

# Chapter 1 : Research outline

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## Introduction

Walter Thompson is a New York-based composer and saxophonist who derived the basic idea of using non-verbal signals for directing the course of a live ensemble performance in that city in the mid-1980s. Thompson (2006:12) describes the genesis of Soundpainting as follows:

Thompson moved to New York City in 1980 and formed the Walter Thompson Big Band (now the Walter Thompson Orchestra) in 1984. During the first year with his orchestra, while conducting a performance in Brooklyn, New York, Thompson needed to communicate with the orchestra in the middle of one of his compositions. They were performing a section of improvisation where Trumpet 2 was soloing. During the solo, Thompson wanted to have one of the other trumpet players create a background. Not wanting to emulate bandleaders who yell or speak out loud to their orchestra, Thompson decided to use some of the signs he had experimented with in his Woodstock days.

As Thompson himself admits (*ibid.*), the initial experiment did not work as he had intended<sup>1</sup>: “In the moment he made up these signs: Trumpet I, Background, With, 2-Measure, Feel; Watch Me, 4 Beats. He tried it and there was no response!” He (Thompson 2006:13) concludes by saying: “But in the next rehearsal, members of his orchestra asked what the signing was about—and he told them. The orchestra members thought it was a very interesting direction and encouraged Thompson to develop the language further.” Fittingly perhaps, since Soundpainting to a large extent depends on collaboration between the Soundpainter and the ensemble, the support and encouragement of the members of Thompson’s orchestra spurred him on to continue developing and codifying Soundpainting.

Thompson's father (to whom *Soundpainting Workbook I* is dedicated) was an

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<sup>1</sup> The description of these gestures is drawn from Thompson (2006).

artist associated with Abstract Expressionism as practised by Jackson Pollock, and Walter Thompson's early years were spent listening to the various kinds of music emanating from his father's tape recorder (which he liked to use as accompaniment to his painting activities). This early exposure to music and the visual arts in close association may account for some of the Soundpainting gestures that derive from the visual arts, such as <pointillism>.

Thompson went on to study composition and saxophone with Anthony Braxton, a controversial figure in American improvised music, whose musical career (as composer and performer) incorporates an eclectic set of interests, ranging from John Cage and Charles Ives to ragtime and **free jazz**. Braxton's vast and wide-ranging *oeuvre*, which incorporates elements from mainstream jazz, free improvisation, and experimental music, does not readily fit the stylistic criteria of what is marketed as "American jazz." As a consequence of Braxton's eclecticism, record companies have had considerable difficulties marketing his unpredictable and iconoclastic offerings in the wider American and international marketplace. Braxton's own compositions range from quite loosely arranged frameworks for improvisation to very meticulously and densely notated pieces, which may also have inspired some of Thompson's procedures in designing the Soundpainting system.

Using Walter Thompson's set of some 700 gestures, which serve as instructions to the performers to carry out specific tasks, it is possible to construct a wide variety of musical events. These range from basic material for beginner improvisers to complex large-scale performances such as Thompson's *PEXO* (2001), which he defines as a "Soundpainting symphony."

## **1.2 Background and justification**

Soundpainting is an integrated system of some 700 gestures employed by the Soundpainter to indicate to the ensemble what is to be performed from moment to moment. Although there are obvious similarities in this regard to orthodox conducting, the intentions and results of a Soundpainting

performance differ very radically from an orchestral performance, in which the conductor directs musicians in the performance of a score (such as a Schubert symphony, for example). In the jazz context, a conductor may likewise direct a big band in the realization of an arrangement for such an ensemble by using gestures similar to those of orchestral conducting.

Soundpainting begins with a set of simple signs depicting musical concepts such as volume, tempo, pitch, and duration. Once the ensemble has mastered these musical building blocks, the Soundpainter introduces progressively more complex signals encompassing such notions as genre or style, key, memory, and more. Under the guidance of an expert Soundpainter, the performers interpret progressively more complex combinations of signs resulting in a fluid and flexible performance. In a given Soundpainting event, the result may incorporate sections of previously prepared music<sup>2</sup> as well as free improvisation.

Thompson started developing his system in 1984 and has since founded the Walter Thompson Soundpainting Orchestra (or WTSP), based in New York and dedicated to the performance of Soundpainting creations. Beginning spontaneously during the course of a live performance, Soundpainting has grown over the twenty years of its existence into a robust and precise means of communication.

### 1.3 Research questions

The above discussion highlights the central concern of this thesis:

How does Soundpainting operate as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance?

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<sup>2</sup> In Soundpainting parlance, such previously rehearsed sections are known as <palettes>. Gil Selinger has released a Soundpainting version of Haydn's Cello Concerto in C called *Deconstructing Haydn*, which links quotations from the original piece (in the form of <palettes>) with Soundpainting interludes.

Two related research sub-questions reveal themselves:

- What kind of musical skills should performers bring to bear during a Soundpainting performance? This sub-question is bound up with the nature of language acquisition in music, with reference to Thompson's approach to improvisation
- As it deliberately aims to include many of the possible genres of contemporary musical styles as part of its manifesto, under what terms and conditions is Soundpainting subject to analysis? In short, into exactly what kind of musical genre does Soundpainting fall?

Sub-areas considered in conjunction with the main research question are stated as follows:

- The nature of collaboration in creative activity, so as to describe the dynamics of the contribution of the participants in the musical process
- Contemporary trends in musical theory and analysis, which (in some quarters) display evidence of a radical interrogation of the assumptions of traditional musicology
- Linguistic theory as a comparable analytical methodology, suggested primarily by Thompson's description of Soundpainting as a language about music
- The relationship between music and media as reflecting a triadic modality of creation, mediation, and reception
- Historically informed performance, because the jazz idiom (like WEAM) subscribes to the notion of a canon of works as well as emphasizing the importance of the creative process
- Performance and the performative, because notions of agency and identity are central to certain areas of jazz improvisation.

Semiotic analysis (especially in the field of WEAM) has concerned itself with the examination of musical scores as the *raison d'être* of musical and philosophical inquiry. Whether and how such methods will be useful as tools for the evaluation of Soundpainting (as a subset of improvised music) is also a central concern of this thesis. The author will suggest that the fluid nature of improvised music tends generally to resist such straightforward semiotic analyses, and therefore that a different strategic approach to the understanding of the nature of improvisation may be called for.

## 1.4 Purpose and aims

The purpose of this study is to interrogate Soundpainting from a number of theoretical vantage points, including those of semiotics, **structuralism**, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. This approach is necessitated by the simple fact that Soundpainting is defined by Thompson as a sign language, and thus is susceptible to analysis as part of a broader set of languages whose primary purpose is communication. On the surface at least, this suggests that orthodox conducting and Soundpainting share similarities with one another, in that both activities depend on systems of physical gestures to achieve their purposes.

In comparing the roles of the orthodox conductor and the Soundpainter, the author will describe Soundpainting as a sign-system for the communication of musical ideas. The author will provide a survey of scholarship tracing the development of semiotic theory in general, and its application to the analysis of music in particular. As semiotics provides an analytical framework for describing the communication of ideas in general, the author will examine and evaluate its application to Soundpainting as a means of generating, and communicating, musical ideas in particular.

The author also aims to consider Soundpainting as a late twentieth-century musical phenomenon, which, by virtue of its origin in a particular historical moment, can be subjected to analysis using some of the available critical tools that have shaped human interaction not only with music, but also the world. Soundpainting, as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance, has the potential to act as a deconstructor of traditional roles within such performances. Moreover, it exhibits in the range and eclecticism of its musical concerns (such as Western art music, musical theatre, jazz, and free improvisation) an awareness of postmodernism.

## 1.5 Justification

Music exists as a three-fold series of processes: a first stage of creation, or composition; a middle stage of mediation, involving publication, production, performance, and dissemination; and a final one of reception and perception.

(Hamm 1992:21)

### 1.5.1 A note on musicking

The way in which the term "making music" is used in everyday language highlights an odd paradox. If, in participating in the day-to-day activities that define their social and occupational roles, actors act, sculptors sculpt, composers compose, conductors conduct, and dancers dance, what is it exactly that musicians do? Oddly enough, they "make music."

For Christopher Small, this is an unfortunate shortcoming of ordinary language, because it implies the existence of music as a reified object out there, whose nature suggests somehow that it exists, and *continues to exist*, independently of those who create it. Small's terms, "to music" and "musicking," once one has become accustomed to the neologisms, go a long way to exposing the ideological assumptions at the root of this strange quirk of language. His definition of the term "to music" goes as follows (1998:9): "To music is to take part, in any capacity, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practising, by providing material for performance (which is called composing), or by dancing." By using the term "music" as a verb, rather than a noun, Small's fairly radical conclusion is that there is no such thing as music as an object *per se*, and therefore that music only exists as an activity.

Small's line of argument owes a certain amount to David Elliott's exposition of the idea of music as activity as set out in *Music Matters* (1995). The author will suggest (in chapter 3) that both these points of view can be subsumed under a Wittgensteinian interpretation of language as use.

