



---

## Pragmatist Aesthetics as a Framework for Analysing Improvised Music

Charles Watkins

Guildhall School of Music & Drama

### Abstract

“Our ear is not satisfied, and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions,” wrote futurist Luigi Russolo in 1913. The twentieth century subsequently witnessed the abandonment of the western classical tradition, searching for sonic stimulation in more extreme abstraction and noise—of which improvised music offers a paradigmatic example. Its wholesale rejection of rules and tradition seems to leave no common ground on which it can be assessed, making value judgements purely subjective. However, improvisers certainly recognise that there are improvisations of differing quality. This paper attempts to identify a shared basis for assessing improvised music, utilising the discipline of pragmatist aesthetics. It demonstrates that emphasising subjectivity doesn’t lead to total arbitrariness and offers suggestions for how we can move towards making shared judgements of improvised music. Pragmatist aesthetics asserts the primacy of dynamic experience in art—first articulated in John Dewey’s work *Art as Experience*. The analytical framework proposed in this paper follows the contours of Dewey’s work: first by exploring our experience of the world, then how art expresses that experience, and finally how we experience art itself. Each of these stages are explored in relation to the 2012 improvised music recording ‘... The Worse the Better’, by Peter Brötzmann, John Edwards, and Steve Noble. This offers an example of how pragmatist aesthetics functions effectively as an analytical framework, as well as opening up the space for future discussions in the theory and practice of improvised music.

**Charles Watkins** is a London-based clarinettist on the improvised music scene. Particularly through solo improvisation, his work explores questions of what it means to listen: to sound, to ourselves, and to the Other.

# Pragmatist Aesthetics as a Framework for Analysing Improvised Music

Charles Watkins

Improvised music is elusive,<sup>1</sup> defying formal analysis or straightforward categorisation.<sup>2</sup> Primarily, it has been understood in relational terms—between musicians, audiences, and environments—but this risks neglecting the aesthetic element itself. Richard Shusterman identifies

a growing preoccupation with the *anaesthetic* thrust of this century's avant-garde, itself symptomatic of much larger transformations in our basic sensibility as we move increasingly from an experiential to an informational culture.<sup>3</sup>

Following Shusterman, I believe we need to reclaim the priority of aesthetic experience in improvised music discourse, which means bringing together the oft-separated categories of subject and object. Although these have historically been treated as mutually exclusive, even antithetical to each other, I will argue that only by integrating them can we answer the question of whether improvised music has real value, and how we can affirm that whilst retaining a place for personal taste and disagreement. Underlying the whole discussion, therefore, will be the question of shared experience: is it possible to find common ground for making aesthetic judgements, or are judgements only ever individual?

This question is especially pertinent when it comes to discussing improvised music, as it invokes such strong reactions from its practitioners, fans, and critics. It will act as a case study for demonstrating why music cannot be analysed apart from both subject and object, utilizing the recent discipline of pragmatist aesthetics to do so.

## *Pragmatist Aesthetics*

Pragmatist aesthetics is best understood as the aesthetic tradition which developed out of John Dewey's work *Art as Experience*,<sup>4</sup> particularly as appropriated by Richard Shusterman in his book *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.<sup>5</sup> As the name suggests, it is rooted in the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, which Shusterman defines as follows:

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my anonymous peer reviewer for their incisive comments on my paper, all of which have been helpful and thought-provoking.

<sup>2</sup> I define improvised music as 'Music which has improvisation as its most basic element.' This distinguishes it from other improvisatory styles like Indian classical music, flamenco, or baroque—each of which have a more fundamental element: the Indian raga (melodic set), the flamenco compas (rhythmic unit), or the baroque thoroughbass (harmonic structure). See: Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, Revised ([s.l.]: Da Capo Press, 1992), 4–5, 14, 22. Improvised music, especially in the record discussed in this essay, often bears strong resemblance to jazz music (in instrumentation and form), but in reality, it is closer to avant-garde and experimental music forms.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 15. Henceforth abbreviated to *PL*.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, Kindle (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 1934). Henceforth abbreviated to *AE*.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). Henceforth abbreviated to *PA*.

An empirical rather than an a priori philosophy (the term “empirical” deriving from the Greek word for experience), pragmatism determines meanings and assesses beliefs in terms of their experiential effects, and is thus committed to the empirical procedures of observation and experimental hypothesis testing that form the core of scientific method.<sup>6</sup>

At its most basic, therefore, pragmatist aesthetics is about asserting the priority of our experience of art, as opposed to the theoretical priority of aesthetic idealism. Idealism, Dewey observed, led to a compartmentalizing tendency in the arts, as galleries and museums increasingly ‘isolated [art] from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience’.<sup>7</sup> Without being experienced, art merely exists as a symbol of cultural (and economic) capital, rather than enriching our lives—which should be its very purpose. Instead, we need to recover ‘the continuity of [a]esthetic experience with normal processes of living’.<sup>8</sup> This means understanding aesthetic experience as a necessary part of our being-in-the-world.<sup>9</sup>

Aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is understood as a natural function of the ‘living organism’, distinguished as ‘the clarified and intensified development of traits that belong to every normally complete experience’.<sup>10</sup> It is a holistic experience of perception *and* emotion—the meeting of object and subject in a moment of consummation—that sets aesthetic experience apart in human life.<sup>11</sup> Hence, a sunset provokes an aesthetic experience just as music does. This is why recovering the continuity between life and art is crucial for Dewey: because aesthetic experience is an essential part of a fulfilled human life, art should be treated as a means of achieving this. Compartmentalization ends up treating aesthetic experience as non-essential, because when galleries, concert halls, and museums make exclusive claims to being spaces of aesthetic experience, it is seen as separate from normal life. Consequently, our lived environment becomes uglier, as evidenced in our noisy, smelly, industrial cities. Aesthetics is relegated to the realm of leisure: a luxury for the weekends, rather than actively contributing to a better society.

