumstances, and who in fact can only call on a limited bag of tricks. Facing truly unforeseen (and potentially dangerous) contingencies, this individual is unlikely to perform well.

By contrast, free improvisation is always (or should always be) at the utmost, at the final stage of Heick (1998)'s continuum, at its paroxysm, i.e. proper improvisation.<sup>6</sup> This is because free improvisation not only does away with the reliance on harmonic structures, but also does not need a melodic statement as its starting point. A simple sound, a simple gesture even, such as the first stroke of a Jackson Pollock on his canvas,<sup>7</sup> suffice to initiate the free improvising process, i.e. an action/reaction process in which the improviser discovers sounds as they are created and answers them with new sounds (or silence). In a performance, free improvisers are "*searching for sounds and for the responses that attach to them, rather than thinking them up, preparing them and producing them.*" (Bell, 2022, p. 35). Guitarist and free improvisation pioneer Derek Bailey gives the following example of how he may launch an improvisation: "*A device I use sometimes is to play something quite nothing — sloppy would be a good word — then try to figure out what it was.*"<sup>8</sup> Bailey would then aim at creating a music which would be "*constantly moving, purposely trying to stay away from generic gestures, and in so doing he would highlight the kind of repetition Gilles Deleuze has in mind, where the artwork shows us a repetition that is always only occurring the first time.*" (Hegarty, 2005, on Derek Bailey, quoted in Lash 2011, p. 162).

This conception of improvisation has different organizational implications than the improvisation found in traditional jazz/swing. According to Weick (1998, p. 545), "*deliberate improvisation is much tougher, much more time consuming, and places higher demands on resources, than does deliberate interpretation. (...) [F]ull-scale improvisation should be rare in*

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4 Even renowned jazzman Charlie Parker famously quoted from Georges Bizet's *Carmen* to negotiate some changes in the tune called *Hot House* (based on the harmonic structure of the standard *What is this thing called love?*).

5 "*He avoids standardized "licks" and limp clichés with persistent determination. (...) [U]nlike many jazzmen who skate on the chord changes (...), Konitz reshapes each piece entirely so that it emerges as a newly integrated work (...).*" (Hentoff, 2003). According to Konitz himself, "*[t]he art of improvising implies, from the first note onward, that the slate is clean. What interests me is the procedure that falls into place without premeditation.*" (Lee Konitz quoted in Gerber, 1999, p. 8). He claimed relying little on chord changes: "*Playing with bass and drums gives me the most room to go in whichever direction I choose; a chordal instrument is restricting to me*" (Konitz, 2003).

6 We are not saying that jazz musicians are unable to improvise freely but rather that free improvisation in jazz is uncommon. When it occurs, it keeps a strong focus on notes and melody as opposed to sounds. One of the earliest recorded examples is the 1949 tune "Intuition" by the Lennie Tristano Sextet (with Lee Konitz on alto saxophone), "*a risky adventure in improvisation, with no tune of reference and no harmonic canvas.*" (Gerber, 1999, p. 8). Even free jazz retains a strong sense of melody due to the use of motifs (as in Ornette Coleman's music), scales (as in late-period John Coltrane's music) or blues elements (as in Albert Ayler's or Archie Shepp's).

7 The reference to Jackson Pollock is neither fortuitous nor gratuitous. He has inspired free improvisers like guitarist Keith Rowe: "*I almost always use painting in order to understand what I'm doing on the guitar. (...) I was an art student in 1956 and (...) Jackson Pollock and the abstract expressionists were really the most exciting thing happening*" (Keith Rowe quoted in Bell, 2022, p. 36).

8 Derek Bailey interviewed by Henry Kaiser in <https://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-two/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/>. This specific excerpt is also quoted in Lash (2011), p. 153.

*time-pressured settings. But, if it could be accomplished despite these hurdles, then it should be a substantial, sustainable, competitive advantage.*" Actually, deliberate improvisation is difficult only if it is thought of in jazz terms, i.e. in terms of notes choice as in Weick (1998). But free improvisers do not think that way: *"I find it very difficult to think of a situation where everything you play is decided intellectually, in a conscious way."*<sup>9</sup> This different, intuitive rather than intellectual, approach to improvisation has the potential to provide an easier model to implement in an organizational context. It is consistent with what Kamoche *et al.* (2003, p. 2032) find with music therapy: *"the fact that virtuosity need not be an issue in improvisational ability"*. This statement concurs with the free improviser's viewpoint: *"Free improvisation, in addition to being a highly skilled musical craft, is open to use by almost anyone – beginners, children and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available."* (Bailey, 1992, p. 83-84).

### 3.2. *Ex post* forms and structure

In jazz improvisation, the matter of form is important. Jazz improvisation relies on a minimal but constraining structure (Barrett et Peplowski, 1998; Peplowski, 1998) including: a pre-established harmonic framework, a common vocabulary<sup>10</sup> and a regular pulse which gives a jazz tune its groove or swing. Playing *out*<sup>11</sup> is possible, but *"(...) the best musicians still have a sense of structure, and are still able to play within a structure that the audience can recognize ... and that's what makes it music instead of just noise."* (Barrett and Peplowski, 1998, p. 560).

In free improvisation, structure is not a primary concern. Derek Bailey thus ironically stated: *"A pre-occupation with form in music is like believing that the important thing about whisky is the shape of the bottle it comes in."* (Lash, 2011, p. 162). Fellow improviser Marc Ribot once noted that *"even for people who do a lot of improvising, it's difficult to improvise freely once the idea of a structure has been introduced. It's practically a reflex (...) to cling to the raft of the nearest song structure, even if it's sinking. Derek Bailey's mastery is evident in his ability to resist this temptation (...)"* (Ribot, 2002). This is an important difference for organizational thinking: free improvisation implies a wilder, more untamed vision of how organizations really work than the jazz improvisation metaphor. Archetypical free improvisers are *"not interested in "instant composition" - the overall architecture of [their] improvisations [can] be left to take care of themselves."* (Lash, 2011, p. 161).

This does not mean that free improvisation has to be formless: it may use a melodic theme as a springboard, recognizable melodies may emerge during the improvisational process, etc. What it means is simply that structure is not a prerequisite. Whenever it is *a priori* absent, it still may be perceived *a posteriori* by any listener interested in finding one. Therefore, in free improvisation, the only structure that really matters is the *ex post* structure of the improvised piece.<sup>12</sup> Note that this plays in favor of recording free improvisation: interested listeners may try and find a structure in the

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9 Derek Bailey in <https://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-two/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/>.

10 *"(...) We have a common vocabulary, we play the same scales, we know the same chords, and we've listened to similar harmonies for years."* (Peplowski, 1998, p. 560).

11 In jazz, playing "outside" of the harmonic structure by deliberately choosing notes that will sound more or less dissonant with respect to the harmonic background or "changes".

12 An early exponent of an *ex post* approach was *free jazz* pioneer Ornette Coleman. In his efforts to free jazz from the yoke of the harmonic structure, he developed his "harmolodic" approach, where musicians improvise independent melodic lines. Any harmonic structure appears *ex post* from the superposition of these melodic lines. Before gaining recognition, Ornette Coleman was long shunned by the jazz community who dismissed his music as "noise".

recording.<sup>13</sup> The equivalent in an organization would be, e.g., videotaping an improvising team at work to make sense later of what they did and, possibly, learn from it.

The free improvisers' attitude is at odds with a jazz musician's conception of improvisation. In the jazz improvisation metaphor, the ceaseless flow of events occurring within an organization creates a "cacophony" and the managers' challenge is to "*tum the cacophony into music.*" (Berniker, 1998, p. 583). According to Pasmore (1998, p. 562), "*[s]imply taking away the score from the orchestra and telling everyone to play whatever comes to mind will not produce jazz. It will produce noise. (...). While it's true that [organizational structure and managerial control] often constrain flexibility, simply removing them will not produce the desired outcomes.*" Unburdened by this concept of harmony, free improvisers embrace the "cacophony"<sup>14</sup> with relish and make "noise"<sup>15</sup> the constituent part of their art form. Some would answer Berniker (1998) and Pasmore (1998): "*We don't care about music anyway.*"<sup>16</sup>

Anyone attempting to transpose this attitude within organizations has to face the challenge already highlighted by Kamoche *et al.* (2003, Note 4, p. 2048) when considering the potential of free jazz: That is, to find organizational alternatives to the dismissal of musical structures/strictures (i.e., the relinquishing of management control) without inviting chaos. We will discuss possible examples empirically in Section 5. On the theoretical level, these authors argue that their music therapy model "*offers a way forward because it does not treat confusion as chaos, but as uncharted territory.*" (*Ibid.*). Percussionist and free improviser Eddie Prévost provides another possible way forward, through a subtler variation on the above-mentioned answer: "*(...) during the activity of sound-making, even during a performance, the materials used are investigated constantly for their potential. Concert-making [is then] an act of experimentalism. The results of which need to be evaluated, initially on the spot, for their social and musical resonances.*" (Prévost, 2009, p. 43).