### 1.5.2 Creation, mediation, and reception

Hamm's triad (that is, the "three-fold series of processes" described above) is useful as shorthand for describing the often-complex processes underlying musicking and its progress en route to reception. The production of the musical artefact at the centre of his discussion—Lionel Richie's song *All Night Long (All Night)*—takes place in a social milieu far removed from the audience that it reaches through the medium of radio. In this particular historical instance,<sup>3</sup> factors of distance both in time and space stretch the line of communication between creator and receiver. Hamm goes on to suggest that historical musicology, especially as practised in the United States, has focused its attention mainly on the stage of creation, and that studies of mass media and some branches of social science tend to examine the area of mediation and performance (the second part of the triad).

To some extent Hamm's preoccupations are far from unique: it is, after all, against this background or shift of focus that are ushered in the concerns of the so-called "New Musicology." With its origins in neo-Marxist critical theory, this methodology strives to acknowledge the social element in music by focussing on process rather than product, thereby emphasizing the people practising music, circumstances under which musicking takes place, the media influencing such practices and, in short, the entire web of relations in which musicking is located.

In Roland Barthes's essay, "The Photographic Message," he likewise reveals a threefold perceptual relationship at work between the viewer and the image, as follows (1977:15):

The press photograph is a message. Considered overall this message is formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission and a point of

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<sup>3</sup> Hamm (1992:26) refers to "this song at the moment it was heard over the radio by two young black women in November of 1984 in a black township in the Republic of South Africa."

reception. The source of emission is the staff of the newspaper, the group of technicians certain of whom take the photo, some of whom choose, compose and treat it, while others, finally, give it a title, a caption, and a commentary. The point of reception is the public which reads the paper. As for the channel of transmission, this is the newspaper itself, or, more precisely, a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph as centre and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption, the layout and, in a more abstract but no less 'informative' way, by the very name of the paper.<sup>4</sup>

Barthes goes on to argue that the photograph is "an object endowed with a structural autonomy" (*ibid.*) but in a process of communication with its commentary or text, in the literal sense. What is in common between these two analyses of such different objects of culture (as in a Lionel Richie pop song and a photograph in a newspaper) is above all that they are products of everyday society.<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps an indication of the quite radical shifts in twentieth century analytical views of cultural life that such "ordinary" products of mass culture are considered as worthy of analysis at all. The notion that such lowly forms of "art" are capable of saying something to their respective audiences is clearly a concern of the Information Age and its postmodern attitude to aesthetic problems, and also for the analysts and commentators trying to understand the dynamics at play.

Returning to Hamm's discussion, his self-avowedly modest intent is to privilege the moment of reception, by situating the listeners' responses to the song in the political context of 1980s South Africa, a time of great unrest and social upheaval. In seeing radio in this case as a promoter of the power interests of the white minority, he concludes by saying (1992:36): "Thus, at

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<sup>4</sup> Barthes goes on to suggest that: "This name represents a knowledge that can heavily orientate the reading of the message strictly speaking: a photograph can change its meaning as it passes from the very conservative *L'Aurore* to the communist *L'Humanité*."

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Korsyn (2003:17) prefers the term "the social," suggesting thereby that "society" is a construct reflecting a number of (sometimes deeply divided) smaller "micro-societies" and not a monolithic concept. Korsyn suggests (*ibid.*): "Just as the postmodern social is decentered, so too are its individuals. Identity today is constructed through participation in numerous and changing groups, which overlap and contradict each other." This viewpoint considers "society" as a product, and "the social" as a process, to some extent thereby allowing for a more fluid view of the mutations and migrations through which "the social" is constituted.



our moment of reception, the ambiguities deliberately built into Richie's song are particularized by specific conditions of history, society, and ethnicity." A crucial implication of Hamm's argument is his criticism of the idea of an unambiguous and final meaning located in the song, suggesting that its reception at that point in time largely depended on the circumstances under which it was received.

Creation, mediation, and reception are not, then, in Hamm's view, neutral terms, which portray an unambiguous relationship. He describes the song (1992:25) in terms of:

Deliberately generalized product, a generic pop song of the early 1980s. The text is non-narrative, repetitious and episodic; its essence is stated in the first few lines, actually in the title itself, and there is no dramatic progression as the song unfolds. The music is likewise episodic, additive, open-ended.

If the listener's task in this triad is to situate meaning in the song, depending on the "specific conditions" of time and place, then the processes of creation, mediation, and reception each arise from relatively fluid ideological and cultural positions, which in turn depend on networks of relations. Hamm's contextualization of Richie's song (as received by those township women in that place at that time) reveals the deep irony of its message of "party on, regardless" against the backdrop of this violent and tumultuous period in South African history, thereby revealing the play of a multivalent dynamic of reception, as Hamm argues, deliberately "built-in" as part of the content of the song itself.

It should be pointed out here that the control of radio as a communication medium was by no means unique to *apartheid* culture in South Africa. As a vehicle for propaganda, radio has proved tremendously useful as a means of entrenching the dominant ideologies of various authorities. On a slightly less sinister level, Orson Welles's famous 1938 hoax news broadcast about the purported Martian invasion is a somewhat extreme illustration of the power of radio to influence and direct public opinion. As documented in Wilson and

Wilson (1998:219), the events unfolded as follows:

On the eve of Halloween in 1938, a 23-year old radio producer and actor named Orson Welles broadcast his rendition of H. G. Wells's short novel *War of the Worlds* on 'The Mercury Theater of the Air.'

All week the cast had been struggling to adapt the story to radio and was finding it difficult to make the drama believable. So Welles decided to present the story as an interruption of a regular music broadcast, with news reporters breathlessly cutting in to describe the landing of creatures from Mars.

Although there were announcements during the broadcast stating that the attack was fictional, Welles's hoax set off scenes of mass hysteria and panic as:

By the end of the hour-long broadcast, people had attempted suicide, jammed long-distance telephone lines, and caused national pandemonium. Military personnel were called back to their bases. In Concrete, Washington, a power failure during the broadcast caused a traffic jam as most of the town's residents fled in their automobiles to escape the invading Martians.<sup>6</sup>

Welles's publicity stunt with regard to *The War of the Worlds* is a case of reception going badly awry, in which listeners reacted in panic to a spurious news broadcast. In contradistinction to the reception of Richie's pop song and the photographic message as described by Barthes, however, there exist instances of live performance in which the processes of composition, performance, and listening take place at the same time, in the present moment. Such performances often include an improvised component, such as the music of the Indian sub-continent, free jazz, contemporary avant-garde music, and certain instances of computer-generated (or algorithmic) pieces, for example.

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<sup>6</sup> Wilson and Wilson (1998:219) conclude: "An estimated 6 million people heard the Welles broadcast, and 1 million of them believed it. It's not known how many others were caught up in the mass hysteria. As a result, the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) quickly stepped in and banned fictional news bulletins from the airwaves."

In the case of Soundpainting these processes also tend to unfold simultaneously, with the result that the divisions between the roles of composer, performer, and listener are not always obvious. The Soundpainter may take on the role of conductor, performer, or listener to varying degrees as the event unfolds, and this fluidity in respect of the boundaries of such roles suggests that Soundpainting may therefore be seen as a type of deconstruction of the power relations of nineteenth century symphonic music.

Kershaw (1999:13), in his discussion of the performative<sup>7</sup> society, has spoken of the “growing interest in performance” with special reference to theatre history and scholarship. This kind of thinking has tended (in some quarters) to move away from the historically based study of the theatrical text as object of inquiry to a more socially situated study of its expression in performance, where the aim is to situate the text in its social context. In musicology, too, these concerns are seen as more and more important.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that the term “text” may refer to any phenomenon open to interpretation, so that in this case it might refer to the written score, to the performance thereof, or to the history of the music and the musician (the province of orthodox musicology), or even to musicology itself (when conceived of as a collection of texts).

### **1.5.3 The role of the conductor in orchestral performance**

In the case of the two performance contexts mentioned above (that is, conducted orchestral and big band performances), the score is a central

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<sup>7</sup> Performative is defined as “relating to or denoting an utterance by means of which the speaker performs a particular act (e.g., I bet, I apologize, I promise).” Often contrasted with constative, “denoting a speech act or sentence that is a statement declaring something to be the case.” This concept, originally from J. L. Austin, forms part of the author's later discussion on the construction of subjectivity within improvised music, as do Gates's theories of signifyin(g). Source: Oxford American Dictionary.

<sup>8</sup> As, for instance, Bowen in Cook and Everist (2001:424-451), Rink (2002).

element in the realization of these musical events. In such performances the score functions both as a mnemonic device and as a map of the musical territory to be traversed, which the conductor and performers navigate simultaneously. For Small (1998), in the somewhat ritualistic context of a WEAM performance, the score takes on an almost mystical significance as the literal and figurative centrepiece of the ceremony. In these circumstances, the conductor has to have supreme and unquestioned control over the orchestra or ensemble at his or her command.