Emphasizing subjective experience as our mode of interaction with art is a direct affront to the Kantian model of ‘disinterested’ observation.<sup>12</sup> We cannot interact with art other than as ourselves, bringing with us all that constitutes our background and context—what Donna Haraway describes as ‘situated knowledges’.<sup>13</sup> Rather than trying to eliminate our situatedness, prioritizing experience means understanding art as a contingent

<sup>6</sup> Richard Shusterman, “The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogical Reflections on a Notion and a Name,” in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, ed. Wojciech Malecki (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, *AE*, 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Being-in-the-world’ is a Heideggerian concept essential to his understanding of human existence (‘Dasein’). It asserts that we are dependent on our environment, and can only be understood in relationship to it, rather than apart from it. See: Michael Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020, sec. 2.2.3, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/#BeiWor>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1914), secs 1, 2, 16, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bernard-the-critique-of-judgement>.

<sup>13</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581.

relationship between subject and object. Disinterestedness, whilst it has characterized formalist criticism in the past, is an impossible ideal—art cannot be abstracted from experience, because it is always seen from somewhere. Similarly at odds with disinterested observation, pragmatist aesthetics argues that art is seen *for* the purpose of aesthetic experience, which itself is aimed towards living a more fulfilled life.

Although the title of Dewey's work might suggest otherwise, pragmatist aesthetics does not weigh itself down with questions of what art is. Such a question is always cursed with, in Shusterman's terms, 'mapping art's demarcational limits'<sup>14</sup>—it can only ever work backwards, trying to explain what has already happened, but never giving art something to aim for. Pragmatist aesthetics is instead a 'reorientation toward values ... that could restore [art's] vitality and sense of purpose'.<sup>15</sup> Improvised music offers a compelling example of such art: it can only be understood through experience, and is always orientated towards experience as its goal. Because its very content is relational, spontaneous, and exploratory, it draws art back towards everyday experience, and everyday experience towards art.

Thus far, my exposition of pragmatist aesthetics has largely been illustrated in terms of individual experience. As I turn to demonstrate why the category of experience offers a promising framework for analysing improvised music, I will simultaneously show how experience provides us with a shared basis from which to talk about the music. To do so, I will talk about pragmatist aesthetics as three stages of experience. First, it recognizes that art always emerges from our experience of the world. Secondly, it shows how these experiences become expressed through form. Finally, it identifies how this form is experienced, rather than treating the art object apart from its goal in reception. Each of these stages will be discussed in relation to *The Worse The Better* (henceforth *TWTB*), a live recording by Peter Brötzmann, John Edwards, and Steve Noble.<sup>16</sup>

### *The Background of Improvised Music*

Any discussion of improvised music must begin with the recognition that '[u]nderstanding the world of art begins with understanding the world of everyday experience.'<sup>17</sup> This means recognizing its political, musical, and historical context. Although this might sound like a naïve attempt to cling onto romanticized ideas of 'authorship', it is not some vain attempt to rediscover the players' intentions, nor about erasing the distance between us and them. The immortalization of classical music through scores, and the striving for an 'authentic' performance deceptively suggests that music is absolute and noncontingent, but this is to buy into the abstracting tendency of idealism. To understand my distinction between authorship and context, therefore, it is helpful to think of music as historically emergent. Shusterman highlights this as an important corrective to Dewey's naturalism:

We should not simply choose between aesthetic naturalism and historicist conventionalism, between lived experience and social institutions, [because]

<sup>14</sup> Shusterman, *PL*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brötzmann, John Edwards, and Steve Noble, *The Worse The Better*, Digital Download (London: Otoroku, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Scott R. Stroud, "The Art of Experience: Dewey on the Aesthetic," in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, ed. Wojciech Malecki (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014), 34.

these notions are as much interdependent as they are opposed. ... Natural life without history is meaningless, just as history without life is impossible.<sup>18</sup>

The genre of improvised music could not have existed 500 years ago, because the traditions, philosophy, and social context from which it emerged did not exist. Improvised music is a product of these elements, even when that has included their rejection. In order to begin constructing a shared foundation for analysing this music, therefore, we must begin to recognize and understand the context from which it developed. A brief note of caution must be made, however, not to simply think of history as an upward linear progression—just because improvised music emerges from what has gone before, does not necessarily mean it improves upon these traditions, but rather that our current context is accommodating to it. With this in mind, we can spend some time considering the socio-historical context from which improvised music emerged.

Luigi Russolo's 1913 futurist manifesto, *The Art of Noises*, described how 'In the 19th Century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today, Noise is triumphant and reigns sovereign over the sensibility of men.'<sup>19</sup> The industrial revolution had been accompanied by a sonic revolution: the advent of the machine made the world noisier. Whilst Russolo's polemical style might seem extreme, his underlying point is a perceptive one: our sonic environment *is* very different from that of the past. Every moment is permeated by the rumble of traffic, the wail of sirens, and the assault of construction noise, from which there is no escape. Although Russolo saw this as no bad thing, he recognised that '[o]ur ear is not satisfied and calls for ever greater acoustical emotions'.<sup>20</sup> Like Dewey after him, Russolo's emphasis on aesthetic experience required new, more extreme forms to satisfy it—evidenced in larger ensembles (superseded by amplifiers), longer music, and increasingly dissonant sounds.

This is the lineage *TWTB* finds itself in. Brötzmann is a first-generation European improviser, renowned for his landmark 1968 recording *Machine Gun*. Just as Russolo identified, Brötzmann's record captured the sonic landscape of post-war Germany. The first 45 seconds is a brilliantly guttural imitation of a machine gun, and the record maintains this militaristic aggression throughout. Unlike the expressivist tendencies which have increasingly come to dominate amongst improvisers, Brötzmann explains that his music 'Isn't about self-expression. It's about reacting to the world you live in.'<sup>21</sup>

Edwards and Noble are both younger than Brötzmann and are two of the hardest working musicians on the British improvised music scene. They draw more obviously on a range of musical influences and work in a greater variety of musical styles. It could be argued that they are more authentically virtuosic on their instruments than Brötzmann, whose technique is more simply about getting as much out of the instrument as possible. Nonetheless, this meeting with Brötzmann showcases their deep roots in improvised music and demonstrates the possibility of creating music because of their shared experiences of a noisy, political world. The politic environment is particularly important for Brötzmann, who describes the impetus behind his early music:

<sup>18</sup> Shusterman, *PL*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, Monographs in Musicology 6 (New York: Pendragon Press, 1986), 23.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Morton and Richard Cook, *The Penguin Jazz Guide: The History of the Music in the 1001 Best Albums* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), 352.