Rather than wondering whether he/she creates music or noise, the free improviser ponders other issues: "*does the sound work in itself? (i.e. have I worked thoroughly enough to discover some of its potential?). Does it work within the context of the performance? Does it work in the context of whatever social milieu is being addressed and embraced? These questions propose a new range of criteria for success within performance. And, maybe will lead us to see how new senses of 'the aesthetic' are formed. The new view will not be through a prism of previous experiences but derived and moulded through the practice of self and social invention.*" (*Op. Cit.*, pp. 43-44). In a sense, "*improvisers have something in common with surgeons, chemists, biological researchers or quantum physicists - a fascination and total absorption in phenomena that are relatively unattached to conventions of beauty, ugliness, boredom, even moral judgement or logic.*" (Toop, 2016, p. 3).

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13 Bailey himself allowed recording to be taken to the extreme: "*(...) a record producer had taken tapes of some long improvisations of his and then subjected them to radical pruning. The producer started at the beginning of each piece, and as soon as he'd heard enough of Bailey's music he cut the tape at that point. Bailey seemed remarkably unfazed by the way his improvisations were being chopped into smaller pieces. He (...) felt his improvising was continuous, broken only by the moments when he set down his guitar*" (Wastell and Marley, 2005, quoted in Lash, 2011, p. 161). This "cut-up" approach is almost unheard-of in jazz, one noticeable exception being the recordings of Miles Davis' various "electric" bands in the 1970s. But Davis' output in this period was regarded as little more than noise by the jazz Conservatives of the day.

14 Thus, in one of European Free Music's seminal recordings, *Machine Gun* by the Peter Brötzmann Octet (FMP Records, 1968), eight musicians "*revel in loud, blustering bursts of group improvisation (...)*" (Spicer, 2012, p. 47).

15 In contemporary music, the word *Noise* often refers, though not exclusively, to "*the no-man's-land between electro-acoustic investigation, free improvisation, avant-garde experiment, and sound art*" (Brassier, 2009, p. 62).

16 Title of a 2009 documentary movie by Cédric Dupire and Gaspard Kuentz on the Japanese experimental and improvised music scene. The soundtrack was released in 2011 on an eponymous record by the Bruit Blanc label.



To us, this concept of social construction within the musical space and beyond is akin to the concept of self-organization through noise theorized by Atlan (1972). What other thinkers saw as "noise" or "error" was for Atlan (1972) a necessary resource for an organized system to develop and grow.<sup>17</sup> This goes one step further than Weick (1998, p. 548) hinting at possible "*ways in which "mistakes" provide the platform for musical "saves" that create innovations.*"<sup>18</sup> Self-organization through noise, modeled after free improvisation, draws the picture of an organization in which each individual's view is equally valid and has the potential to transform the whole. All "errors" are welcomed as part of the organizational learning process. In the process, new ways of measuring organizational performance may also emerge, which may make conventional performance measures less relevant (Peters *et al.*, 2018).

In the end, while the jazz improvisation metaphor still grants a key role to the manager, the free improvisation model allows us to think of an organization as a democratic workplace built from the ground up by the individuals who are its constituent parts. The two may coincide only if jazz music is considered in its most libertarian version (e.g., free jazz): "*There can still be a band leader, but often the best thing he can do is to step out of the way and let the other people do what they do best.*" (Peplowski, 1998, p. 561). In an organization, this translates as a more horizontal structure with less hierarchy and increased trust in the skills incorporated in its members, as well as increased trust in their ability to use these skills in an idiosyncratic and creative way.

### 3.3. Cognition, listening and self-discovery

The self-organization through noise described in Sub-Section 3.2 is made possible because free improvisers hear potential building material in what others would consider as noise, and are able to exploit it. Cognitive abilities are at work here, and prominent among them is the ability to listen. Jazz musicians and free improvisers alike are aware of the crucial importance of listening. Thus, after describing the "common vocabulary" of jazz (see Footnote 7), Peplowski (1998, p. 560) concludes: "*We all know these things, but what's more important is that we've also learned how to listen*". Weick (1998, p. 547) adds that it is important to listen "*to oneself as well as to other people. Prescriptions in organizational studies tout the importance of listening to others (...) but miss the fact that good improvisation also requires listening to one's own comments and building on them.*"

In free improvisation, concentrated listening is also a primordial skill, but free improvisers seem more aware than jazz musicians that it has to be spread in a continuum between listening to oneself and listening to one's environment. Thus, while jazz musicians find it essential to listen to each other to avoid "musical anarchy", free improvisers may perfectly choose to embrace the said anarchy by listening only to themselves and not to the others. The listener may find a different kind of beauty in this allegedly more chaotic experience.<sup>19</sup> A famous quote from members of free

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17 Music critic Jo Hutton, in a review of recent releases by label Brachliegen Tapes, stated that some theorists "*have described perception of noise as unmusical or unwanted interruptions*". In his opinion, the said releases "*prove the opposite. In the hands of Brachliegen's artists, noise is undeniably both musical and wanted.*" (Hutton, 2022).

18 Miles Davis reportedly said "*don't worry about making mistakes because there aren't any.*" (Barrett and Peplowski, 1998, p. 560), but he was referring to turning "wrong" notes into "outside" notes (in the sense of Footnote 8) and resolving on the harmony, skilled jazz musicians being "*never more than half-a-step away from salvation*" (*Ibid.*).

19 The jazz musician's viewpoint is that "*if [we] climbed up on stage, and I counted off a song, and we all went off in our own direction, this would be musical anarchy.*" (Peplowski, 1998, p. 560). This is in stark contrast with, e.g., the practice of improvisation collective Amal Gamal Ensemble, as remembered by one of its founders and regular participants: "*[T]here'd usually be some sort of a free-for-all noise collision.*" (Ryniewicz, 2022, p. 25). The

improvisation group AMM illustrates this awareness of the possibilities offered by the continuum: "Keith Rowe [guitar]: *when I play, I do not listen to anyone else. I do not refer to what the others do. John Tilbury [piano]: when I play, I take everything into account, on stage and outside the stage. I listen to everything. Eddie Prévost [percussion]: well, I am not sure that I can believe either one. But it raises interesting questions.*" (Saladin, 2014, p. 209, we translate). This quote is actually a few decades old, but all three musicians still adhere to it today: "*I remember Keith saying that when he plays the music he doesn't listen to what anybody else does at all. John Tilbury said that when he plays he takes notice of everything that everybody does. I'm sat in the middle and I'm thinking I don't believe either of them.*" (Eddie Prévost's interview in Bell, 2022, p. 34).

Isolating oneself from the other participants, as Keith Rowe is reported to do here, is not mere solipsism.<sup>20</sup> It ultimately aims at opening new modes of collective improvisation, by favoring "*a juxtaposition of individual contributions rather than organizing them on the model of a conversation*" (Saladin, 2014, 210-211, we translate). Conversation can easily become a cliché, a formula yielding a polite pastiche of free improvisation. In the juxtaposition approach favored by AMM, the improvisers develop an "*ability for those three situations [listening only to oneself, listening to everything and finding a middle ground] to co-exist without it ultimately fragmenting*" (Bell, 2022, p. 34) and a "*toleration of divergent views.*" (*Ibid.*)

Naturally, juxtaposition is only one possible mode of interaction in the aforementioned continuum and listening very attentively to others (and to the whole context) remains a widespread ideal among free improvisers. Free improvisation groups like the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) or the Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO) have developed an aesthetic characterized by the permanent quest for a delicate sonic balance between the musicians. This aesthetic implies a certain minimalism in everyone's contribution, a certain restraint in each musician, an ability to keep one's sonic space and volume under control (Saladin, 2014). It is also a useful reminder that if free improvisation relies on pure sound as its main sonic material, its vocabulary is not necessarily restricted to noise and let alone to sheer volume.

So far, we have seen that, in free improvisation even more than in jazz improvisation, the act of listening was associated with the abilities to co-exist with others, to tolerate their possibly erratic behaviors and to show some restraint when necessary. All these qualities are useful when organizing under rapidly-changing circumstances, which make the free improvisation metaphor all the more relevant. Beyond listening to oneself and others, the practice of free improvisation brings forward another cognitive ability: self-discovery, leading to self-knowledge. A child psychologist who had joined the weekly free improvisation workshops held by Eddie Prévost since 1999 reportedly told him: "*This kind of improvisation is exactly what children need for their cognitive development. You've got to get this into schools, Eddie!*" (Bell, 2022, p. 25). In that sense, free improvisation may sometimes border on music therapy as envisioned by Kamoche *et al.* (2003). Both explore uncharted territory and some free improvisers have been known to play in mental institutions, even involving willing patients in their musical practice. According to Eddie Prévost, free improvisation

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ensemble's approach could consist in "*opening with a gigantic crash chord with everyone playing a note, but with no idea what anyone else is going to play. Hammer on that and stick with it.*" (*Ibid.*)

20 It is even less so if one applies here the concept of a *dialogical relationship*. Using this concept, Saladin (2014) underlines that, even when playing solo, an improviser never improvises *alone*. One's improvisation is always an answer, a reaction, an extension to existing improvisations (one's own or others'). Understood in this sense, a solo improvisation is always already a collective improvisation, "*a stratified improvisation marked by intertextuality*" (Saladin, 2014, p. 219, we translate).

is "about finding out about the world, finding out out who you are, how you relate to other people and to stuff, the material of the world." (*Ibid.*) His main recommendation to the participants in his workshops is to "explore more about yourself as you connect to other people. Your instrument is a complex of possible responses that you've yet to find out about, but even more complex is the person sitting next to you – they're not fathomable. All you can do is engage with them in a joyous way." (*Ibid.*) What Eddie Prévoist mentions here are personal and interpersonal skills of the greatest importance for organizing.