Prévost<sup>9</sup> expresses the potentially negative results of this situation with vigour (1995:51): “When men are not in control of the music they make, when they feel compelled to listen out of duty, then it is clear that men are doing things to other men—that some form of authoritarianism is on the loose.” As a case of “authoritarianism on the loose,” what better example in a musical context than orthodox conducting, which operates, as the author will argue, not only as a sign-system but also as a reflection of power relations within the larger ambit of late capitalist society?

As Van Leeuwen (1999:82) claims: “The symphony orchestra thus celebrates and enacts discipline and control, the fragmentation of work into specialized functions, in short, the work values of the industrial age.” In this view, the role of the conductor can be seen as analogous to that of a foreman directing the workers (members of the orchestra) in the creation of a product (the music) designed by the owner (the composer) for the consumption of the audience. The kind of “discipline and control” to which van Leeuwen refers may also be addressed via the *metaphor* of music as a journey through time, in which case the conductor is in charge of the ship, so to speak.

Graham Collier suggests that the model of the symphony orchestra as a reflection of society is a pervasive one, in stating (1998:11):

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<sup>9</sup> Prévost is a British drummer and co-founder of the free improvisation ensemble AMM.

It's one of the paradoxes of the world—at least the western world—that the values espoused by WEAM are those that dominate our lives. What we see, in the most common manifestations of WEAM, is a conductor in charge of an orchestra playing music which depends for its effect on everything being together. The only changes are those of tempo, dynamics, and so on, which are put into place by the conductor.

Sounds familiar? This is what most governments would like society to be like. A government which knows best and a populace which believes—or at least can be made to suspend its disbelief—that the government is right.

The operations of the orchestra illustrate a fairly rigid organizational structure, in which the vector of communication is generally in one direction only, from the conductor to the orchestra members. This type of organization is generally categorized as "top-down," in which directions (or orders<sup>10</sup>) emanate from above, and tend for the most part to be obeyed without question.

By the end of the nineteenth century the orchestral resources in terms of the colours, available dynamic range, and sheer numbers of players available to composers had grown enormously by comparison with those in the days of Haydn and Mozart. This placed progressively greater resources (in terms of timbral variation, volume, and sheer numbers of players involved in the event) at the disposal of the composer and, by extension, the conductor as his intermediary.

In addition, the increasing complexity of much of this music (and that of the twentieth century) tends to demand far higher levels of technical skill (that is, specialization) from the performer. These factors tend to reinforce competition between performers (as job opportunities in orchestras are limited by economic constraints) and composers, many of whom depend on public funding for their survival. These phenomena suggest a reflection of the industrial work values that van Leeuwen mentions.

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<sup>10</sup> "Ordinary" orchestral musicians (not the leaders of the various sections) are sometimes referred to as "rank and file" players, indicating an obvious parallel with military organizations.

During the author's visit to Paris in March 2003, the opportunity arose to attend a public performance of two works composed and conducted by Pierre Boulez<sup>11</sup> at *Cité de la Musique*. At the time the need was apparent to compare the author's experience (as performer and listener in the Soundpainting workshops) with a kind of music that completely and intentionally excluded any possibility of improvisation. The sheer virtuosity of the performance left one with the aural impression of a rare and elegant piece of jewellery, of extraordinary intricacy and priceless value.

*Anthèmes 2* (for solo violin and electronics) was performed by Hae-Sun Kang, a slight figure as she stood in a single spotlight in the centre of the vast auditorium. Around the auditorium were ranged in a circle a number of loudspeakers into which were fed very soft, mysterious electronic sounds. "Dans sa réécriture de 1997, *Anthèmes 2* fait dialoguer le violon solo avec un ordinateur qui le suit comme son ombre, pour lui répondre çà et là par un véritable contrepoint qui, spatialisé sur des haut-parleurs, surgit autour du public."<sup>12</sup>

Despite the use of the terms "dialogue" and "reply" in the programme notes, this listener felt very little sense of communication in the music and the overwhelming experience (reinforced to no small extent by the staging) was one of loneliness and desolation, a postmodernist map of human isolation against the backdrop of the Information Age. Compared to an orchestra performance as reflecting the ideology of the industrial revolution, the Boulez piece called to mind (both aurally and visually) the image of a faceless worker punching data into a computer terminal.

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<sup>11</sup> Boulez himself conducted two pieces, *Anthèmes 2* (for solo violin and electronics) and *Répons* (for seven soloists and ensemble).

<sup>12</sup> "In its 1997 revision, *Anthèmes 2* creates a dialogue between the solo violin and a computer which follows it like its shadow, replying to it here and there in a true counterpoint which, spatialized over the loudspeakers, surrounds [lit. emerges around] the audience." Programme notes for Boulez concert at *Cité de la Musique*. Paris, 15 March 2003. Author's translation.

### 1.5.4 Free jazz as ensemble performance

Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s (and in stark contrast to the meticulous organization of much art music of the time) stands the genre of free jazz. This loose movement was initially spearheaded by musicians such as Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, and, later, John Coltrane. Any hint of “authoritarianism” was strenuously avoided, very often for ideological or political reasons, and performers made music spontaneously without the necessity for either score or conductor. There existed the assumption of a kind of musical democracy resulting in what might be termed composition by consensus. Often derided as the province of charlatans by more conservative jazz writers, free jazz makes its own demands of technique and concentration on player as well as audience.

Anderson (2002:133) describes the revolutionary impact of Ornette Coleman’s music in these terms:

The Ornette Coleman Quartet aroused a critical furor that polarized performers, journalists and fans immediately following its New York City debut in 1959. Coleman’s compositions and alto saxophone playing reordered structural principles to afford maximum melodic and rhythmic freedom. By allowing each musician to play inside or outside conventional chord, bar, pitch, and tempo guidelines, he pursued an expressive and collective approach to improvisation pioneered by pianists Cecil Taylor and Sun Ra.

The elements in Coleman’s early music point in an obviously “jazz” direction, unlike much of the music created by “experimental” composers with more overtly philosophical concerns. John Cage’s interest in methods of indeterminacy, for example, was motivated largely by his need to avoid any semblance of “individual taste and memory,”<sup>13</sup> an antithetical position to the jazz musician’s insistence on individuality of sound. By rigorously limiting the possibilities for individual expression, modernist “experimental” composers sought to constrain improvisation, thereby maintaining a form of control over

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<sup>13</sup> Potter (2000:6) discusses this concept in some detail.

the random elements within their compositions.

Berendt (1991:128) compares the “sound ideals” of jazz and orchestral musicians as follows:

A jazz musician has to have a sound, his own personal sound by which the listener can, after a few bars, identify him. How different is the sound ideal of Western classical music: Basically and with a few grains of salt, there is one obligatory sound ideal for all musicians of an orchestra.

Lucy Green (2001:212) acknowledges the beauty as well as some of the negative elements of this orchestral *Klangideal*<sup>14</sup> when she states:

Whereas the emphasis on achieving the 'right' tone quality or colour is in itself a beautiful aspect of classical music-making, it is also accompanied by some disadvantages: in particular, that in pursuing an ideal sound, idiosyncrasy must be controlled and is nearly always considered to be 'wrong,' there being only a few geniuses whose personal touch has been celebrated as such.

For Lewis, the individual sound of the jazz musician is a vital means of constructing identity. As he expresses it (2004a:4):

In the context of improvised musics that exhibit strong influences from Afrological ways of music-making, musical sound—or rather, 'one's own sound'—becomes a carrier for history and cultural identity. 'Sound' becomes identifiable, not with timbre alone, but with the expression of personality, the assertion of agency, the assumption of responsibility and an encounter with history, memory and identity.

Whether the pioneers of free jazz in America were aware of the experimental music of Cage and others, which had preceded this revolution by some twenty years, is open to debate. Cage's thinking was in any case not about the same kind of freedom that lay at the heart of the free jazz movement. Cage's dictum (as discussed in Nyman 1999:32), was that: “The opposite and necessary coexistent of sound is silence,” which would have held little interest for Ornette Coleman at the time of the release of his seminal “Free Jazz”

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<sup>14</sup> The German term literally translates as "sound ideal."



recording.<sup>15</sup> Coleman later was to develop a theory of composition known as *harmolodics*, in which *horizontal* content is the central motivating musical element.

### 1.5.5 The role of the Soundpainter in ensemble performance

The dynamics of orchestral performance, in which the conductor plays a pivotal role, and those of freely improvised music in which, ostensibly at least, there is no leader, suggest two extremes of power relations within musicking. In the orchestral context, the players are contractually obligated to follow the conductor's directions; in free improvisation, the leadership position is constantly under negotiation, as the dominant role is not formalized, and is assigned more or less accidentally as a consequence of the musical processes taking place. In free music, this "dominance" may be seen as a temporary by-product of the music itself, in which, for example, a player may cease playing for a time, thereby ceding an acoustic space to the other musicians.