We wanted to change things; we needed a new start. In Germany, we all grew up with the same thing: ‘Never again.’ But in the government, all the same old Nazis were still there. We were angry. We wanted to do something.<sup>22</sup>

Although this political background is specific to Brötzmann, it is difficult to extract such political elements from the other forms of improvised music which have subsequently developed.<sup>23</sup> It is a reaction against oppression and authoritarianism, a striving for political and social ideals.<sup>24</sup> *TWTB* is a demonstration of an egalitarian music (although it must be conceded that the saxophone trio format can easily feel hierarchical), and it is resonant with passion. This is not a case of claiming that loud music is necessarily protest music, but it is hard to deny how the improvisatory language used bears resemblance to such an environment.<sup>25</sup> Brötzmann himself recognises that ‘You have to have a kind of form to express what you want to give over to the people. You have to be organized in yourself and you have to know what you are doing.’<sup>26</sup> The form of improvised music is in its seeking to break away from the authority of the composer, the composition, and the consumer.

The phrase ‘the worse the better’ indicates as much. Its origins are in nineteenth-century Russian political thought, where it was used to suggest that, as the conditions for workers decline, the possibility of revolution is greater. The use of this phrase as the album title suggests an affinity with that ideology, although we should be careful not to overread the title—it is likely that it would have been chosen for releasing the recording, rather than being a prior decision regarding what was played. Nonetheless, it shows that the musicians believe themselves to be making a political statement with their music, choosing a title which they consider to represent what the music is.<sup>27</sup>

The musical background provides some more obvious causes for the emergence of improvised music. George Lewis identifies two major categories, which he defines by socio-cultural location: ‘Afrological’, which he sees as emergent from African-American jazz; and ‘Eurological’, situated within the western art music tradition, particularly experimental composers like John Cage.<sup>28</sup> There is merit to these categories, but *TWTB* is difficult to situate in either. It draws elements from jazz music, folk music, and the European avant-garde, just to take a few obvious examples. Recorded in 2010, the culture

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Jones, “Brötzmann Reflects on ‘Machine Gun’ as It Hits 50th Anniversary,” *Downbeat* (blog), 2018. <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/machine-gun-turns-50>.

<sup>23</sup> Although not all improvised music is explicitly political, I would maintain that a political background is necessary for understanding any improvised music. Seth Kim-Cohen makes a similar point, arguing for the textuality of all music. See: Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2009), chapters 5–6.

<sup>24</sup> See: Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), chapter 5.4.

<sup>25</sup> Appelqvist, in her exposition of Hanslick, rejects such an idea of resemblance, particularly because it doesn’t provide a universal basis for critical judgement. Although her point is well argued, I would suggest that a shared context makes available these points of reference. Hanne Appelqvist, “Form and Freedom: The Kantian Ethos of Musical Formalism,” *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 22, no. 40–41 (2011 2010): 75–88.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Brötzmann, A Fireside Chat with Peter Brötzmann, interview by Fred Jung, [n.d.], <https://www.jazzweekly.com/interviews/brotzmann.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> I recognize the possibility that the musicians may simply have been playing on the irony of the phrase: that the ‘worse’ (by conventional standards) the music is, the better they believe it to be. Engagement with the background of these musicians, however, indicates that they probably understand its political origins.

<sup>28</sup> George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.

in which it was created is one where these forms coexist and overlap, especially because of cross-pollination between improvising musicians, and the rise of digital music. Increasingly, globalization is making genre a fluid concept, and postmodern theory has led to the free appropriation of different styles and approaches. Therefore, it must simply be recognized that a huge wealth of musical traditions lie in the background, causing improviser Sarah Gail Brand to describe improvised music as ‘music without idiom’.<sup>29</sup>

Pragmatist aesthetics declares history to be essential and intrinsic to the development of aesthetic practices. Improvised music, in the forms it takes today, inhabits an aesthetic realm that would have been unthinkable before the development of atonality, noise, and freeform music. It relies upon the context from which it emerged, and is always responding to these traditions. It is, however, impossible to be comprehensive in establishing the experienced environment from which *TWTB* emerged. There is much that we embody which may be beyond articulation—our situatedness is lived, and we can only attempt to make explicit the experiences which have formed us. Nonetheless, I have attempted to indicate some of the key experiences I believe may be at play in the music, which offer a helpful starting point for understanding the social (and thus shared) context behind *TWTB*. This is not to imply that music’s meaning can be reduced to its background of experiences. This would suggest that music’s meaning is other than its medium (to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan). Linguistic metaphors for music often betray a gravitation towards meaning as ‘informational’ (i.e. reducible to propositions), whereas music’s meaning is primarily aesthetic. Instead, the historicist nature of aesthetics provides a background against which improvised music can be framed. How this background might be at play in the act of expression is the question to which we now turn.

### *The Expression of Improvised Music*

Contingency is central to improvised music. Although often considered to be totally abstract, it relies on the musicians, the environment, and the moment in time as the concrete conditions of its existence—these generate the content of musical expression. However, this risks making improvised music seem overly deterministic, as if improvised music is merely the natural consequence of our lived experience. For this reason, it is necessary to recognise that improvised music has a *telos*: an end (or ends) towards which it is orientated. Dewey sees this as an important distinction between pragmatism and empiricism, highlighting that ‘[pragmatism] does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action.’<sup>30</sup> This is essential for understanding pragmatist aesthetics, with Scott Stroud similarly commenting that ‘[t]he aesthetic combines the future and the past in the present.’<sup>31</sup> It is the combination of antecedent and consequent phenomena which gives improvised music its form: that which ‘organizes material into the matter of art.’<sup>32</sup> It is

<sup>29</sup> Sarah Gail Brand, “An Investigation of the Impact of Ensemble Interrelationship on Performances of Improvised Music Through Practice Research” (PhD diss., Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), 16. Nonetheless, there are still clear ‘schools’ of improvised music. Unavoidably, an ensemble or a musician will develop an idiom of sorts.

<sup>30</sup> John Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilisation* (London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 24.