### 3.4. The importance of bricolage

We have now described how free improvisation unfolds in the three dimensions that are relevant for organization theory according to Weick (1998). In addition, free improvisation also allows the researcher to talk about a fourth dimension, which Weick (1998) only touches upon: bricolage. While Weick (1998, p. 548) defines bricolage as the ability "to make do with whatever resources are at hand", Ciborra (2002, pp. 48-49) gives a more precise definition: "Bricolage (...) means tinkering through the combination of resources at hand. These resources become the tools and they define in situ the heuristic to solve the problem. (...) bricolage is about leveraging the world as defined by the situation. With bricolage, the practices and the situations disclose new uses and applications of the technology and the things."

While Weick (1998) states that improvisation may involve skills of bricolage, examples of bricolage in jazz improvisation remain rare. It might occur at an abstract level, possibly outside of a stage situation, for instance when a new sub-genre of jazz is being invented. Costa (2011) gives the example of Miles Davis, disciple of be-bop luminary Charlie Parker, inventing cool jazz or, more appropriately perhaps, electric jazz with the fusion of jazz, rock and funk in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By contrast, bricolage is omnipresent in free improvisation, because the latter relies intensively on sounds, noises and "poor" materials. Their inclusion in the improvised music requires a set of very idiosyncratic skills, which are inherent to each improviser's practice and can only partially be transmitted to another.

Guitarist Derek Bailey gives an example of these skills in his own practice: "There are also certain things I find very difficult to control, like some of the noisy things. I don't know exactly what they're going to sound like when I play them. A little trick I've been working on lately is sliding the pick on the side of the string, which can produce a high scream. It may not work at all, and the pitch is totally unpredictable. And there are quite a lot of things like that where you can't tell exactly what the result is going to be. So you can move into those things."<sup>21</sup> Here, Bailey explains a "trick of his trade" to a fellow guitarist (Henry Kaiser), but the latter would require a certain amount of personal practice to master this "trick". And, even if he eventually masters it, he will certainly master it in a way that is slightly different to Bailey's own. This is quite similar to an experienced "bricoleur" explaining a less experienced one the action of sawing or sanding: the junior tinkerer will require personal practice to acquire actual sawing or sanding skills.

In free improvisation, bricolage may extend, beyond the improvisers' practice, to modifications of the instrument played and even to instrument building. It is a natural extension of how improvisers perceive their instrument: "It is not only a means to an end; it is a source of

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21 Excerpt of Derek Bailey's interview with Henry Kaiser (<https://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-two/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/>) also quoted in Lash (2011), p. 153.

material, and technique for the improviser is often an exploitation of the natural resources of the instrument." (Bailey, 1992, p. 99). When the improviser deems these resources insufficient, he/she may want to modify the instrument or build one from scratch. This is fairly rare in jazz<sup>22</sup>, but rather common in free improvisation. Léandre (2011) mentions the archetypical example of a musician playing an amplified bicycle wheel through a cheap distortion pedal. Other examples include Leslie Ross' Cyclestrum<sup>23</sup> and Cassiopeia Sturm's Saxafone, "a mouthpiece-less alto sax rigged up to an array of electronics" (Smith, 2022, p. 59).

At the frontier of fiction and organization theory, this convergence of improvisation and bricolage is incarnated in the character of Gomer Goof, created by Belgian comic strips artist Franquin. Latour (2007) has emphasized Gomer Goof's ability to resolve social tensions within his organization (the reimagined Editions Dupuis, Franquin's publisher) using "hacked"<sup>24</sup> or invented technical objects. To his undisputed skills as a genius tinkerer, Gomer Goof adds disputable musical skills. In the comic strip, he is the inventor of various instruments, the most emblematic of which is the surreal and recurrent "Goofophone". In Franquin's stories, the Goofophone seems to produce unbelievable sounds, able for instance to make a whole line of telephone poles collapse. Such unheard-of sonorities would certainly seduce some free improvisers as much as they would frighten most audiences. The rejection of Gomer's musical experiments by the fellow denizens of his comic strip world is actually reminiscent of the attitude of the wider public towards free improvisation.<sup>25</sup>

To sum up our exploration so far, the free improvisation model is characterized by (i) the highest possible degree of improvisation, (ii) the emergence of *ex post* structures and (iii) the openness to self-discovery. To these three characteristics, inherited from Weick (1998)'s defining categories, one should add *bricolage* as an inherent, constituent part of the free improvisation model for organizing.

#### 4. The flexibility of free improvisation and current concepts of organizational improvisation

So far, we have characterized, using Weick (1998)'s categories, the free improvisation model for organizing as a model that is well distinct from the jazz improvisation metaphor. We will now examine how this model performs in light of recent advances in the organizational improvisation literature. Prominent among these developments are the typologies proposed by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2014, 2015). We will show that the protean nature of free improvisation makes the model flexible enough to fit easily in these typologies.

We build our argument using Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015)'s typology of improvisation, which appears in many respects as a consolidation of Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2014)'s typology. The authors distinguish four types of (organizational) improvisation: (1) episodic improvisation, (2) subversive improvisation, (3) resistive improvisation and (4) semi-structured improvisation. *Episodic improvisation* is a set of spontaneous reactions to an unexpected situation. Central to the organizational improvisation literature, it is informal but nevertheless desired as it can help solving

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22 A famous exception is Roland Kirk, who played modified saxophones, two saxophones at once, and operated non-musical devices while playing the saxophone (or various other wind instruments).

23 <https://roulette.org/event/leslie-ross-excursions-11/>.

24 In the sense of Ciborra (2002), who often uses "hacking" as a quasi-alternative term to bricolage.

25 "Even today, people have no problem going to see an exhibition of modern art, but they still find New Music difficult, even 'old' New Music. (...) Their eyes might be ready to accept a Jackson Pollock but their ears still haven't understood Ornette Coleman yet. Try taking somebody to a Derek Bailey concert and see if they realize that this is a great artist." (musician Jac Berrocal interviewed in Warburton, 2004, p. 40). See also Stubbs (2009).

unforeseen organizational problems. *Subversive improvisation* aims at changing an organization from inside, replacing its old order by a new one. Well-known in the innovation literature, it is informal but with a generally positive mindset and as such is often well tolerated by the organization. *Resistive improvisation* is a type of informal improvisation typically analyzed in the organizational change literature, as a mean developed by individuals to resist the implementation of change. As such, it is likely to be unwanted in organizations. *Semi-structured improvisation* is a type of formal improvisation that is desired by some flexible organizations prone to frequent change and, as such, is integrated in their structure. It is typically explored in the strategy literature.

In this typology, each type of improvisation is associated with a form of learning, and all four types of improvisation include a creativity dimension and a spontaneity dimension (see Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2015, Table 1, p. 516). While we have emphasized the creative nature of free improvisation all over Section 3 and have discussed its cognitive and learning dimensions in Sub-Section 3.3, a brief remark on spontaneity is of the order before we proceed. By definition (see Section 2), free improvisation is *spontaneous*, but ‘spontaneous’ does not implies it has to be fast. Some collective improvisations, for instance, do take time to develop, and grow slowly, organically. Weick (1998, pp. 552-553) notes that "*the faster the tempo at which a musician plays, the more likely he or she is to fall back on the predictable use of a formerly mastered vocabulary. (...) At extremely fast tempos there is no choice but to use preplanned, repetitive material to keep the performance going*", which is the very opposite of improvising. This is why Ciborra (2002), when thinking about improvisation, uses the term *extemporaneous* (literally, *outside of the passing of time*) rather than *spontaneous*, because the former better expresses the notion of *acting at one's own tempo* – something any free improviser can relate to (see Footnote 2).

Now, by nature, free improvisation is extremely flexible and can be many things to many people. Being *a priori* formless, free improvisation can take as many *a posteriori* forms as there are free improvisers (and, arguably, listeners), as seen in Sub-Section 3.2. Because of this malleable nature, it may fit within each of the categories proposed by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015), sometimes simultaneously. This is potentially acknowledged by the authors who state that "*an improvisation may (...) be more than one thing at the same time*" (Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2015, p. 515) and that trying to contain improvisation "*inside a single type at a time may be conceptually convenient but misleading.*" (*Ibid.*). We will now consider four different ways to practice free improvisation and discuss their implications for the related organizational model. Our developments on free improvisation as subversive improvisation will be longer than those given to the other types, not because free improvisation would be more subversive than anything else, but because it is subversive along different dimensions, some musical and some extra-musical. This is something we felt had to be elaborated upon.