In orthodox orchestral performance, the conductor uses the score as a guide to directing the musicians in the interpretation of the composer's intentions. Obviously the quality of these performances will depend on the training and technical abilities of the musicians and the conductor. Their ability to read sometimes extremely complex and difficult music while producing an acceptable sound from their instrument of choice becomes significant. The work of the Portsmouth Sinfonia (as documented in Nyman 1999:161-2) is an extreme instance of what happens when these conventions of Western art music are intentionally subverted, often to hilarious effect.

The staging of a Soundpainting event, by contrast, differs from a performance

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<sup>15</sup> The guitarist Pat Metheny (influenced by Coleman's music in his early career) has released a recording called *Zero Tolerance for Silence*. Metheny's collaboration with Coleman is documented on the recording *Song X*.

by an orchestra or a jazz ensemble in the sense that in Soundpainting the score generally does not take pride of place; the musicians create improvised music on the spur of the moment without reference to textual instructions. The performers are free to be influenced by the musical results of their interpretation of the gestures and to go where the music leads them. This state of affairs carries with it, however, the responsibility of active and concentrated listening as well as the need to do honour to the sign in question.

The Soundpainter “hovers” between these two dynamics of power relations as discussed above,<sup>16</sup> allowing the performance to emerge in a manner fundamentally different from the orthodox conductor’s contribution to the musicking process.<sup>17</sup> Unlike the clearly-defined boundaries of the conductor’s job, the Soundpainter’s task may subsume the role of conductor, composer, or performer to varying degrees in the same instant, the boundaries of which may shift from moment to moment as the music unfolds.

Despite the improvised nature of a Soundpainting performance and the amount of freedom allotted to the participants, it should be emphasized that the gestures of this form of spontaneous musicking are very precise indeed.<sup>18</sup> While the ensemble’s musical journey may eventually reach a hitherto uncharted destination, the gestures involved in getting there are designed to be unambiguous, to be delivered after the Soundpainter has acquired a thorough knowledge of their execution through diligent practice. While the gestures of Soundpainting brook no ambiguity in themselves, their interpretation by the performers involved allows room for a wide range of musical results, from quite specific details as in <play a long Ab pianissimo> to a much more general gesture, such as <improvise freely>.

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<sup>16</sup> The comparison is between orchestral music and free improvisation.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that WEAM somehow is lacking in authenticity as compared with Soundpainting, but rather that the rules and results of their respective games are different.

<sup>18</sup> Thompson emphasized the need for precision in signing the gestures throughout the workshops that the author attended (Paris, March 2003).

The way in which this form of musicking is generated by a set of physical gestures suggests that it is open to analysis on the most immediate level as a semiotic system, in which the performers respond to Thompson's sign language on the basis of a shared understanding of what a given sign means. In this view, the gestures of the Soundpainting language themselves may be categorized as first-order phenomena, in other words, as uninterpreted data.<sup>19</sup> Acknowledging the different musical results of each activity, Soundpainting has more in common than one might have imagined with orthodox conducting. The crucial difference for the author lies in the opportunities for indeterminacy provided by Thompson's language, opportunities for what Heble, referring to the music of the Art Ensemble of Chicago (AEC), has termed "impromptu explorations of a semiotic freedom" (2000:72).

In this sense, the author asserts that Soundpainting interrogates Western art music's necessary separation of the roles of performer and conductor, as both interact in the live moment of making music, foreshadowing Pierce's term (section 4.1), "in character." The signs of Soundpainting have the potential to set in motion an infinite number of such spontaneously invented musical moments. The Soundpainter's task is not to edit or comment on or repress such moment-to-moment events but to allow them to unfold without interference. This requires respect for the performer's contribution, in whatever situation.<sup>20</sup>

The key issue is that the Soundpainting experience (from the vantage point of conductor or performer) tends to lead the participant into the fundamental issues of musicking. There are no mistakes, only the subjective expression of

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<sup>19</sup> Heylighen and Joslyn distinguish between first-order and second-order cybernetics on the following basis (2001:3-4): "An engineer, scientist, or 'first-order' cyberneticist, will study a system as if it were a passively, objectively given 'thing,' that can be freely observed, manipulated, and taken apart. A second-order cyberneticist working with an organism or social system, on the other hand, recognizes that system as an agent in its own right, interacting with another agent, the observer."

<sup>20</sup> It is regarded as bad etiquette in Soundpainting to signal "silence" to a performer in the midst of an improvised solo, for example.

the tasks at hand. The conductor might ask of himself: Are my gestures clear and comprehensible to all present? The performer might ask: Do I understand what is required of me within the boundaries of the sign-system, as I have interpreted it? Essentially, the system operates effectively if there is a shared semiotic musicking system in place.

In Soundpainting, the separation of conductor from performer (a necessary element in orthodox conducting) dissolves into a collaborative experience of musicking. Thompson<sup>21</sup> points out that what is of primary concern here is the “communal experience.” The value of this experience lies precisely in Soundpainting’s potential adaptability to different levels of musical skill. Children, for instance, as well as musicians who do not have the reading or technical skills of orchestral players, can participate in a performance in a somewhat less threatening musical environment than that of the orchestra.<sup>22</sup>

The Soundpainter requires, as a consequence, a degree of alertness to the cultural differences, expectations, and competencies embodied in the disparate sound potentialities at hand. In this situation, the Soundpainter must manage such variables as divergent levels of training, skill, acculturation, and musical talent so as to produce a cohesive performance or product. To some extent these variables are taken care of by Thompson's emphasis on process rather than product.

### **1.5.6 The Soundpainter as ensemble director**

This study of a contemporary form of spontaneous music-making called Soundpainting, while conscious of the difficulties in comparing orthodox conducting with such a manifestation of late twentieth century cultural activity as Soundpainting, needs nonetheless to take account of some obvious

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<sup>21</sup> Author's interview with Walter Thompson, Paris 2003.

<sup>22</sup> During the Grahamstown National Youth Jazz Festival in 2004 and 2006, the author directed two Soundpainting ensembles with participants ranging in age from 13-18 years.

surface similarities between these approaches to musicking. In each case, specific elements<sup>23</sup> of the musical journey are entrusted to a single person in the figure of the conductor or Soundpainter. This individual is responsible for managing both the on-stage performance, as well as the rehearsal time allocated to the musicians in such a way as to generate the best performance possible in the most time-efficient manner.

The Soundpainter controls the flow of the music by using physical movements of his or her body which suggest a course of action for the musicians to follow: for example, a movement of the arms and body in a certain direction may suggest an increase in tempo or a diminution of volume. In orthodox conducting, these movements may provide additional interpretive information to the members of the orchestra, which supplements that contained in the symbolic language of the score; in Soundpainting, these movements, in appearance very different, confirm memorized responses on the part of the musicians to the Soundpainter's instructions. A comparative study between these two modes of musicking is therefore appropriate to this research because "the closest thing" to Soundpainting (on the physical level of what is actually taking place) is orthodox conducting.

These physical similarities notwithstanding, the repertoire of these two approaches to musicking is very different, and, obviously therefore, the results obtained (what kind of music is produced by these activities). The different types of music so resulting, in turn, confirm that WEAM conducting and Soundpainting have very different agendas and audiences. The fundamental agenda of WEAM conducting is to conform to the intentions of the composer as manifested in the symbolic language of the score as accurately as possible, and achieving this aim must of necessity vest control in the conductor's hands or baton.

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<sup>23</sup> As Thompson suggests (author's interview), the conductor "improvises" for the most part only with the elements of tempo and dynamics.

For the above reasons, the author limits the field of study mostly to these forms of music that employ a director, and, as a consequence, situates the essential emphasis on the very complex set of events, which take place during musicking in these two fields. The focus on performance which results from these considerations is then appropriate to the study as it attempts to answer unsolved questions raised during the author's own experience as a performing musician in a variety of musical styles. This suggests a potential area of conflict between the orchestral musician and the improviser, in that the orchestral musician deals mainly with the performance of the music of a particular historical era, in which the symphony orchestra, simply put, takes part both as interpreter and vehicle for a largely tonal repertoire, while the improviser's identity tends to be forged on the spot in a wide variety of social and performance situations, necessitated by the demands of his or her circumstances of employment.<sup>24</sup>

## 1.6 Chapter divisions

The layout of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1 contains introductory material relating to the author's research into Soundpainting as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance. After discussing the creation-performance-reception framework and comparing the orthodox role of the conductor in Western art music with that of the Soundpainter, the author considers these activities from the viewpoint of the power relations underlying them. The origins of semiotic theory are examined as a starting point, in addition to material relating to some other possible theoretical frameworks for the analysis of improvised

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<sup>24</sup> While it is noted that some compositions for orchestra call for the musicians to improvise and also that some jazz performances are very precisely notated (Duke Ellington's *Suites* for instance), the author aims to limit the discussion to musics that are more or less created in the moment, such as "traditional" jazz, free jazz, and Soundpainting.

music in general, and Soundpainting in particular.