<sup>31</sup> Stroud, “The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics,” 44.

<sup>32</sup> Dewey, *AE*, 139.

born out of our experiences, as has been seen, but is also orientated towards shared goals, as will now be explored.

Ensemble relationships are vital to understand here as the *means* by which these goals are achieved, so I will draw particularly on Brand's research into ensemble interrelationships, which she has developed by drawing improvisation practice into conversation with psychoanalytic theory.<sup>33</sup> Brand does not often discuss musical goals, perhaps because of the emphasis improvisers tend to place on spontaneity, and the taboo of entering an improvisation with preconceived ideas. But neglecting to talk about a vision for the music seems to forget that we do not have to make music, but that we choose to. Distinguishing between a structural goal (i.e. coming into an improvisation with a plan for how the music *should* sound) and an experiential goal (coming into an improvisation with the hope and intention that it will succeed) is therefore a vital distinction which pragmatist aesthetics helps us understand. A structural vision *would* preclude spontaneity, but if there was never an experiential goal, then no one would make music. *TWTB* offers a clear example of a music which is aimed towards a powerful and stimulating experience, which is why pragmatist aesthetics makes such a helpful conversation partner to improvised music discourse.

'Musical intersubjectivity' and 'shared meaning' are two vital elements of ensemble relationships, both of which constitute a recurring theme throughout Brand's paper. She defines musical intersubjectivity as 'a sharing of musical intentions and cognitive process',<sup>34</sup> going on to identify it as the culmination of the elements in her framework.<sup>35</sup> It demonstrates that the musicians are aware that they have entered into a shared creative experience—unity is achieved between the members of the group, especially through the sharing of musical *intentions*. This recognises that an improvisation is not about the meeting of unrelated individuals, each playing whatever they want, but rather that an improvisation is a collective endeavour—the whole ensemble desires that it would succeed, and move towards this vision through their interactions with each other. Shared meaning, therefore, could be understood as the goal towards which improvised music is orientated: an improvisation is the creation of the ensemble. It is not something which occurs instantaneously, however. Rather, it is 'cultivated and maintained with ... collaborators over a long-term period'.<sup>36</sup> Just as in a conversation with an old friend, shared meaning is developed through the deepening of relationships over time, as well as an understanding of the shared conventions of improvised music. This interpersonal dynamic is very

<sup>33</sup> In the spirit of Roland Barthes, many formalists would question the worth of such a discussion, on the grounds that we cannot know what is influencing the musicians' processes. I dispute this claim on a number of points. Firstly, we *do* have access to the artists' contexts (as demonstrated in the previous section). Secondly, as will be shown, Brand's framework helps us to recognize the intentions of the musicians through their actions (her psychoanalytic background is important to bear in mind also). Thirdly, because improvised music is a group activity, it requires shared methods and visions, and recognizing these deepens the potential to appreciate the music (for this reason, I would argue that *watching* improvised music is often more fulfilling than merely listening to it, because it is easier to see the group interacting). It does not need to be a case of 'all or nothing'—we might not have direct access to the artists' minds, but that does not make it impossible to get inside their process, even if it might be speculative at points. I will, however, grant that the recording itself is ultimately more important than the process, as will be explored in further detail in section 4.

<sup>34</sup> Brand, "Ensemble Interrelationships in Improvised Music," 99.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>36</sup> Brand, "Ensemble Interrelationships in Improvised Music," 144.

important for Brand's thought, as demonstrated by her frequent emphasis on intersubjectivity—that improvisations does not take place between instruments, but between persons.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the relational dynamic is essential and intrinsic to the aesthetic content.

Having identified these relational processes, Brand offers a number of elements which often take place in an ensemble improvisation (see: Figure 1, Appendix). These elements are recognisable and repeatable, and so are important in our identification of a shared object to analyse.

Some of the elements worth mentioning are attuned responses: a 'Musical phrase, gesture or sound that responds to the intensity or energy of another's improvising';<sup>38</sup> matching: a 'Musical phrase, gesture, sound or tonal framework that is analogous to or resembles another's';<sup>39</sup> and ensemble meeting: 'Material that denotes a musical agreement in the group.'<sup>40</sup> Brand identifies these within her own performing work, as effective processes taking place between the members of an ensemble. Although not universal to all improvised music, they offer a helpful introduction to formal processes with which to talk about the music. They are not themselves the *goal* of the improvisation, but rather are constitutive of musical intersubjectivity, which is itself aimed towards a successful improvisation.

The process of improvisation can be wrongly understood as musicians listening to each other and trying to fit in. Constructive resistance, where a musician clearly plays against something else going on, offers an important corrective. David Borgo explains:

While sensitivity to the group is an essential component of improvised performance, to blindly base one's own playing on what others do or to simply follow the group as an overriding strategy can lead to rather inflexible and ineffective results, producing a musical 'circular mill.'<sup>41</sup>

Constructive resistance can be difficult to identify when listening to improvised music, as often the resistance is felt by the musicians, rather than heard by the audiences. For it to work successfully, therefore, you need musicians who are independent and willing enough to sustain their own ideas, so they would not flinch at musical conflict. These moments are positive because they are 'constructive': a more interesting improvisation is the end towards which it is aimed (rather than the sadistic end of frustrating the intentions of another musician). These kinds of processes deepen ensemble relations, and act as ways of understanding what the shared vision for the particular improvisation might be. Experienced musicians are able to recognize and achieve a shared vision through their lived understanding of the improvisation process, and so a successful improvisation is one where the vision is achieved (even if the vision changes). Whilst difficult to articulate, the aforementioned elements offer a starting point for analysing how this happens.