#### **4.1. Free improvisation as episodic improvisation**

In episodic improvisation, members of an organization improvise sporadically, when needed (e.g. when facing an unexpected event), before going back to more routine tasks. Relatively long periods of commonplace work are interspaced with short bursts of improvisation. These repeated experiences of improvisation may feed the more commonplace work, during which the improvisers may reflect on their practice and further hone their improvising skills. Episodic improvisation requires individuals or teams who are able to improvise, i.e. act or react extemporaneously in

specific circumstances, before going back to commonplace tasks when the specific circumstances are resolved. But being able to improvise is not a characteristic of specific individuals or teams. It is rather a potentiality that the organization must allow its members to reveal and develop, by giving space for their moods, feelings and emotions. Indeed, according to Ciborra (2002), any entity able of introspective reflection is also able to improvise.

This is in line with the thinking of free improvisation practitioners, especially of those who have spent some time reflecting on their practice. Classical composer turned improviser Cornelius Cardew "*used to say it's part of everyday life*" (Bell, 2022, p. 38). Classically trained violinist Angharad Davies thus describes her first experience of free improvisation: "*That was a very liberating experience. I remember being quite apprehensive about it because I'd never done it before, and then Rhodri [her brother, harpist and free improviser] saying there are no mistakes, you can just do whatever you want to.*" (Bliss, 2022, p. 30). This feeling of liberation is often found in interviews of musicians and more generally in the literature on free musical improvisation, but can be readily extended, beyond music, to many fields of occupation.

What makes free improvisation in music a relevant model for episodic improvisation in an organization is not simply that, within an empowering framework, anyone is potentially able to improvise freely. Another important element of relevance is that, over the course of their lifetime, musicians who improvise freely may do so in an episodic manner. They get on the stage or in the recording studio, perform an improvisation, and go back to their everyday life until the next performance.<sup>26</sup> During the downtime between performances, free improvisers have other concerns, but also hone their improvising skills and prime themselves for their next performance.<sup>27</sup>

This is compatible with the notion of free musical improvisation as a continuous process if, following Saladin (2014), we apply the concept of *dialogical relationship* already referred to in Footnote 20. Some improvisers like Keith Rowe "*consider that they only momentarily terminate an improvisation. The end of a concert or of a private session would not be an end in itself, but rather a provisional stop, until the next performance.*" (Saladin, 2014, p. 151, we translate). In the dialogical relationship, each improvisation, whether played solo or in a group, in front of an audience or not, is resolutely new without obliterating the past, which is consistent with the aforementioned idea of "music as process". Each improvisation is inscribed in the personal history of the improviser, who, while listening to his/her practice (see Sub-Section 3.3), builds his/her own persona. Besides the improvisational practice, the dialogical relationship is also strengthened during downtime, e.g. by listening to records, attending concerts, or through informal meetings with peers.

## 4.2. Free improvisation as subversive improvisation

Subversive improvisation question the current order of things in the organization and disrupt the status quo. Keeping the organization's well-being in mind, subversive improvisers destabilize the old order and invent substitutes. They complicate the current functioning of the organization

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26 Interestingly, especially with respect to what we stated in the previous two paragraphs, free improviser Derek Bailey once said "*Playing is like living, only better*" (Keenan, 2004, p. 48).

27 Saladin (2014) emphasizes that, while one cannot prepare an improvisation, one can prepare oneself to improvise. This can imply practising motor skills or specific techniques, such as continuous breathing for wind instruments players. Bailey (1992, p. 110) claims practising regularly on the guitar, in a way reminiscent of what jazz musicians call "woodshedding", while Keith Rowe admits to start a performance with several "scenarios" in his mind (Bell, 2022, p. 35).

(Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2015; Hirshman, 1995; Weick, 1993) because they have in mind an alternative mode of functioning that they wish to see implemented. This attitude is frequent in innovation work and may often imply the introduction of ‘social change’, in a broad sense, within the organization. The concept of subversive improvisation is thus vital to understand organizational change.

As far as models and metaphors are concerned, jazz has, during its century-long history, gone through periods when it truly was a subversive music. In the late 1940’s, *bebop* was born from the efforts of a generation of young musicians to break free from the discipline imposed by the big bands of the swing era. Bebop also went against the racial prejudices and stereotypes of the day by showcasing educated and refined Afro-Americans playing an ‘intellectual’ and sophisticated music, designed to be *listened to*, at a time when the public considered jazz as a functional music destined to make people dance.<sup>28</sup> Bebop even influenced literature through the works of the Beat poets and writers like Jack Kerouac.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1950s, *free jazz* in turn emerged from the need of some musicians to break free from the harmonic constraints imposed by bebop (see, e.g., Footnote 10). Free jazz was also linked to social change in the USA (and beyond), many free jazz musicians being associated with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Carles and Comolli, 2015). From the late 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, jazz has become a largely reified music that is nowadays taught in conservatories. As a result, mainstream jazz of the type considered in the 1998 Special Issue of *Organization Science* (which falls under the traditional jazz/swing genre in Zack (2000)’s typology) is anything but subversive.

By contrast, free improvisation was a subversive art form from the start, and has managed to remain so to this day throughout its extensions in various spheres of musical – and human – activity. European Free Music (see Section 2) started as a series of experiments at playing music freed not only from scores and bandleader but also from harmonic, melodic and rhythmic constraints. The improvisational approach of free jazz musicians either directly informed some of these experiments (e.g. the Joseph Holbrooke trio<sup>30</sup> described in Bailey 1992, Part V, pp. 86-93) or came to validate discoveries that were made outside of its direct influence: "(...) *in more relaxed moments (...) we played without any reference to anything. We didn't see it as being serious, we just enjoyed doing it. Later on when we heard Ornette, we said, well hang on, we were doing that too.*" (Eddie Prévost quoted in Bell, 2022). This quest for freedom soon led those musicians who came from a jazz background to leave it behind and invent new ways of playing their instruments, with a focus on sounds. This was the case of Derek Bailey: "*It was no good coming on like Charlie Christian while somebody was playing a gong and somebody else was sawing off the end of the bass... So as regards to changing the way I played to suit the musical situation, that was how it started.*"<sup>31</sup>

Given what we have just said, we feel compelled to amend the comparison provided for this type of improvisation by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015, p. 518): "*Much as 'jazz players' in a well-drilled dance band, subversive improvisers 'disturb' and 'pollute' the organization (...) and unfreeze the status quo of strict tempo and predictable chord changes.*" Actually, bebop players who would have tried to disturb the discipline of a "well-drilled dance band" of the 1940s would have been

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28 It nevertheless took decades before bebop figureheads like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk were finally recognized as musical geniuses on equal terms with classical musicians and composers.

29 Beatniks soon adopted the "hip" slang of bebop musicians.

30 The trio choose this name because it might have been a pseudonym for several British composers (Bailey, 1992, p. 86) wishing to stay anonymous in order to let the music speak for itself, which, in composition, is subversive.

31 Excerpt of Derek Bailey’s interview with Henry Kaiser (<https://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-two/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/>) also quoted in Lash (2011), p. 149.



fired – which is exactly what happened to trumpeter (and bebop pioneer) Dizzy Gillespie in 1941 in Cab Calloway's band. Early boppers would wait after their big band duties were over and meet after-hours in small New York clubs in order to experiment with their new conception of jazz. Similarly, Derek Bailey asserts that if the Joseph Holbrooke trio had tried their free experiments in a conventional jazz club, they would have had to contend with the unappreciative – if not downright hostile – reaction of the audience. This is why the band experimented semi-privately in a small room above a pub. We may then propose, e.g., the following alternative comparison: "*Much like improvising musicians meeting outside of their money-making gigs, subversive improvisers 'disturb' the organization by questioning the status quo of its 'acceptable' music, searching for new ways and inventing alternative practices*".

#### **4.2.1. Social and political subversiveness**

The experiments of the first generation of free improvisers reflected the turmoils of the time: as explained in Saladin (2014), they were often involved not only in music, but also in social and political experiments. Some improvisation groups, like AMM, were overtly political, whereas others, like Joseph Holbrooke, Music Improvisation Company (MIC) or SME, focused first and foremost on the music. But even the less political groups and musicians were interested in the anti-authoritarian aspect of improvisation (Toop, 2016).

If a collective of musicians is a micro-society, then changing the way music is played may become a blueprint for changing the way society is organized. The musical activity of the free improviser has a "*social component*" which is "*communicable and has the strength to move outward to others who may wish to engage with it in their own way.*" (Toop, 2016, p. 3) The "*constructive aspect*" of this, "*both on a personal and social level, is almost miraculous by comparison with current ideas of democracy in which participation is promised yet hollow.*" (*Ibid.*) These parallel attempts at finding new forms of social organization, which rest on a delicate "*balance between competition and cooperation*" (*Op. Cit.*, p. 4) and in which "*hierarchies are more or less absent*" (*Ibid.*), are indeed subversive in the sense of Pina e Cunha et al. (2015). They suggest that "*freely improvised music can in some way be a vehicle, or a model, for the kind of society (...) in which [some] would prefer to live*" (Prévost, 2009, p. 44). In Section 5, we will examine empirically how this form of subversive improvisation can be implemented within organizations.

#### **4.2.2. A contagious subversiveness**

Free improvisation is also subversive in its capacity to infiltrate, "contaminate" (to use the expression of Keenan, 2004) and transform other musics, including well-defined idioms or "styles". Thus, guitarist Thurston Moore explains in Pierrepont and Gross (1999) how, in the 1990s, a large fraction of the punk-rock scene (musicians and audience alike) developed an interest in free improvisation, as a reaction to punk-rock becoming more and more mainstream. A case in point is Dutch punk band The Ex, founded in 1979 in the Amsterdam squats scene.