Chapter 2 traces salient developments within critical theory and the philosophy of language as a background to the application of semiotics to notated music. The work of Saussure and Peirce is discussed as the origin of many of the most important theories about language and culture to emerge during the course of the twentieth century. Following Bowen (2001:424-451) and Goehr (1992), the distinction is drawn between music "as work" and music "as event," and the necessity in this thesis for the study of music as performance is highlighted. The implications of this distinction are significant for an understanding of the different set of critical tools required in the case of a spontaneously negotiated type of music such as Soundpainting.

In chapter 3, the author applies a sociolinguistic framework to the analysis of musical performance, especially those performances which depend on improvisation as an organizing principle. The author's aim is to arrive at an approach to the analysis of improvised music that accounts for some of its fluid and spontaneous nature. Considering Soundpainting as a specific case of music as "event," the author next discusses the kind of methods best suited for the analysis of Soundpainting, with a view to suggesting some possible frameworks for analyzing the process of improvisation in general.

In chapter 4, the author considers the metaphorical links between jazz improvisation and language, especially spoken language. The author also examines the tensions that may arise between the individual jazz musician and the norms of other musicians with whom he or she is interacting, as well as the nature of this interaction in relation to the audience's reception of such musicking. Such issues throw into relief the nature of the Soundpainting event as a case of nearly free improvisation, and help to situate Soundpainting at a point on a continuum between organization and total freedom, one of the tenets of the 1960s free jazz movement.

Chapter 5 examines some key concepts in the writings of Bourdieu (1990, 1991), Czikszenmihalyi (1991, 1997), and Sawyer (1999, 2002, 2003a,

2003b, 2006a), in the context of communication, collaboration, and creativity in improvised music. Various theories of communication and creativity are examined so as to examine these processes at work in Soundpainting. The cybernetic theories of Bateson and others are also considered.

Chapter 6 explores the origins and historical background of Soundpainting as a sign-system for improvised musicking, in order to situate Soundpainting in the context of late twentieth-century music performance practice. Examining Soundpainting in some of its manifestations, the author describes what and how Thompson's language communicates.

Chapter 7 suggests some conclusions and recommendations drawn from the author's research with regard to Soundpainting as a language for live performance. As argued above (section 1.5.5), Soundpainting can provide a positive and non-critical environment for music creation and a supplement to more traditional text-based improvisation methods.

## 1.7 Methodology

Recalling Thompson's definition (2006) of Soundpainting as a "universal live composing sign language for the performing and visual arts," the author's methodology is to examine various theories of the sign within the broader context of twentieth-century critical theory so as to introduce some key concepts for the analysis of spontaneously created musical performances. These modern theories of signification derive primarily from the work of such authors as Saussure and Peirce, and are later developed in the work of Barthes, Eco, and others. The author draws on key concepts from Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, such as his notions of language as use, the *language-game*, family resemblances, and Wishart's definitions of conventionalized and direct "utterance" as applied to music.

By drawing on interviews recorded with Thompson in Paris 2003 and the first-hand experience of Thompson's approach to using the gestures as conveyed



in the workshops and performances in which the author took part, the author develops a set of critical tools to analyze and evaluate Soundpainting as a manifestation of late twentieth-century performance practice. Thompson's insights into the history and operations of the system form the kernel of this thesis. Selected Soundpainting works such as Gil Selinger's *Deconstructing Haydn* and Thompson's own *PEXO Symphony* will also form an important component of the discussion.

### 1.7.1 Survey of scholarship

Semiotics, or the theory of signs, has its modern beginnings<sup>25</sup> in the work of two pioneers, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Saussure's thinking led him to an interpretation of the structure of language based on binary oppositions. For Samuels (1999:3):

Saussure's basic armoury of concepts proceeds in binary oppositions. First, he distinguishes 'synchronic' analysis from 'diachronic.' Synchronic analysis attempts to reconstruct the totality of relations between signifiers in a system at a given moment of time; diachronic analysis traces the evolution of signifiers through time. Secondly, language exists both as an abstract system of rules, which Saussure terms 'langue,' and as particular instances of spoken or written utterance, which he terms 'parole.' Thirdly, the analysis of language must be both 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic.' Paradigms are groups of signs which may theoretically substitute for one another, whereas syntagms are allowable ('grammatical') sequences of signs.

Aston and Savona (1991:5-6) summarize this central oppositional aspect of Saussure's thinking as follows:

What emerged from Saussure's work was an understanding of language as a sign-system, in which the linguistic sign was further presented in binary terms as signifier and signified, or 'sound-image' and 'concept.'

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<sup>25</sup> Theories of signification (how words and other signs convey meaning) have been a central concern of Western philosophical inquiry since ancient times. Early formulations of semiotic theory are found in Greek philosophy and the later work of Locke.

The two sides of the linguistic sign are arbitrary, which enables language to be a self-regulating, abstract system, capable of transformation.

Peirce's work, on the other hand, revolves around a tripartite approach, one of the most widely known examples of which is his concept of icon, index, and symbol, where icon indicates a sign linked by resemblance to its signified, index, one which "points to" its object, and symbol, one where the connection is a matter of convention. In this instance Aston and Savona's (1991:6) citations of photograph, smoke as related to fire, and the dove as a symbol of peace are useful examples of each concept.

These two interpretations of language as a sign-system soon found application in the fields of theatre (the Prague structuralists), literary criticism (Barthes and Eco), and analysis and theory of music (Agawu, Nattiez, Tarasti, and Monelle, to name a few). Monelle's seminal work, *Linguistics and Semiotics in Music* (1992), ranges widely from discussions of intonation theories<sup>26</sup> to analyses of popular music, and has proved to be influential in bringing semiotic concepts into musicology, while such writers as Tarasti (1987), Agawu (1991), and Samuels (1999) are chiefly concerned with the application of semiotics to the notated music of composers such as Sibelius, Wagner, Mozart, and Mahler. For the most part, semiotic theory as analytical methodology has been applied to music where the score is of necessity a central structural element of the musical event.

### 1.7.2 Theoretical frameworks

As Soundpainting consists for the most part of improvised music which functions without a score, it may be more suited to the type of popular music analysis as seen in Hamm (1992) and Tagg (1999). This type of analysis, while acknowledging semiotics as a point of departure, also takes cognizance of the fact that the spontaneous creation of music is a part of everyday human

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<sup>26</sup> These apply to the work of Asafiev with regard to the relationship between intonation and meaning in language and not theories about musical intonation as such.

activity, as is concert music in its customarily more formal setting. Small's notion of "musicking" is an important conceptual tool, as it emphasizes the activity of creation rather than the product generated by such activity. Such an emphasis recognizes the spontaneous and provisional nature of improvisation, and that "meaning," *per se*, is generated by the human beings that bring such music to realization.

As Ramanna (1998:2) states it:

Music is significant precisely because of its meaningful inter-connectedness with the flux of everyday life. As such, we need to be cognisant of the people actually composing, performing, recording, producing, and listening to this music. To write meaningfully about music, I think, is to write with an awareness of the actual human beings producing and consuming it.

Ramanna's important notion (1998:213-238) of "**discourse** of place"<sup>27</sup> emphasizes that variables such as geographical locale, levels of skill, and diversity of musical backgrounds are factors, which affect the activities of creation, mediation, and reception in the musicking process. Such variables will obviously have an important bearing on the qualities performers bring to any live performance, but become especially important in improvised music like Soundpainting, because quite literally no one knows what the outcome will be in advance. In these circumstances, trust between the Soundpainter and the ensemble and a willingness to "go with the flow" are imperative. Unlike an orchestral performance, in Soundpainting, there is no overt map provided for the performers, no parts or score to guide the way.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ramanna (1998:216) views this notion as consisting of two questions: "1) Where is the music heard? How do its meanings emerge and evolve in relation to the venues in which it is performed/heard?" and "2) Is Durban a place of any significance in terms of the forms which the music takes? Would the music be different if it had been performed/composed in Johannesburg or Cape Town, New York or Reykjavik?"

<sup>28</sup> During both performances in Paris in March 2003, the author observed that Thompson at times consulted a list of the signs he had explained and rehearsed during the workshops. When asked if he was using this as a plan of action for the compositions, he made it clear that the list was merely there to prevent him from signing a gesture that the ensemble had not prepared in advance.

"Discourse of place," as theorized by Ramanna, further implies that no musicking takes place in a vacuum. His study describes the reactions of performers and audience members alike to the musical event: not only to the music as first-order event, but to the entire web of relations from which the music (and the social environment from which it springs) is constructed. This web or network, Ramanna argues, is intersubjective, in that it consists of a collectively negotiated understanding between audience and performers of the mostly unfamiliar territory<sup>29</sup> traversed during a performance by Ramanna's group Mosaic.

### 1.7.3 Theories of improvisation

While Soundpainting may at times draw from genres as diverse as Western art music,<sup>30</sup> experimental music, minimalism, free jazz, or even the local music of South Africa,<sup>31</sup> its main area of activity is that of improvised music. Defining what is understood by improvisation begins with the distinction between the pragmatics of the art and what might be termed its philosophical and political implications.