Musical goals are effectively realised through shared meaning and musical intersubjectivity. It is the execution of such a shared vision which enables us to talk about

<sup>37</sup> This is made especially clear in Brand's fourth chapter, "Ensemble Interrelationships in Improvised Music."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>41</sup> David Borgo quoted in Brand, "Ensemble Interrelationships in Improvised Music," 106.

positive and negative aspects of an improvisation, especially through understanding some of the formal techniques used in improvised music. Brand's framework offers a helpful analysis of these elements, demonstrating how improvisers make individual decisions within a shared context and towards a shared goal. These decisions are always going to be influenced by a musician's situatedness, and sometimes the backgrounds of improvisers will make for less compatible musical relationships. But the trio in *TWTB* offer a clear example of musical intersubjectivity, with a shared vision of how to approach the music. Because these elements are relational, however, there is an important sense in which they can only be understood through being experienced by the musicians—we can only attempt to identify how well the shared vision was realised. So, more vitally for this paper, we must now consider how *TWTB* is actually experienced by an audience.<sup>42</sup>

### *The Reception of Improvised Music*

Analysing improvised music, as pragmatist aesthetics would claim for any form of music or art, must be done through its experience. Hence, Dewey outlines the importance of form as 'the operation of forces that carry the experience of an event, object, scene, and situation to its own integral fulfilment'.<sup>43</sup> Without the formal elements generated by the ensemble, there can be no experience.

This is not equivalent to saying that, because the formal elements do exist, everyone will experience it the same. True, a more effective use of the formal elements may be more likely to stimulate aesthetic experience, but, as with thinking about the background of the music itself, the experience of improvised music is always situated. A significant factor behind how we experience an improvisation is where *we* are situated. Our situatedness is our interpretive framework, through which we see the world.<sup>44</sup> Stanley Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities' is useful to mention here, which claims that our hermeneutics are learned through the communities in which we participate.<sup>45</sup> This is important to assert as we attempt to identify shared bases for our analysis of improvised music. To give an example: a baroque music audience would hear improvised music in a very different way from a heavy metal audience. The contrapuntal elements would be better recognized by the baroque audience, whereas a metal audience would be more likely to appreciate the intensity. These interpretive communities grant different viewpoints on the music, yet through immersion in different communities, we learn to experience more richly.

To demonstrate this, I will offer some brief observations on how I experience *TWTB*. This is not a claim to any kind of absolute reading of the music, but rather an attempt to demonstrate how I believe pragmatist aesthetics helps us to hear improvised music.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> 'The Intentional Fallacy' would claim that the artists' intentions are unimportant, and the only thing that matters is what actually happened—whether or not it was intended. However, a significant difference in my analysis is the need for a successful group dynamic. This does not treat intention as an absolute, set in stone from the beginning, but rather an ongoing reevaluation of the process. Ultimately, it is necessary for the musicians to share a goal of creating a successful improvisation together, and this overarching goal shapes the decisions that happen in the improvisation itself. It is, therefore, a valid criticism of *the music itself* to say 'The musicians were just moving in different directions.' W. K. Wimsatt, Jr and M. C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (September 1946): 468–88.

<sup>43</sup> Dewey, *AE*, 142.

<sup>44</sup> For an enlightening discussion on this issue, see: Shusterman, *PA*, Chapter 5.

<sup>45</sup> See: Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the 'Variorum,'" *Critical Enquiry* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 465–85.

<sup>46</sup> Shusterman provides similar readings of rap and country music in Shusterman, *PL*, chapters 3–4.

Shusterman emphasizes the ethical element of pragmatist aesthetics: it exists to help us live more fulfilled lives. Hopefully, my experience of *TWTB* can lead others to a richer experience of improvised music.

These observations will be accompanied by a method of grid notation I have developed specifically for this purpose (see Appendix, Figures 2–5, Appendix). Inspired by Morton Feldman's *Projections*, it has time running along the X-axis, and tessitura along the Y-axis, indicating a (very) rough outline of the shape of the music. The grid notation also utilizes greyscale shading, which represents intensity—whether that means density, volume, or even the type of sounds used. The intensity is relative, rather than absolute (which would have been difficult to record accurately), with darker shades representing the more intense moments. At a few points on the transcription, squares are marked with an 'x'. These represent some kind of visceral extended technique, which I felt needed an additional method of notating. As with my method of analysis, my transcription draws together both the objective and subjective elements of the music—it requires my interpretation (for example, what qualifies as high in the tessitura, or deciding how intense a passage is) of the sounds taking place. I acknowledge the numerous limitations of such a transcription method, for example the lack of specific details, but it will serve to illustrate the key points of my textual commentary—in particular, how the music was experienced by me.

From the very first sound, the music is visceral and affective (see: Figure 2). Noble rolls around with brushes, and Edwards' bass creeps upwards. Until 01:27, Brötzmann's playing is keening, but melodic. At that point, he becomes more characteristically abstract, utilizing extended techniques in fast-moving and dense passage. At 02:08, Edwards' bowing becomes more aggressive, appropriately disturbing alongside Brötzmann's multiphonics. 02:45 introduces a fairly typical overblown saxophone 'scream', driving home the intensely passionate feeling of the music, although it only surfaces briefly. Noble gets denser and more aggressive, reflecting this sense of passionate ascent, with the three musicians each finding distinct ways to contribute. At 03:40, Brötzmann overblows again, the intensity growing and growing. Although my temperament is not 'aggressive', I have always found high intensity music incredibly affective, and my association of multiphonics with the spiritual-political music of the 1960s always makes such moments feel like a grasping towards ecstatic experience.<sup>47</sup>

Around 5:24, Brötzmann sustains some high pitches, again encouraging a sense of ascent. Underneath, Edwards is jumping around much more—almost inaudible under the other two, but providing a textural 'mismatch' that is quite effective. At 07:08, Edwards and Brötzmann match each other's sound, a brief but exciting meeting. Although by 07:50 there is a slight sense the energy is waning, Noble powerfully pushes through, and the others are renewed by a rejuvenated passion. 09:10 marks a significant change of mood, as Edwards introduces a slow repeated bass motif. As Brötzmann descends, with almost a sigh of relief, there is a real sense that the effectively built tension has been let go—a welcome respite for the listener.

<sup>47</sup> This theme is comprehensively expanded upon in Stephen Davies, "Emotions Expressed and Aroused by Music," in *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). I thank my anonymous peer reviewer for bringing this work to my attention.