Through collaborations with free improvisers like cellist Tom Cora or drummer Han Bennink, The Ex gradually opened up to free improvisation until they made it a key element of their



music.<sup>32</sup> Since the 1990s, the band (still active today) regularly introduce long, freely improvised instrumental passages in the middle of their songs. This practice goes against the grain of the punk-rock style, which tends to focus on short, very structured tunes and to shun instrumental soloing. It has however introduced The Ex to a new audience, through their inclusion in radical avant-garde and avant-garde jazz festivals.<sup>33</sup> For drummer Katherina Bornefeld, a.k.a. Katie Ex, the band's involvement in free improvisation was an inevitable extension of their initial desire to invent a better way of living: *"That was the same idea. It's like trying to catch the spirit and idea of the moment – what is necessary to make your dreams happen? You have to feel it and then grab it and do it. That's also improvisation. It's more adventurous, because you are more vulnerable when you just let things happen, because you have to be alert all the time and put energy in it to survive."* (Katie Ex quoted in Spicer, 2014, p. 48). True to this statement, the band extends their improvisatory aesthetics beyond music, having no manager or representative, no other label than their own (Ex Records) and going on tour without driver nor road crew.

This "Do It Yourself" (DIY) aesthetic, which characterizes punk-rock as a social movement (Hein, 2012), can also be traced back in European Free Music. Thus, musicians collective Instant Composers Pool (ICP) was founded in 1967 in the Netherlands to *"enable improvisors to generate gigs and recordings for and among themselves because as [co-founder Han] Bennink [once] told (...), "no one else was interested in what [they] were doing"* (Spicer, 2014, p. 48). The ICP who, *"alongside German and British contemporaries, represented the third crucial bridgehead in the emerging European school of free improvisation"* (Ibid.), provided, a decade before the emergence of the punk scene, a *"workable blueprint for a self-sustaining musical community surviving outside of mainstream culture"* (Ibid.).

Just like free improvisation, as a musical community, exerted a subversive influence on a wider spectrum of the music industry, free improvisation as a model has the potential to spread across organizations following a 'contagion' process. If implemented in an organization in a given industry (e.g., entertainment), it may be imitated first by other organizations in the same industry and then spread to other industries (e.g., marketing and advertising, retail, etc.).

#### 4.2.3. Economic subversiveness

The creation of ICP is not an isolated example of free improvisation exerting its subversive influence on the music industry. Indeed, free improvisation led to the creation of some of the first viable independent music labels in the UK and Germany. Indeed, although some early recorded traces of European Free Music can be found on major labels,<sup>34</sup> thanks to audacious A&R directors aiming at a niche audience, free improvisation could not interest the music industry in the long run: *"I mean, of course they don't want improvisation. You cannot make money with this mess where, from one minute to the next, you have no idea what's going to happen."* (Derek Bailey interview quoted in Saladin, 2004, p. 307, we translate).

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32 Original bassist Luc Ex got so involved in free improvisation that he finally left the band in the early 2000s, to dedicate himself to this practice only.

33 We were able, for instance, to catch The Ex in action with free improvisers on stage in the 1998 *Jazz à Mulhouse* festival – which was, in those days, resolutely devoted to free jazz and free improvisation.

34 E.g., *AMMMusic* by AMM was released in 1966 on the American label Elektra, *Karyobin* by SME was released in 1968 on Island Records and *Friday* by MEV was released in 1969 on Polydor (Saladin, 2014, p. 302).

As an answer to this situation, free improvisers started to create their own independent labels. One of the first was Incus Records, founded in the UK in 1970 by Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley and Evan Parker, in a spontaneous way true to the spirit of free improvisation: "(...) *many musicians were not being recorded at all (...). I suggested to Derek we should start our own company. He agreed, but of course we needed money. A friend of mine—Mike Walters—offered to finance the idea. To start if off we had a meeting. He stated he did not want to be involved in the running of the company but would be happy to finance it. So, we needed a third member. Evan Parker was invited to fill the spot.*" (Tony Oxley quoted in Gottschalk, 2009).

The basics of Incus Records' "business model" are described in a manifesto included in the label's first release, the 1970 *Topography of the Lungs* LP: "*The bulk of the revenue from any Incus recording will go directly to the musicians. Once the basic cost of each record is recovered, thus providing the finance for the next, the vast bulk of all income will be paid in royalties to the artists. Incus has no intention of making profits in the conventional sense.*" (Bailey *et al.*, 1970). In today's context, this manifesto could easily be adapted to an organization active in the social economy and/or performing frugal innovation. It is therefore as subversive (in the sense of Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2015) today as it was in 1970.

The creation of Incus Records was soon followed by the development of a whole *cottage industry*<sup>35</sup> of independent labels dedicated to free improvisation in the UK. Thus, John Stevens and Trevor Watts (members of SME) started *A Records* in 1973 while Eddie Prevost created *Matchless Recordings* in the late 1970s. Meanwhile, similar labels appeared on the Continent, such as Free Music Production Records (abbreviated in FMP Records) in Germany, founded in 1969 under the impulsion of free improviser Peter Brötzmann. Improvising drummer Ken Hyder thus summarizes the dynamics at work in this rise of the first independent labels dedicated to free improvisation: "*Many musicians did not even receive an answer when a record label refused their work. But now, there is an answer: do it yourself.*" (Saladin, 2014, p. 304, we translate).

Creating record labels to release music with little to no commercial perspective might seem, from a strictly economic viewpoint, foolish if not downright suicidal. But it is precisely this foolish character which makes this initiative subversive, since spontaneous subversive improvisation may promote "*a technology of foolishness (...) to counter technologies of reason (...).*" (Pina e Cunha *et al.*, 2015, p. 517). Opposing a technology of foolishness to technologies of reason is what Gomer Goof does all the time, and we have seen in Sub-Section 3.4. that, with his skills of bricolage, he is a model improviser. More generally, the economic subversiveness of the free improvisation model may consist, in organizations, in taking high economic chances, hoping to beat the odds with a mix of vision and serendipity to, ultimately, achieve greatness.

### **4.3. Free improvisation as resistive improvisation**

Resistive improvisations may happen in organizations where goals are not shared, as a reaction to the pressure exerted by the hierarchy against individual goals. The improvisers hide their improvisations, since they do not serve the organization's goals. There seems to be a fine line between subversive and resistive improvisation. Both may hide behind a "*façade of compliance*" to escape scrutiny (Pina e Cunha *et al.* 2015, p. 517), but while the former embraces the organization's

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35 This term, coined by Derek Bailey, is reminiscent of pre-Industrial Revolution Great-Britain, where the textile industry relied on the home production of individual laborers.

objectives and performance, the latter do not. Individuals engaged in resistive improvisation follow personal goals, "*if only to reassure themselves of their ability to be able to do so*" (*Ibid.*).

As far as the musical metaphor is concerned, free improvisation, which often has to reclaim the right to its own existence, can easily shift from subversive to resistive. Free music "*embodies the strange dream or nightmare of a life almost entirely improvised*" (Toop, 2016, p. 1) and, because of this, meets with a "*reception within broader society so hostile and uncomprehending*" (*Ibid.*) as to make this dream impossible. Plunged, with little marketability, in the unwelcoming environment of a mercantile music industry, free improvisation *de facto* appears as resistive. It is a music that "*counters the ethos which characterizes capitalism; with its emphasis upon market relations, and all the social forms and attendant attitudes, that follow in its wake.*" (Prévost, 2009, p. 39). For this reason, many free improvisers struggle to survive, barely make it financially and depend on day jobs and friendly support. Nevertheless, this fires up their determination: "*Improvisers are a stoic, stubborn bunch. (...) What they discover and nurture through playing and the insistence of their own community is tough enough to sustain most of them through difficult lives.*" (Toop, 2016, p. 5).

Besides showing resilience in a hostile economic environment, free improvisers also need to resist the lure of the music industry, which, in an attempt to fulfill niche markets, may reward them financially in exchange for turning their practice into a mere commodity. "*Because of this we must constantly question our motives, our modus operandi and its relation to the conditions that we are embedded in, to avoid recuperation (...).*" (Mattin, 2009, p. 23).

We can infer from this citation that, when free improvisation attains a certain degree of 'success' (musical, commercial or otherwise), it ceases to be resistive improvisation. It may even cease to be proper improvisation. Bailey (1992, Part VII, pp. 133-139) thus considers that when an improvising group reaches a certain maturity and finds a 'style', it is likely to develop musically and commercially but its music ceases to be pure improvisation. This is why he preferred ephemeral bands formed by the temporary association of free improvisers.

As an improviser, Bailey extended this line of thinking to its own practice: "*When you can do something really well, that's when it gets more or less no good to you. Because you know exactly what's going to happen the moment you start it. (...) And there are some things I've never gotten the hang of and those are the things I quite like. I've been playing them for years, and I've never had complete control. I mean, I know exactly what's happening. But I couldn't produce the same thing twice doing these things. As soon as I can, I'll stop playing them.*"<sup>36</sup> Some organization theorists have made similar reflections in their own field: "*Success encourages simplification, (...), less slack, and accelerated production, all of which (...) force people back on older ideas and away from the very innovating that made them successful in the first place.*" (Weick, 1998, p. 553).