By pragmatics the author has in mind the wealth of practical method books available, whose main aim is to assist the student of improvisation in the process of language acquisition. This process of learning the language is often presented in notated form, showing (for the most part) little evidence of engagement with current debates around the place of improvisation in the wider context of critical theory. This is perhaps to be expected, since many of the authors of such pedagogical methods are first and foremost practical musicians, and not theoreticians of jazz studies as a discipline.

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<sup>29</sup> The repertoire of this group consisted mainly of original compositions drawing from a hybrid of jazz and Indian music performed on acoustic instruments at relatively low volume levels.

<sup>30</sup> Gil Selinger's *Deconstructing Haydn* has been mentioned earlier with reference to the use of <palettes>.

<sup>31</sup> In Jeanneau's workshops in Pretoria we used Abdullah Ibrahim's piece *Mannenber* as a <palette>.

The aim and object of many such methods is to expose the student of improvisation to discrete elements of the language (such as phrasing, for example) and to assist novices in the internalization of key elements of the vocabulary of the genre under discussion. Methods by musicians such as Lateef (1975), Baker (1987a, 1987b, 1987c), Steinel (1995), Voelpel (2001), Sher and Johnson (2005), and Evans (2006a, 2006b) exemplify the practical side of this process of language acquisition. Where theoretical elements are employed in such methods, they are largely concerned with the musical relationship between the horizontal (melodic) element and the vertical (harmonic) one, so as to assist the novice in making the appropriate note choices.

In tonal improvisation, the appropriate note choices are governed by a protocol known as the **chord scale**, which codifies the relationship between the horizontal and vertical elements in a systematic way. By analyzing the harmonic implications of the chord progression of a given piece in advance, the novice improviser is able to choose the appropriate chord scales to assist him or her in soloing over such sections of the piece where this is called for. With practice and familiarity, this procedure becomes internalized, and the fluency of the improvisation gains in leaps and bounds. In jazz parlance, great improvisers so demonstrate their "chops," a term which implies both fluency and technical mastery of their instrument of choice.

Improvisation can also however be theorized from a rather more abstract vantage point, a political/philosophical one (in which it is conceived of as linked to the negotiation of identity). By conceiving of improvisation as a social activity, the "new jazz studies" draw on developments in critical theory to demonstrate how performers interrogate subjectivity in the course of performance. This new approach to jazz scholarship finds expression in the work of such critics as Paul Berliner (1994), Ingrid Monson (1996, 1998), Dana Reason (2004), Robert O'Meally *et al.* (2004), George Lewis (2000, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d), and Ajay Heble (2000), who underscores the necessity of exploring the links between jazz studies and critical theory as

follows (2000:12):

By tracing particular aspects in the history and development of jazz from its origins to the present day, we can observe the ways in which fundamental changes have taken place both in theories about jazz and in theories about language (and its relation to social realities). Similar kinds of reorientations of interpretive strategies in these adjacent (and, indeed, interpenetrating) discourses of jazz and literary theory suggest to me that much might be gained through a rigorous attempt to theorize the history of jazz in relation to the broader debates about language, culture, and identity that get played out in the history of contemporary critical theory.

On a more prosaic level perhaps, improvising is also often viewed as akin to conversation, not only by theorists, but also by musicians themselves. The discourse of improvisation, the author will argue, is pervaded by metaphors of music as speech and/or narrative. As Kane (2006:50) states:

Improvisation is, after all, a language. And like language, a significant amount of time is necessary for students to develop confidence and technical proficiency needed to communicate improvisationally through a musical instrument.

Kane uses the metaphor of improvisation as language to reinforce a common idea that both music (in this instance, improvised music) and language communicate something. Kane's metaphor is predicated on the idea that scales (and, in particular, the object of his discussion,<sup>32</sup> the blues scale) possess the ability to convey meaning. As he states it (*ibid.*): "Students continue to fixate on the blues scale (even after having been introduced to more interesting melodic/harmonic alternatives) because they can hear its inherent communicative qualities." This raises a vexing question at the forefront of the new jazz studies, namely: How and what can such musical materials as scales be said to communicate?

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<sup>32</sup> Kane's argument hinges on the suitability of the blues scale as a starting point for novice improvisers, one of the most useful characteristics of this scale being its *holus-bolus* applicability to the harmonic structure of the blues. As he suggests (2006:50): "The blues scale also offers students the opportunity to explore improvisation without regard to correct or incorrect note choices. In other words, every note in the blues scale sounds good over a blues form."

Part of the answer to this question may lie with the notion of signifyin(g), a concept of Henry Louis Gates, which in turn is connected to the manipulation of language for the purpose of subverting the *status quo*. Theorizing a link between music and literary language (as in "the blues aesthetic and the African-American signifying tradition"), Ayana Smith (2005:179) notes:

Both the blues aesthetic and the African-American signifying tradition have engendered a diverse array of new critical approaches to African-American literature. Many of these approaches pertinent to literary studies are also applicable to music. Since the very nature of the blues incorporates an oral form of literacy, it is only natural that commonalities should exist between these two art forms.

So saying, Smith finds a degree of common ground between two artistic practices on the basis of their grounding in an oral tradition. In this regard, Roach has employed Ngugi wa'Thiongo's term "orature," defined as (1995:45): "The range of cultural forms invested in speech, gesture, song, dance, storytelling, proverbs, customs, rites, and rituals." By placing value on such a range of cultural forms, these authors valorize the oral as cultural practice. Similarly, Sawyer (2002:32) defines one of the key characteristics of improvisation as its manifestation in "an oral performance, not a written product."

The key concern of this section might be simply phrased as this question: How do musicians learn to improvise? The answer is on the one hand, by engaging with music on a "pre-literate" basis, acquiring musical skills by ear, and, on the other, for "schooled" musicians, by learning through such methods as have been discussed. While access to such methods obviously presupposes a reasonable degree of musical literacy, it is important to note that Soundpainting does not require the ability to read music as a prerequisite for performance.

#### **1.7.4 Group improvisation as a collaborative process**

Sawyer highlights the collaborative element of improvisation in stating

(1999:202):

Socioculturalists study multiple levels simultaneously by choosing as their unit of analysis the micro-processes of interaction during specific events. I believe this is the only way to understand group improvisation fully—its moment-to-moment unpredictability, its collaboratively created nature, its constant dialectic between individual creative actions and the collaboratively created flow of the improvisation.

Sawyer's studies have included children's games, improvised comedy, jazz performance, and everyday conversation, all of which share an improvised character. What is at stake for Sawyer in his examination of "the micro-processes of interaction" are three elements that unite such practices: their unpredictability, their collaborative nature, and the way in which the dialectic between individual and group is negotiated.

In two critical respects, Sawyer's defining characteristics of group improvisation (collaboration, and the individual/group dialectic) are common to many styles of music, which may or may not include improvisation. For example, the performance of a concerto from the symphonic repertoire by an orchestra obviously depends on collaboration between the conductor and the orchestra for its realization. However, this realization takes place in a highly structured way, both in terms of its dependency on the symbolic language of music notation (that is, what is played), and, with respect to the organizational structure of the orchestra itself, in which the various roles of conductor, soloist, and players (as in the individual/group dialectic) are rigidly defined (that is, how what is played is to be negotiated). One might say that the rigidity of this organizational structure is to ensure that the boundaries of the idiosyncratic, random elements of such performance are similarly patrolled.

In contradistinction to free jazz, in which the random element is allowed to predominate, however, it is possible to theorize Soundpainting as a system for limiting the unpredictable results of such improvisational activities by means of an agreed-upon set of rules, the Soundpainting gestures themselves.

Therefore it is necessary to conclude that Soundpainting, although Thompson has obvious sympathies with the aesthetics of free jazz, is not a typical



example of free improvisation, as the presence of the Soundpainter and the repertoire of signals at the Soundpainter's disposal suggest the aptness of Thompson's definition of this form of musicking as "live composition."

## 1.8 Relevance of this study

In considering how Soundpainting operates, the author adopts a framework drawn from the field of sociolinguistics to situate this study in the context of current debates within critical theory around the notions of performance and agency within certain genres of contemporary music. Thompson's view of Soundpainting as a language forms the point of departure for this argument, which therefore brings attention to the fluid and provisional nature of such music, which is mainly improvised. Although the metaphor of music as language forms a central pillar in the ordinary speech of some musicians, the extent to which this metaphor is a viable one is crucial on the way to an understanding of how musicians negotiate performance.

As a subset of a class of improvised musics, Soundpainting requires a range of cognitive and musical skills from its participants, which are different in some respects from both those brought to a performance of free music or a concerto respectively. The ways in which such skills are acquired and deployed in the realization of such performances are also highly relevant to this study.