The music transitions into a messy jazz sound at 10:00, with Noble provocatively tumbling around between the slow swing of Brötzmann and Edwards (see Figure 3, Appendix). Out of the blue, Edwards moves into a rapid pizzicato bass section at 11:12. With Brötzmann out of the picture, there is something intriguing about this intricate new idea, which previously would have been lost in the noise of the full trio. It becomes an exciting duo with Noble, whose cymbals somewhat imitate Edwards' techniques. 13:24 demonstrates that, even without Brötzmann, the two are more than capable of producing noise, which feels more appropriately in line with the atmosphere of the first 10 minutes. Brötzmann's reintroduction around 14:00 is a welcome one, with the music quickly increasing in pace and intensity.

16:04 sees Brötzmann's multiphonics emerge again, which is well received by the others, although it lasts only briefly. The louder, higher, and more visceral these sounds, the more I feel myself shaken by the trio—they are the moments I find most exciting.

Around 18:20 I begin to wonder whether the intensity has gone on for too long without significant variation—the passion does not seem as sustained as the first time round. There are moments of interest, but either the energy does not feel quite high enough, or the sound quite intriguing enough. So, at 22:00, the familiar descent feels like an appropriate change (see: Figure 4). And again, Noble introduces a jazz feel, with a ride swing going on underneath Edwards' angular playing. As the previous section had not grabbed me as much as the first, I welcome this change in texture, and the way these two musicians respond to each other is consistently enticing.

24:22 has the first significant change in density of the whole improvisation. There are little holes in the playing of both musicians, who seem to dance around each other. The new sounds clatter around in a way that makes me wish I was watching, and thankfully this more-spacious texture is continued even when Brötzmann reemerges at 25:38. After playing some unintrusive sustained notes, he brings in a cry-like melody, in total contrast with Noble's and Edward's banging and crashing. But this slightly off-balanced texture is wonderful, giving the feeling that the musicians really are in tune with each other.

Again, this section feels to me very reminiscent of the 'spiritual jazz' of musicians like John Coltrane: the simple melodies from Brötzmann, accompanied by a low, heavy accompaniment from the other musicians. Coltrane's masterpiece, *A Love Supreme*, is the landmark suite in this regard: utilizing modal harmony, extended techniques (particularly overblowing—which Brötzmann uses to similar effect), and lengthy solos, it instigated a tradition of passionate music that is often echoed amongst improvisers. Noble in particular can easily be placed within the lineage of Coltrane's drummer, Elvin Jones, particularly through his frequent use of the toms to create a continuous rumbling underneath.

29:30 sees Edwards and Brötzmann move into a new space in synchrony, although Noble carries on with his own trajectory; constructively resisting the change. Both musicians play more pointilistically, which at around 30:06 Noble catches too (see: Figure 5). Edwards plays a rapid walking bass, and whatever Noble is playing creates some brilliant noises up with Brötzmann. This is more akin to the intensity that existed at the start, as the ensemble really feel like they've reached a place where each are contributing effectively.

It often feels like Brötzmann loses the energy the fastest—maybe a sign of fatigue after many years of playing, or maybe just because the saxophone requires a lot of air and commitment to feel like it is playing with energy. So this time, the energy is not sustained for as long—even though Noble and Edwards play effectively, maybe they’re aware that Brötzmann is struggling to maintain it. Near to 34:00, the music slows again, with Edwards playing an impressive pedal in low and high registers. Brötzmann does screech away over the top, but this is very different from how he has previously done so, and the new texture is an interesting one. At 35:00 his keening saxophone is matched by Edwards’ arco bass, in timbre and pitch. It is a beautiful and disconcerting moment, and whilst Brötzmann sustains his pitch, Edwards almost drunkenly lowers his pitch. Again, there is a delightful feeling of being slightly off-balance that this evokes.

36:45 reaches a final climax, with all three musicians suddenly finding new energy. Although only brief, it is well played by all three musicians. The final minute is the most melodic yet, with a folk-like melody from Brötzmann, played against a similar melody of Edwards. Unexpectedly, Edwards keeps bowing once the other two have stopped—increasing in volume until he ends with a last bang. It feels like a fitting end to an exciting set.

Such an analysis can only touch the surface of the kind of experience I went through whilst listening to the music. It is unashamedly a situated interpretation of the musical ‘object’, but it demonstrates how both object and subject are vital for talking effectively about the music. It would be entirely possible for a completely different analysis to be given—even on a different day, I might find such intense music wearisome. But it is the culmination of these experiences—our own and those of others—which help us to experience this music better.

### *Conclusion*

By exploring the different stages of aesthetic experience, I hope to have shown how pragmatist aesthetics could offer a fruitful way forward for conversations around the theory and practice of improvised music. Recognizing it as a contingent, historically emergent music is vital for learning how to experience it well, and although improvised music practices will undoubtedly change as our times change, it will continue to be possible to make sense of it through its historicity, formal elements, and our situatedness. *TWTB* demonstrates that the pursuit of aesthetic experience continues to persist, and points us to a promising future for the music. But we must return to our opening question: does such a framework give us the space for *shared* understanding and appreciation of improvised music? Or does pragmatist aesthetics remain bound to individual subjectivism?

The section *The Background of Improvised Music* began to answer the question of shared understanding, by highlighting that art is never created apart from its relation to the world. It is brought forth in the context of shared experiences—we always share the world *with* others, and learn how to experience the world as we see how others experience it. Improvisers are able to make critical judgements of an improvisation, because they inhabit an interpretive community—a shared language and interpretive framework that has developed from clear traditions. This was expanded on in the section *The Expression of Improvised Music*, which discussed the shared aims and processes of improvised music—

especially through approaches and techniques that have been affirmed within the interpretive community. There is no claim that they are 'absolute', in the sense that they will always be understood positively, but they are 'objective', in the sense that they really do take place. Within our current moment, these are (amongst) the shared practices that improvisers employ when working together, and so understand when they are being utilized well or badly. Finally, although the individual is the site of reception, allowing space for taste (as developed through our personal contexts) and disagreement. The penultimate section, *The Reception of Improvised Music*, attempted to show how an individual experience has the aim of shared understanding and appreciation, through partaking in the experience of another. I am not claiming an authoritative interpretation of the music, but rather offering my experience in the hope that others might be able to learn from it. It is within this context that it is possible to develop shared understanding. We experience as individuals, but never apart from communities, seeking to live more fulfilled lives through the pursuit of aesthetic experience. Pragmatist aesthetics, therefore, offers a way forward for improvised music, by recognizing it as a music which has experience at its very heart.