Free improvisation thus faces artistic, economic, and socio-political hardships on the one hand, and the risk of dissolution entailed by success on the other. This is what Prévost (2009) calls "*resisting authority and the cults of scientism and celebrity*" in the title of his essay. Despite these difficulties and danger, free improvisation "*has survived (...) since the 1960s and it continues to attract new generations. That suggests that it embodies a way of living that is necessary, even if only for a minority, and so it persists as anomaly, as conscience, as critique and as refuge.*" (Toop, 2016, p. 4). This is a fitting definition of free improvisation as resistive improvisation.

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36 Excerpt of Derek Bailey's interview with Henry Kaiser (<https://bells.free-jazz.net/bells-part-two/derek-bailey-the-interview-london-1975/>) also quoted in Lash (2011), p. 153.

It is quite possible, actually, that the aforementioned difficulties have only reinvigorated free music, acting as fuel for its creativity and resilience. After all, without external pressure, there would be no need for resistive improvisation, which is an informal answer to a formal pressure. Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015) emphasize that resistive improvisation embodies this element in improvisation which opposes the regulated and the institutionalized. Free improvisers do not hide their defiance of the institutional: "*Creation is not the institution... I'm not here to please, I don't follow orders, the good will of bosses and monarchs. Now State artists, they have a cushy life, in any case they will always have regular support, a kind of crutch! They're good artists, no doubt about that, but they're consensual, stereotyped.*" (Léandre, 2011, p. 123).

Skeptics may say that it is possible to talk this way while accepting some public subsidies from time to time, but most improvisers are true to their word and some will go even further to live by their creed. This was the case of Derek Bailey, who, in 2003, at the age of 73, chose to leave his London base and relocated in Barcelona because the London improvisation scene (of which he was a cornerstone) had become too institutionalized. He thus declared to Keenan (2004, p. 44): "*For the kind of music I am involved in, London is very organized. (...) It's all settled and established and that does not suit me at all. (...) So coming here is like starting from scratch.*" It is as if being unknown in an unfamiliar and possibly unreceptive environment was necessary to keep his freely improvised music vital – through a resistive, confrontational stance. Bailey criticizes the opposite attitude in some of his fellows who dedicate time to "*(...) all that practising and hustling and dining out with Arts Council bureaucrats*" (Keenan, 2004, p. 47).

#### **4.4. Free improvisation in a semi-structured context**

Semi-structured improvisation is a form of improvisation that is structurally framed, the frames themselves being the result of prior knowledge that was partly acquired through previous improvisations. Improvisations that occur within a semi-structured framework are typically found in flexible organizations such as Silicon Valley firms. Since this definition introduces the idea of structure (however minimal), one could expect the free improvisation model to fit less with this type of organizational improvisation than with the other three identified by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015). One could *a priori* assume that the jazz improvisation metaphor is more relevant here, given that jazz improvisation relies on a constraining structure that includes, among others, a rigid harmonic canvas and a fixed meter.

However, we will now see that the free improvisation model remains as relevant for semi-structured improvisation as for the other three types, which we have already examined. Indeed, we have already seen, in Sub-Section 4.2, that musicians operating in a very structured music style, such as punk-rockers The Ex, can accommodate spaces for free improvisation in their performance. On a deeper level, while some seasoned improvisers strictly swear by non-idiomatic improvisation, others, especially when they have a contemporary classical background, consider that "*composition and improvisation are compatible, only they happen in two different times*" (Léandre, 2011, p. 81).

This citation suggests that it is possible to articulate both. Classically trained violinist and free improviser Angharad Davies provides an example with *Gwneud A Gwneud / Do and Do Again*. In this recording, she improvises freely within a framework in which two parameters were set beforehand (Bliss, 2022): the duration of her improvisation, set at 52 minutes, and the part of the violin where she would apply the bow – actually a tiny portion of cardboard nail file woven

between the strings. In addition, she recorded a second layer of improvisation while listening to the first one. This approach has elements which would not be out of place in contemporary composition, but which are only here to provide a minimal structure within which the improvisation can freely unfold.

Even dedicated free improvisers with an avowed antipathy for composed music, such as Derek Bailey, have been known to operate in a semi-structured framework. A perennial musical troublemaker known for his sometimes mischievous behavior in ensemble playing, Bailey enjoyed being the proverbial grain of sand in the cogs of a well-oiled musical machine, especially when playing with non-improvisers (Keenan, 2004). But his engagement with minimal structures actually went deeper than that. In the 1990s, he released a series of recordings with bass and drum rhythm sections providing a backdrop that informed the way his free improvisations unfolded. In return, the free improvisation 'disturbed' (in a positive sense, like in subversive improvisation) and reoriented the rhythm. Standouts among these recordings include *Saisoro* released in 1996 with Japanese avant-garde noise-rock duo The Ruins and *Mirakle* released in 2000 with Jamaladeen Tacuma and Calvin Weston, the rhythm section of Ornette Coleman's free funk band Prime Time.

In a 2004 interview, Bailey recalls his first meeting with The Ruins: "*We recorded Saisoro the next day and I played with them many times after that. (...) What worked was when they were doing what they did and I did what I did and we met in the middle.*" (Keenan, 2004, p. 48). His remembrance of the *Mirakle* session with Tacuma and Weston (who had little to no prior knowledge of his practice) is just as warm and enthusiastic: "*Playing with Tacuma and Weston was great. (...) They're there and they're playing this semi-funk shit, I'm over here doing my own thing and somehow we just meet in the middle.*" (*Ibid.*) Listening to *Mirakle* reveals that, indeed, Bailey's jagged electric guitar stabs definitely belong to the domain of free improvisation and yet are a perfect fit for the rhythm section's "semi-funk". While "meeting in the middle" is possible with a live rhythm section, Bailey went even further in 1996 with *Guitar, Drums 'N' Bass*, on which he freely improvises on an electronic background provided by deejay and beat-maker DJ Ninj. This recording is only a glimpse of Bailey's aptitude for this paradoxical music: he routinely practiced free improvisation while listening to Jungle and Drum'n'Bass music<sup>37</sup> on pirate radio stations in London (Keenan, 2004).

Last but not least, towards the end of his life, Bailey revisited, with the mind of a free improviser, the ballads and standards he had played in jazz and dance bands as a young musician. This gave rise to the 2002 album *Ballads*, a solo session in which Bailey stays clear from any conventional jazz playing, each free improvisation feeding a jazz standard while the standard feeds back on the improvisation: "*When I first attempted it, I just played six or seven improvisations and then stuck a ballad on the end of each one. (...) What I began to notice, though, was that as I got towards the ballad it influenced the improvisation. So that's what I became most interested in, how it alters and colours the improvisation. That record to me is about improvising, not about playing tunes.*" (*Ibid.*)

With this, we have now reached the end of Section 4. In this section, we have seen that the free improvisation model is appropriate for all four types of organizational improvisation (episodic, subversive, resistive and semi-structured) envisioned by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015). The protean nature of free improvisation not only allows it to fit within them all, it even sometimes allows it to fit within several types simultaneously (e.g., subversive and semi-structured). Free improvisation is

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37 Two closely-related types of bass-heavy electronic music with roots in dub and reggae music.

therefore a good candidate as a model for organizational improvisation. In the next section, we will examine the empirical relevance of this model in a few real-world organizations.

## 5. The pervasiveness of the free improvisation model in contemporary organizations.

The concept of organizational improvisation is not a mere fancy from organization theorists, it has empirical relevance for practitioners and managers. As early as 1996, the CEO of LEGO (the well-known Danish toy company) expressed the belief and expectation that "*improvisation is an art form that needs to become the hallmark of all levels of management, beginning at the top.*" (Lewin, 1998, p. 539). Since then, this organization has certainly shown an ability to catch the spirit of the moment in order to expand, developing new lines of toys under license from major entertainment companies such as Disney or Marvel and creating its own movies, cartoons and video games. Aware that its consumer base comprises a large share of adults, the company has started catering to this specific audience.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, it has involved this audience in its innovation strategy, e.g. through LEGO User Groups, who receive new products or prototypes for free and provide advance consumer feedback (see, e.g., Antorini *et al.*, 2012; Avasilcăi and Rusu, 2015; Jennings, 2019). LEGO User Groups also develop their own projects, such as stop-motion amateur "brickfilms"<sup>39</sup> or even ambitious exhibitions.<sup>40</sup> Besides making the LEGO products ubiquitous and providing free advertisement for the company, these projects are instrumental in developing new products. With this practice, the company has integrated at the heart of its business model the spirit of bricolage which constitutes an essential dimension of the free improvisation model.