Raising the aesthetic problem of Soundpainting as a genre, the author examines the *grammar* of related musical styles such as free jazz, "conventional" jazz, as Bailey (1993) categorizes it, with a view to defining how musicians in various historical periods have negotiated the dialectic between individual and group to regain control of the means of musical expression. Soundpainting (whether considered as process or product), in common with other contemporary styles of music and performance, borrows strategies from the postmodern in an often self-reflexive and ironic fashion, thereby exhibiting a somewhat sceptical attitude to its own methods. Some

current studies in the field (Auslander 1999, 2003a, 2003b) view music (and musical performance) as irretrievably "mediatized," and the author sees the necessity of examining this process as part of the way in which such performances are created, negotiated, and received.

The Soundpainting environment is designed to be above all a non-threatening and non-prescriptive one. Being a non-verbal system, it may also serve to transcend the barriers of language and cultural expectation, once the gestures have been learned and rehearsed. Further it provides musicians at whatever level of training and from whatever musical style with room to explore basic or advanced concepts of musicking. In this sense, it has potential as a method for novice improvisers and teachers of improvisation who may feel they lack the skills and resources to tackle the subject. In essence, the relevance of this study lies in the way that Soundpainting allows and fosters a way of interrogating power dynamics in musicking.

## **1.9 Scope and limits**

It is no easy task, given the need for precision in language, even to begin to define such terms as "perform," "improvise," "music," and many others so as to free them of their ideological burden, imported after the fact of performance as a descriptive and sometimes prescriptive tool. Although the author aims to engage with some of these problems on a theoretical level, it seems apparent that these also represent real problems for practical musicians, precisely because they are bound up in a web of signifying rules, the task of much contemporary music scholarship seemingly then the unravelling of these rules of linguistic engagement.

The limitations as evidenced in this study are based on a theoretical survey of two fields of musical discourse, historical moments in time, so to speak, commonly known as Western European art music and jazz. Despite the very

different languages within which their discursive frameworks operate, they do share some significant "isomorphisms," in Hofstadter's terms;<sup>33</sup> for the author, these revolve around the adoption of the tonally-based major-minor system as their harmonic and melodic methodology.<sup>34</sup> In the light of the longevity of this system,<sup>35</sup> and its political and socio-linguistic implications, the author examines various other musical systems that challenge its dominance.

There are a number of lines of argument, or opportunities for debate, emanating from the above statement of limitations. Firstly, following the work of McClary (2000) and Heble (2000), the author suggests that in the performance conventions of tonal music is sometimes exposed the telic and legitimating ideology of tonality as a hegemonic reinforcement of the *status quo*, and further that jazz's adoption of this system problematizes this cultural legacy. This is clearly not an unproblematic encounter, as it is deeply bound up in political responses to the prevailing social circumstances of the time (the legacy of slavery, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and other controversial issues around the problem of identity formation in the geographically complex locale of the United States).

In the second place, it is part of the author's theorizing around musical language as a vehicle for identity-formation to consider that these rebellions and skirmishes take place through the work of individuals (or groups) at the boundaries of the linguistic **code** at work in the music. These solecisms both are grounded in, and chafe against, the animating conventions of the style, for they can only be defined as such with reference to the rules of the existing

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<sup>33</sup> Hofstadter (1999:262) defines isomorphisms (mappings between notational systems) as "information-preserving transformations," suggesting that their operation is "like playing the same melody on two different instruments."

<sup>34</sup> The major-minor system is the common terrain traversed not only by WEAM and "conventional" jazz, but also by popular music to this day, which suggests that this system is not without hegemonic power and longevity.

<sup>35</sup> Obviously, such a broad statement needs qualification, as there are countless examples which prove that the contrary is also true, but the dominance of the language of tonality animates both genres until the appearance of the Tristan chord and the 1959 first recording of free jazz, respectively.

game. It is through the chafing at the boundaries of the language, then, that new musical languages are formed.

Undeniably influenced by such trivial social pursuits as television, fashion, and the music industry as many contemporary musical genres may be, it is part of their agenda of marketing to consider carefully the balance between innovation and repetition. In these operations of what Adorno and Horkheimer referred to as "the culture industry," Adorno was able to detect the fostering of a hegemony<sup>36</sup> based on popular music being the new "opium of the people."<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the author is conscious of a certain sympathy with Adorno's position, especially since the focus of this study is on genres of little relative sales volume in the global picture of the music industry. It is possible to find ample evidence of the music industry's manipulation of musical "fashion trends," and the literal manufacture of "boy bands" and the "Idols" phenomenon are obvious confirmations of some of Adorno's pessimism.

This examination of only two sites of performance does not presuppose the hidden attribution of value to either one, or any at all of the numerous genres of music available for study as part of human musicking. Moreover, in practice

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<sup>36</sup> The idea of cultural hegemony originally comes from Antonio Gramsci, and is linked to the Marxist concept of "false consciousness":

Gramsci argued that the failure of the workers to make anti-capitalist revolution was due to the successful capture of the workers' ideology, self-understanding, and organizations by the hegemonic (ruling) culture. In other words, the perspective of the ruling class had been absorbed by the masses of workers. In 'advanced' industrial societies hegemonic cultural innovations such as compulsory schooling, mass media, and popular culture had indoctrinated workers to a false consciousness. Instead of working towards a revolution that would truly serve their collective needs (according to Marxists), workers in 'advanced' societies were listening to the rhetoric of nationalist leaders, seeking consumer opportunities and middle-class status, embracing an individualist ethos of success through competition, and/or accepting the guidance of bourgeois religious leaders.

Available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_hegemony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_hegemony).

<sup>37</sup> The quotation is from Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and reads: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people." Available from <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/31765.html>.

there is considerable intersection between these and other styles in this postmodern brave new world, and it is perhaps a characteristic of this ethos that the nature of boundaries themselves is under close scrutiny.

The *performance artist* Laurie Anderson sums up the situation<sup>38</sup> in typically laconic fashion in saying: "Postmodernism means never having to change the subject." For the author, this has two implications: subject as in field of interest and subject as human individual. In this view, genre-boundaries or style-boundaries become sites of negotiation with a heavily mediatized world in which access to areas of power is likewise heavily guarded, because there is a great deal of money (sometimes, astronomical amounts) at stake.

In the following chapter, the author provides a survey of scholarship with the aim of examining salient concepts from critical theory as applicable to musical analysis in general, and Thompson's practice of Soundpainting in particular. In so doing, the author develops a theoretical framework, drawing on semiotics and its related potential linguistic and cultural underpinnings, for the explanation of the dynamics and functioning of Soundpainting as a system for the collaborative creation of music in performance.

## 1.10 Glossary

The author here provides a glossary of terms that may be unfamiliar to the reader, with a view to obviating the inconvenience of extraneous footnotes.

**Aporia:** Defined as "an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory: the celebrated aporia whereby a Cretan declares all Cretans to be liars" (Oxford American Dictionary). The term is also defined in Selden (1989:79) as "infinite regress."

**Bebop:** (Bop): Peter Gammond defines this form of musicking as follows

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<sup>38</sup> Laurie Anderson, multimedia exhibition, London 1997.

(2002a): "A new style of jazz developed in the 1940s, emphasizing more sophisticated harmonies and rhythms than earlier jazz. It was pioneered by Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk." Bebop sought to re-establish the African American's position within jazz less as entertainer than as artist.

***Bricolage:***

A metaphor introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss to describe the improvised construction of mythical thought from the heterogeneous, often recycled materials of earlier myths, stories, and experiences. In French, the term refers to the work of a handyman or jack-of-all-trades. Following Jacques Derrida's characterization of bricolage as the condition of all discourse and cultural production (*Writing and Difference*, 1978), it has become a widely used and debated concept.

(Calhoun 2002)

**Changes:** Short for "chord changes," this term refers to the harmonic form (chord progression) underpinning the form of a given piece. In tonal jazz, after the initial statement of the theme, each soloist in turn improvises over this harmonic structure, in a practice known as "running the changes."

**Chord scale:** Pease and Pullig (2001:41) define the chord scale as: "A set of stepwise pitches assigned to a chord symbol to provide a supply of notes compatible with that chord's sound and its tonal or modal function." Chord scales in tonal or modal jazz are thus explicitly bound to the harmonic function of the chord in question.

**Chorus:** As defined by Van Heerden (1996:28): "In jazz performance, one complete cycle of the chord sequence."

**Code:** Baldick (1996) describes this in the following terms:

A shared set of rules or conventions by which signs can be combined to permit a message to be communicated from one person to another; it may consist of a language in the normal sense (e.g. English, Urdu) or of a smaller-scale 'language' such as the set of hand-signals, horns,

grimaces, and flashing lights used by motorists.

**Conduction:** Butch Morris's term for his approach to signal-based directed improvisation. In his own words:

Conduction (conducted interpretation/ improvisation) is a vocabulary of ideographic signs and gestures activated to modify or construct a real-time musical arrangement or composition. Each sign and gesture transmits generative information for interpretation and provides instantaneous possibilities for altering or initiating harmony, melody, rhythm, articulation, phrasing or form.

Source: <http://www.allaboutjazz.com/php/article.php?id=689>.