## Appendix

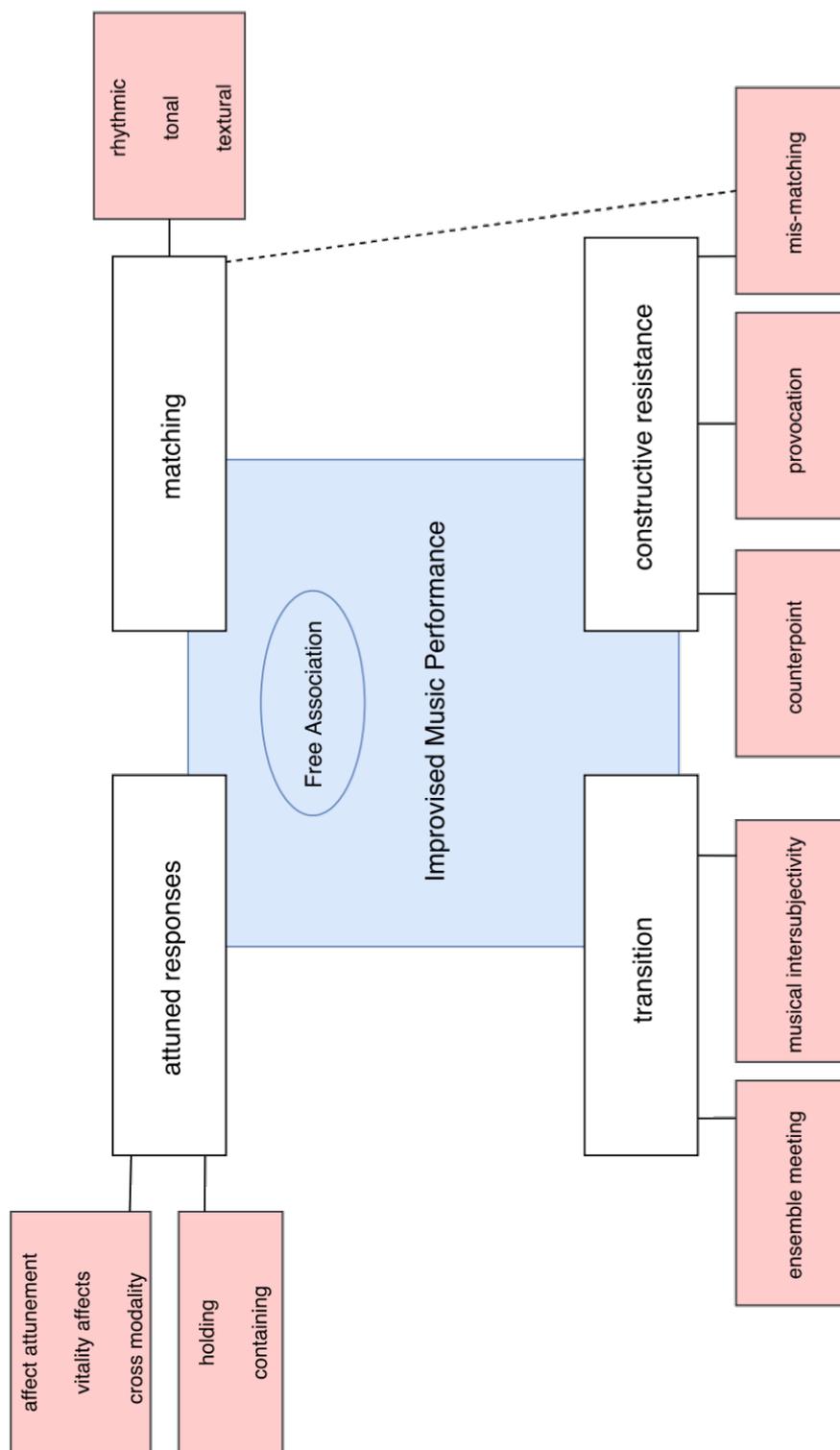


Figure 1. Improvised Music Framework. Brand, “Ensemble Interrelationships in Improvised Music,” 84.