LEGO may be spearheading a whole movement of consumer engagement, but it is not the only company which implements (aspects of) the free improvisation model. For instance, while working on *The Code* television series for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the production organization Scribe, as a soft and decentralized "polyarchic structure" (Clegg and Burdon, 2021), displayed characteristic elements of a group of free improvisers. The best and most recent example might be entertainment company Netflix, which is characterized by a management style relying on primarily on the absence of rules, also referred to as 'leading with context rather than with control' (Hastings and Meyer, 2020). The company avowedly aims at building a culture of "*dispersed decision-making*" (*Op. Cit.* p. 131) through 'freedom and responsibility', which is, according to its top management, equivalent to "*operating on the edge of chaos.*" (*Op. Cit.*, p. 268). While the CEO of Netflix himself touts the jazz improvisation metaphor, his metaphor leans towards the freer fringes of jazz and borders on free improvisation: "*To build a team that is innovative, fast and flexible, keep things a little bit loose. Welcome constant change. Operate a little closer towards the edge of chaos (...) and hire the type employees who long to be part of an improvisational band.*" (*Ibid.*, p. 272). These words closely echo those, encountered in the previous sections, that practitioners of free musical improvisation use to describe their art.

Managers and employees alike often emphasize the extreme degree of freedom granted by Netflix, a prime example being the absence of vacation policy (employees are free to take leave whenever they want, as long as they consider that it will not be detrimental to the organization). In

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38 <https://www.lego.com/en-gb/categories/adults-welcome>

39 <https://brickfilms.com/>

40 <https://paris.caes.cnrs.fr/2022/04/25/briquantiques-les-romains-en-lego-jusquau-4-septembre-2022/>

this organization, freedom is seen as leading to responsibility, as "*a path towards [accountability]*" (Op. Cit., p. 53). This is reminiscent of the notion, encountered in the previous sections, that the free improviser is responsible for what he/she plays and for the decision to remain silent (Prévost, 2009; Bell, 2022).

Constructive feedback is another element that Netflix emphasizes as a key constituent of its organizational culture. In this context, constructive or 'candid' feedback consists in giving critical comments (on a project, on colleagues, or on the organization itself) "*with positive intent – not to attack or injure anyone, but to get feelings, opinions and feedback out onto the table, where they [can] be dealt with*" (Op. Cit., p. 14). An organizational specificity there is that employees provide candid feedback not only to each other, but also to their hierarchy. The company even dedicates specific meetings, known as '360s' because comments flies from all directions, to the provision of constructive, candid feedback. Saying aloud what one thinks, however critical, with positive intent is similar to the "contradictory" playing sometimes encountered in free musical improvisation. As seen in the previous sections, free improvisers do not have to assent with each other when playing together: they are free to dissent and contradict. This will not harm the improvisation process as a whole, it is even likely to make it go in unexpected (and, sometimes, more interesting) directions, which is for the best. The "live 360s" at Netflix are organizational equivalents to free exchanges between players in a live free music improvisation group.

All the examples we have just reviewed were taken from the entertainment industry, where creativity and innovativeness are paramount. And indeed the empirical literature suggests that the free improvisation model suits best a "*loosely coupled organization where talent density is high and innovation is the primary goal*" (Op. Cit., p. 233), such as Netflix. This is certainly a case in point, but, since this model is malleable enough to fit within various types of organizational improvisation (see Section 4), it may also apply in other industries. Envisioned as *subversive* in a *semi-structured* context (see Section 4), free musical improvisation is an appropriate model for improvisation in services, of the type described by Secchi *et al.* (2020). Using an ANOVA on a measure of service improvisation competence built from survey data on the hotel industry, they find that a personnel able to improvise (i.e., to deviate from prescribed routines and processes) may increase customer loyalty as well as the hotel reputation. In a different vein, Baier-Fuentes *et al.* (2023) show that bricolage, which is an important constituent of the free improvisation model, may be an effective tool for the survival of owner-manager SMEs during crises such as the recent covid-19 pandemic.<sup>41</sup>

#### FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

At this point, having drawn the main features of the free improvisation model and having reviewed a few examples, we are able to summarize, in Figure 1, the empirical relevance of this model. In Figure 1, the horizontal axis measures the degree of improvisation from lowest (on the left-hand side) to highest (on the right-hand side), while the vertical axis states the main concern (primary objective) of an organization, from safety (bottom) to creativity (top). The two axes define

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41 Interestingly, Fultz and Hmieleski (2021), using a structural model on a sample of 326 U.S. startups, find: (i) that improvisation is more associated with serendipity when resources are scarce and (ii) that the combination of serendipity with an informal (i.e., improvisational) organizational structure is in turn associated with a higher performance of new ventures. Unfortunately, their improvisation variable is an average of three empirical measures of improvisation and cannot straightforwardly be related to the free improvisation model.

four quadrants, on which we have positioned, without aiming at exhaustivity, representative organizations.

In the top-right quadrant, we find organizations that belong to creative industries (such as entertainment companies and advertising agencies), where the primary objective is creativity and where the degree of improvisation is likely to be at its highest. In the bottom-right quadrant, we placed organizations such as hotels and providers of similar accommodation, where customer safety is more of a concern than creativity, but where improvisation may still occur (to accommodate non-standard consumer demands, for instance), albeit in a semi-structured and/or subversive way.

In the top-left quadrant, we find organizations as diverse as R&D departments, higher education institutions and restaurants, where creativity is a major concern, but with less scope for improvisation than in creative industries. Researchers in R&D departments conduct research that is oriented towards specific goals and must find solutions to given problems within a limited amount of time. Teachers in higher education institutions can introduce pedagogical innovations, but are constrained in terms of teaching contents and/or teaching hours. In restaurants, chefs may improvise with whatever ingredients are available on a daily basis, but may have to retain customers with a house specialty and must comply with health and hygiene regulations.

Finally, the bottom-left quadrant features organizations where safety is the main concern. They rely on strict rules, safety procedures and check-lists, which give little to no scope for improvisation. Companies operating in the energy industry (e.g., electricity companies relying on nuclear power plants) or in the transportation industry (e.g. airlines or railway companies) are typical examples of such organizations. In these industries, any mistake or degree of carelessness can have dramatic consequences for operators, customers or even unsuspecting citizens. Since improvising consists, among other things, in embracing errors, it is unwanted – and with good reason, as we will see in the next section – in these industries.

Given the respective characteristics of the organizations that are comprised in these four quadrants, it is easy to see that the main locus of the free improvisation model (represented by the large gray circle) is in the top-right quadrant. As mentioned earlier, free improvisation of a semi-structured and/or subversive nature may nonetheless occur in parts of the bottom-right and top-left quadrants. It is most unlikely to occur in the bottom-left quadrant, except perhaps as *resistive* improvisation (cf. Section 4) in rare periods of organizational change. Overall, Figure 1 suggests that organizational practices modeled on free improvisation are more prevalent in contemporary organizations than one may *a priori* assume.

## **6. Limits of the free improvisation model**

We have seen in the previous section that the free improvisation model is best suited to creative industries, where novelty and creativity are quintessential and where the degree of improvisation is likely to be high. At the polar opposite, industries where safety is the main concern are not a good fit for free improvisation. This naturally points out to a first limit of the model: improvising is not ‘playing it safe’ and one cannot improvise with safety. Trying to do so may have negative consequences for the organization and for all those who depend on it. We will briefly consider this limit and provide some examples in Sub-Section 6.1.

In Sub-Section 6.2, we will discuss a second, less obvious, limit. In Sub-Section 4.3, we saw that free musical improvisation, if ‘successful’ in a conventional sense, may lose what gave it its



meaning initially. In organizations, the equivalent could be unforeseen societal consequences of the introduction of a model that is supposed to give individuals more freedom, without specifying beforehand what exactly is the cost of freedom. Making an organization more informal through free improvisation, i.e., loosening some binding ties, may lead to bind other ties, simply because one can never conceive freedom in an absolute sense, but always in relation to a context.

### **6.1. Negative consequences for the organization: the dark side of improvisation.**

We have seen in Section 5 that there exist a number of industries in which operators and/or customers safety is a primary concern. Examples include the energy industry, the chemical and petrochemical industries and transportation industries such as railways or airlines. In these industries, mistakes can have dramatic consequences. Since improvising consists in operating at the edge of chaos while embracing errors, it is not welcome in these industries: "*Control mechanisms are a necessity when you're trying to run a dangerous operation profitably with as few accidents as possible. Likewise, if you are running a hospital emergency ward and give junior nurses the context to make decisions themselves with no oversight, people might die. If you are manufacturing airplanes and don't have plenty of control processes ensuring every part is assembled perfectly, the possibility of deadly accidents increases. If you are washing windows on skyscrapers, you need regular safety inspections and daily checklists. Leading with control is great for error prevention.*" (Hastings and Meyer, 2020, p. 214).

Giustiniano *et al.* (2016) remind us that not all organizational improvisations are successful and shed some light on what they call 'the dark side of improvisation' by developing a case study based on the sinking, in 2012, of the cruise ship Costa Concordia. The sinking resulted from a collision with a rock during an unplanned sail-by, "*an out-of-route maneuver that brings a ship close to shore to salute those on land*" (Giustiniano *et al.*, 2016, p. 224), ordered by the captain of the ship. The authors interpret this maneuver as "*a form of organizational improvisation, performed both with the acquiescence of the line of command and the compliance of the crew (...), thereby constituting a state of unreflective obedience (...)*" (*Ibid.*). Given that, "*even in high-reliability organizations in which procedures and operational standards are supposed to ensure reliability, individual conduct - both in normal and emergency conditions - can create disasters*" (*Ibid.*), the case at hand is a reminder of "*how improvised and noncompliant actions can [further] jeopardize organizations*" (*Ibid.*).