**Critical theory:**

Critical theory is a general term for new theoretical developments (roughly since the 1960s) in a variety of fields, informed by structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, Marxist theory, and several other areas of thought. It encompasses many related developments in literary theory (which is often a rough synonym) and cultural studies, aesthetics, theoretical sociology and social theory, continental philosophy more generally. Despite the difficulties in defining its boundaries or its origins, some statements can be made about critical theory. It is often informed by postmodern and post-structuralist theory, though it is not strictly postmodernist. Its major concerns are questions of identity, both within the private sphere and within the public sphere, and particularly in questions of dissonance between those two identities. A major focus of critical theory, then, is on the process through which these identities are developed.

Source: [http://www.answers.com/critical\\_theory](http://www.answers.com/critical_theory).

**Cybernetics:** As defined by Gregory (2001):

The science of control. Its name, appropriately suggested by the mathematician Norbert Wiener (1894–1964), is derived from the Greek for 'steersman', pointing to the essence of cybernetics as the study and design of devices for maintaining stability, or for homing in on a goal or target. Its central concept is *feedback*. Since the 'devices' may be living or man-made, cybernetics bridges biology and engineering.

**Différance:** With reference to this term in Derrida's strategy of deconstruction,

Sim and Van Loon (2005:89, emphasis in original) state: "He made up this word in French to describe the process by which meaning 'slips' in the act of transmission. Words always contain within themselves traces of other meanings than their assumed primary one. It would probably be better to talk of a *field* of meaning rather than a precise one-to-one correspondence between word and meaning."

**Differend:** This concept, deriving from Lyotard, is described as follows (Sim and van Loon 2005:97): "Differends are irresolvable disputes in which neither side can accept the terms of reference of the other."

**Discourse:** For Sardar and van Loon (1999:14), "A discourse consists of culturally or socially produced groups of ideas containing texts (which contain signs and codes) and representations (which describe power in relation to Others). As a way of thinking, a discourse often represents a structure of knowledge and power. A discursive analysis exposes these structures and locates the discourse within wider historical, cultural and social relations."

**Form of life:** With reference to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Hacker describes this in the following terms (2005):

Wittgenstein employed it to indicate the roots of language and of agreement in application of linguistic rules, in consensual, regular forms of behaviour. This includes natural, species-specific action and response, as well as concept-laden, acculturated activities. Speaking a language is part of a form of life (a culture) and to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life. What has to be accepted, the given, is not the empiricist's mythical sense-data constituting the foundations of knowledge, but forms of life that lie beyond being justified or unjustified.

**Free jazz:** As defined by Peter Gammond (2002), this term refers to: "The avant-garde jazz style of the 1960s associated with Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, and others, where the performers were given a free reign with regard to tonality and chord sequences. The freedom it accorded resulted in jazz that was extreme even by most modern jazz standards."

**Generative grammar:** In linguistics, a generative grammar (associated with



Chomsky's work in the field) is defined as: "A type of grammar that describes a language in terms of a set of logical rules formulated so as to be capable of generating the infinite number of possible sentences of that language and providing them with the correct structural description." Source: Oxford American Dictionary.

**Gesture:** Thompson uses this term in referring to the various signals of the Soundpainting language.

**Grammar:** Referring to Wittgenstein's use of the term in the context of a set of rules for making sense.

**Harmolodics:** As defined by McKean (2005): "A form of free jazz in which musicians improvise simultaneously on a melodic line at various pitches. Origin 1970s: coined by the American saxophonist Ornette Coleman (b. 1930) and said to be a blend of *harmony*, *movement*, and *melodic*."

**Head:** For jazz musicians, the initial statement of the melodic theme.

**Horizontal:** Melody can be seen as forming a horizontal structure as it unfolds through time.

**Jazz:** Kennedy 1996 (*etymology obscure*) "A term, which came into general use c.1913–15, for a type of music which developed in the Southern States of USA in the late 19th century and came into prominence at the turn of the century in New Orleans, chiefly (but not exclusively) among black musicians. Elements which contributed to jazz were the rhythms of West Africa, European harmony, and American 'gospel' singing."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In noting that some so-called "jazz" players (whom he interviewed in the course of his research) preferred to be known simply as improvising musicians, Ramanna (1998, 2005) employs the term jazz while conscious of the issues of problematized identities encompassed therein. The author considers jazz (after Lewis 2002, Monson 1996, 1998) as a potential site of resistance or struggle.

**Kinesics:** “The study of the ways in which people use body movements, for example shrugging, to communicate without speaking.” (Encarta Dictionary)

**Language-game:**

Wittgensteinian term of art, introduced in *The Blue and Brown Books* when rejecting the calculus model of language which had dominated his *Tractatus*. It highlights the fact that language use is a form of human rule governed activity, integrated into human transactions and social behaviour, context-dependent and purpose relative. Analogies between games and language, playing games and speaking, justify it. Imaginary language-games are introduced as simplified, readily surveyable objects of comparison to illuminate actual language-games, either by way of contrast or similarity.

(Hacker 2005b)

**Linguistic turn:** As defined by Christopher Norris (2005):

Collective designation for a range of otherwise quite disparate trends in twentieth-century thought. What they all have in common is an appeal to language, to discourse, or forms of linguistic representation as the furthest point that philosophy can reach in its quest for knowledge and truth. There are no ‘facts’ outside language, and no ‘reality’ other than that which presents itself under some linguistic description. Thus philosophers can only be deluded if they seek to render language more accurate or perspicuous by removing its various natural imperfections—ambiguity, metaphor, opaque reference, etc.—and achieving a crystalline transparency of logical form.

**Metaphor:** 1) Implicit comparison: the application of a word or phrase to somebody or something that is not meant literally, but to make a comparison, for example saying that somebody is a snake 2) Figurative language: all language that involves figures of speech or symbolism and does not literally represent real things 3) Symbol: one thing used or considered to represent another. Source: Encarta Dictionary.

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**Metonymy:** A figure of speech in which an attribute of something is used to stand for the thing itself, such as 'laurels' when it stands for 'glory' or 'brass' when it stands for 'military officers' (Encarta Dictionary).

**Modal jazz:** George Russell is widely regarded as having brought the modes back into jazz. Historically, modality in jazz improvisation can be traced back to Miles Davis' late 1950s recording *Kind of Blue*, which explores for the first time very simple harmonic structures as vehicles for improvisation.<sup>40</sup>

**Paralanguage:** Nonverbal vocal elements in communication that may add a nuance of meaning to language as it is used in context, for example tone of voice or whispering (Encarta Dictionary). Also see Bateson (2000).

**Performance art:** As defined by Oliver Parfitt (2001):

A term which arose in the late 1960s in an attempt to account for an increasingly diverse range of forms taken by art in that decade. Performance art combined elements of theatre, music, and the visual arts; its deliberate blurring of previously distinct aesthetic categories was intended to focus attention on the relationships between artist, work, and spectator, and to question critical judgements about what does or does not constitute art. In its hostility towards formalism, Performance art related to other contemporary movements, including Conceptual art and Environmental art. It was also closely connected with 'happenings' (the two terms are sometimes used synonymously), but Performance art was usually more carefully planned, and generally did not involve audience participation.

**Polysemy:** Polysemy is defined as "the coexistence of many possible meanings for a word or phrase" (Oxford American Dictionary).

**Semantics:** "The relationship of signs to what they stand for" (Hodge 2003).

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<sup>40</sup> So *What*, the album's opening piece, has an AABA harmonic structure as follows:

[A] D-7 (D dorian) (8 bars repeated)

[B] Eb-7 (Eb dorian) (8 bars)

[A] D-7 (D dorian) (8 bars).

**Semiotics:** "Semiotics and the branch of linguistics known as Semantics have a common concern with the meaning of signs. Semantics focuses on what words mean while semiotics is concerned with how signs mean" (Hodge 2003).

**Slippage:** "When meaning moves due to a signifier calling on multiple signifieds. Also known as skidding" (Hodge 2003).

**Social Semiotics:** As defined by Hodge (2003), this area of study within linguistics "has taken the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system to the next level, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations".

**Structuralism** is "an analytical method used by many semioticians. Structuralists seek to describe the overall organization of sign systems as languages. They search for the deep and complex structures underlying the surface features of phenomena" (Hodge 2003).

**Swing:** Widely considered as one of the defining characteristics of the jazz language, swing is a rhythmic approach to phrasing in which a pair of eighth-notes is interpreted as two parts of a triplet phrased short-long.

**Synecdoche:** A figure of speech in which the word for part of something is used to mean the whole, for example 'sail' for 'boat', or vice versa. (Encarta Dictionary)

**Syntax:** As defined by Hodge (2003): "The formal or structural relations between signs."

**Trope:** A figurative or metaphorical use of a word or expression, as in: "He used the two-Americas trope to explain how a nation free and democratic at home could act wantonly abroad." A conventional idea or phrase, as in: "Her suspicion of ambiguity was more a trope than a fact." (Oxford American Dictionary)