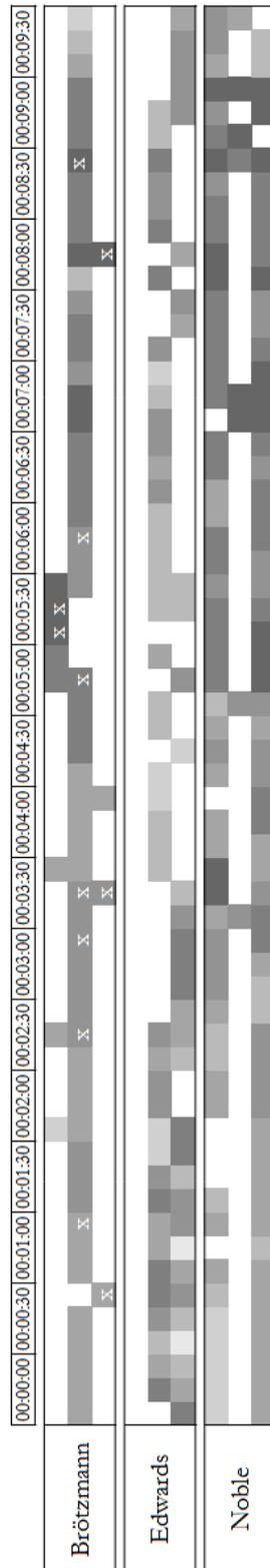


Figure 2: 00:00:00-00:09:30

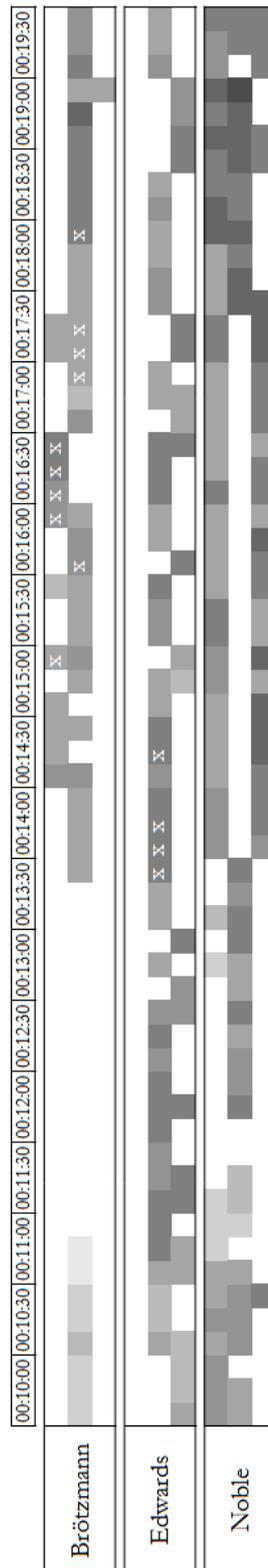


Figure 3: 00:10:00-00:19:30

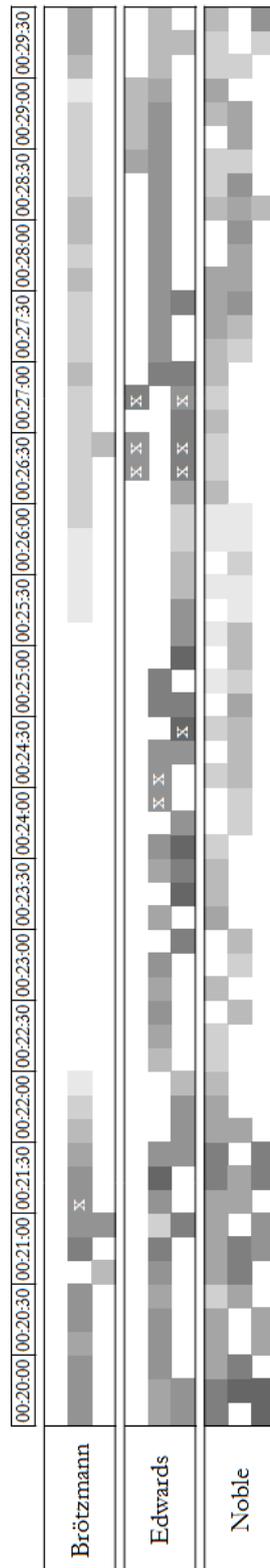


Figure 4: 00:20:00-00:29:30

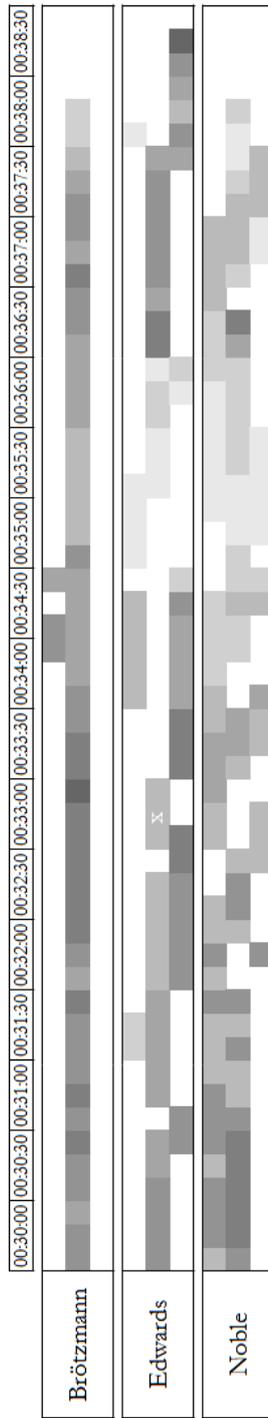


Figure 5: 00:30:00-00:38:30

## Bibliography

- Appelqvist, Hanne. "Form and Freedom: The Kantian Ethos of Musical Formalism." *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 22, no. 40–41 (2011–2010): 75–88.
- Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Revised. Boston MA: Da Capo Press, 1992.
- Brand, Sarah Gail. "An Investigation of the Impact of Ensemble Interrelationship on Performances of Improvised Music Through Practice Research." PhD diss., Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019.
- Brötzmann, Peter. "A Fireside Chat with Peter Brötzmann." Interview by Fred Jung, [n.d.]. <https://www.jazzweekly.com/interviews/brotzmann.htm>.
- Brötzmann, Peter, John Edwards, and Steve Noble. *The Worse The Better*. Digital Download. London: Otoroku, 2012.
- Davies, Stephen. "Emotions Expressed and Aroused by Music." In *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Dewey, John. *Art As Experience*. Kindle. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 1934.
- . *Philosophy and Civilisation*. London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931.
- Fish, Stanley E. "Interpreting the 'Variorum.'" *Critical Enquiry* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1976): 465–85.
- Gottschalk, Jennie. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
- Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–99.
- Jones, Andrew. "Brötzmann Reflects on 'Machine Gun' as It Hits 50th Anniversary." *Downbeat* (blog), 2018. <https://downbeat.com/news/detail/machine-gun-turns-50>.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by J. H. Bernard. 2nd edition. London: Macmillan and Co., 1914. [oll.libertyfund.org/title/bernard-the-critique-of-judgement](http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bernard-the-critique-of-judgement).
- Kim-Cohen, Seth. *In the Blink of an Ear*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2009.
- Lewis, George E. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 91–122.
- Malecki, Wojciech. *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.
- Morton, Brian, and Richard Cook. *The Penguin Jazz Guide: The History of the Music in the 1001 Best Albums*. London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010.

Charles Watkins

Russolo, Luigi. *The Art of Noises*. Monographs in Musicology 6. New York: Pendragon Press, 1986.

Shusterman, Richard. *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2000.

———. *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

———. “The Invention of Pragmatist Aesthetics: Genealogical Reflections on a Notion and a Name.” In *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, edited by Wojciech Malecki, 13–32. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.

Stroud, Scott R. “The Art of Experience: Dewey on the Aesthetic.” In *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, edited by Wojciech Malecki, 33–46. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.

Wimsatt, Jr, W. K., and M. C. Beardsley. “The Intentional Fallacy.” *The Sewanee Review* 54, no. 3 (September 1946): 468–88.