This useful reminder emphasizes a key difference between free improvisation as a musical practice and free improvisation as a model for organizing. In the former, the music being played is not the end product of a score, the work of a composer, but a 'work in progress' (Léandre, 2011), an ongoing process that is in a state both of continuous unfolding and of constant renewal (Cannone and Guerpin, 2018). In this process, there can be no failure (see Section 3). What would elsewhere appears as 'errors' is embraced in the music, which unfolds, warts and all, in front of the listeners. Risk-taking can be maximal because its consequences are purely musical, except on rare instances such as the 1981 Company Week (improvisation workshop), during which "*the duetting trumpets of Toshinori Kondo and Charlie Morrow extend[ed] beyond the confines of the theatre and out into the arms of the London constabulary*" (Bailey, 1992, p. 135). By contrast, in an organization, errors can lead to catastrophes. Suffice to say, as a dreadful example, that 32 persons lost their lives during the sinking of the Costa Concordia. It is therefore best to implement the free improvisation model for

organizing in its primary locus, i.e. organizations where creativity, rather than safety, is the primary objective.

## 6.2. Negative societal consequences.

Contemporary free improvisation, when it emerged as a musical movement in Europe in the 1960's, had an undeniable political element to it (Sub-Section 4.2.1). As social and political movements expressed a wish for a less authoritarian society, some musicians, echoing the concerns of the day, rejected the tyranny of the composer - the primary authoritarian figure in Western music. This dissatisfaction with the hegemony of the composer is expressed in assertions such as: "*Music for the instrumentalist is a set of written symbols which he interprets as best he can. They, the symbols, are the music, and the man who wrote them, the composer, is the music-maker. The instrument is the medium through which the composer finally transmits his ideas. (...) [C]omposers prefer the instrumentalist to limit his contribution to providing the instrument, keeping it in tune and being able to use it to carry out, as accurately as possible, any instructions which might be given to him. The improvisor's view of the instrument is totally different.*" (Bailey, 1992, p. 98).

This view is clearly stated by saxophonist and veteran improviser Evan Parker: "*I'm suggesting that if anyone in the production of a music event is dispensable, it is the score-maker, or the 'composer' as he is often called. My 'ideal music' is played by groups of musicians who choose one another's company and who improvise freely in relation to the precise emotional, acoustic, psychological and other less tangible atmospheric conditions in effect at the time the music is played*" (reported in Bailey, 1992, p. 81). This indicates that one reason why the first generation of free improvisers wanted to do away with the dominance of the composer is because they conceived music making as a social activity. Collective improvisation can be thought of as a social as well as musical experiment, in which participants create open, non-hierarchical social relations through the medium of music.

As a model for organizing, this practice is a direct critique of the hierarchical and highly structured Fordist organization, the dominant model in the 1960's and 1970's. Free improvisation proposes an alternative where extemporaneousness replaces planning, where emergence replaces prescription and where the focus is on processes before products. This alternative model partakes of the "artist critique" of Fordist capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999; Chiapello, 1999). Contemporary capitalism has long integrated this critique (Saladin 2009, 2014; Aggeri 2017), as exemplified by the organizations reviewed in Section 5. In an organization such as Netflix, 'led with context', social relationships are less formal, less hierarchical and definitely more democratic than in an organization 'led with control'. Any employee may openly criticize even members of the top management without fears of consequences, if he/she deems it is in the interest of the organization. But the newfound freedom and sense-making provided by this type of organization has a cost that must be clearly stated in order to better grasp the limits of the free improvisation model.

In the case of Netflix, the cost is inherent in the fact that the organization considers itself, and wants to remain, a "*high-talent-density work environment*" (Hastings and Meyer, 2020, p. 166). As a consequence, it has adopted a practice which consists in "*firing a good employee when you think you can get a great one.*" (*Ibid.*). The company is akin to a pro sport team in which "*[t]eam members are playing to stay on the team with every game. For people who value job security over winning championships, Netflix is not the right choice (...)*" (Hastings and Meyer, 2020, p. 170). A

merely adequate performance is not enough and may lead an employee to lose his/her job. To make up for this and try to "remove any shame for anyone let go from Netflix" (*Op. Cit.*, p 171), perhaps also to avoid embarrassing judicial consequences, the company provides laid-off employees with a "generous severance package" (*Op. Cit.*, p 172).

This policy has served the company well so far, according to its CEO: "When someone is let go at Netflix, we (...) all stay friends and there is no shame." (*Op. Cit.*, p 171). The account he gives of the departure of the company's former human resources directors is that "she wanted to work less, so she left Netflix and it was very amicable. Seven years later we remain close friends and informal advisers to one another." (*Ibid.*). It is interesting to compare this account with the one given by Derek Bailey of his split with Evan Parker, co-founder of the Incus records<sup>42</sup> label: "It wasn't an amicable split (...). I tend to get a bit mouthy. I just get abusive, really. He had every right to be offended. Basically, he wanted to leave Incus and he wanted to do it legally. I told him (...) [w]e don't have to do it legally. Just get out. He wouldn't do that." (Keenan, 2004, p. 47). While Incus was an informal, loosely-coupled organization, its non-profit *modus operandi* meant that resources were scarce, which exacerbated the growing artistic tensions between the two founders.

In any case, the above-mentioned Netflix policy outlines a key difference between free improvisation as a musical practice and free improvisation as an organizational model, and points out to an important limit of the latter. In music, free improvisation cannot fail, it simply is what it is, as explained in Sub-Section 6.1. Musicians are free to participate or not in a group or in a collective improvisation and are generally not dismissed. In contemporary organizations such as Netflix, however, free improvisation is implemented in a way that makes it liable to a penalty for failure: if the creative worker does not display enough talent, if he/she is merely adequate for the job, he/she can be dismissed. This demand for talent is at odds with a key principle of improvisation: the fact that virtuosity is not a prerequisite and that anyone can improvise (see Section 2). This suggests that free improvisation cannot (should not) become a dominant model for organizing. If it were, it would raise acute societal issues that cannot be easily resolved. What would be the place, in a society dominated by Netflix-like organizations, of 'merely adequate' individuals and of those lacking 'talent' remains an open question.

Many contemporary free improvisers are "aware that culture, creativity and communication are becoming the tools of the 'factory without walls'" (Mattin, 2009, p. 23) i.e. aware that their practice can be used to model organizational behavior for best but also for worst. They invite us "to be suspicious of ways in which cultural practices can be exploited by capital" (*Ibid.*), i.e. to remain critical of free improvisation as an organizational model and consider not only its potentialities but also its limitations.

## Conclusion

In this research, we have explored the potential of free, non-idiomatic musical improvisation as an organizational model. Using Weick (1998)'s seminal classification, we have identified four constituent parts that characterize this model: (i) it involves improvisation at its highest degree, (ii) it allows for the emergence of *ex post* structures and organizational forms, (iii) it proposes to engage with others through self-discovery and (iv) it relies intensively on *bricolage*, in the sense of

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<sup>42</sup> See Section 4.2.3 for a brief description of this label.

Ciborra (2002). In a nutshell, it sketches a form of self-organization through noise à la Atlan (1972) which always borders on chaos without surrendering to it.

Free improvisation is also inherently protean, which makes the model suit with sophisticated typologies of organizational improvisation, such as the one proposed by Pina e Cunha *et al.* (2015). We have illustrated how it can be episodic, subversive, resistive and how it may even appear in a semi-structured context. We have emphasized that it can sometimes fit several types simultaneously. We have also highlighted that its subversive nature comprises a social and political (in a broad sense) dimension as well as an economic dimension and that it can be contagious.

We have then gone through examples taken from both case studies and quantitative analyses to examine the empirical relevance of the free improvisation model. We have ascertained that its locus lies in organizations where creativity is the prime directive, such as companies operating in the entertainment or advertising industries. Specific aspects of the free improvisation model may nevertheless be found elsewhere, e.g. in a semi-structured context in higher education institutions or as subversive improvisation in the hotel industry.

Finally, we have stressed two limits of the model. First, it cannot apply to organizations primarily concerned with operators' or customers' safety (e.g., chemical industries, airlines, railway companies, etc.) because it embraces errors and, in these organizations, errors will have dramatic or deadly consequences. The second limit is that organizations which implement this model integrate the 'artist critique' that emerged in the 1970's. However, the sense of increased workplace democracy and freedom it gives to employees may come at the cost of increased job insecurity. This makes its acceptability low beyond specific segments of society. If it were generalized, it would likely result in greater economic precarity, which is not desirable in a world where poverty and its cognates (such as environmental issues) are major concerns.

Our contribution leaves scope for further research, primarily of an applied nature: to complement the existing empirical literature on organizational improvisation, we would like to gather data that would allow us to build proxy measures of reliance on practices derived from the free improvisation model. If writing about as elusive a subject as free improvisation is a challenge, trying to measure reliance on different forms of organizational improvisation is another, of quite another magnitude. It is worth attempting, though, in order to further examine, empirically, how this organizational practice relates to other aspects of organizations, such as performance and behavior.

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Figure 1: Organizations and the locus of the free improvisation model

