

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Durham University
Unit of Assessment: Philosophy (32)
Title of case study: The Aesthetics of Improvisation (CS3)
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The research by Professor Andy Hamilton (appointed at Durham in 1993) on the ‘aesthetics of imperfection’ has had three types of impact:</p> <p>(1) Transforming the practice, teaching, and training of jazz musicians by providing a novel aesthetic basis for creating and understanding both improvised music, and the performance of composed music.</p> <p>(2) Influencing other artists in the improvised and performing arts, including sound artists, photographers and recording engineers.</p> <p>(3) Providing music critics and writers with an innovative style of interviewing, with broad appeal beyond an academic readership, designed to identify and articulate otherwise tacit musical insights for the benefit of other composers and performers.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Hamilton carried out the underpinning research on the ‘aesthetics of imperfection’ initially in a paper in <i>British Journal of Aesthetics</i> (2000), whose arguments were developed further in Ch. 7 of his monograph <i>Aesthetics and Music</i> (Continuum, 2007). This paper challenged the received view within philosophical aesthetics, and within established musical thinking generally, that improvisation is an approach to musical performance of lower status than the interpretation of composed works – a kind of ‘instant composition’ that is ‘made up as you go along’. Hamilton defined and defended an ‘aesthetics of imperfection’ that values spontaneous process over finished product, and which is expressed most clearly in the work of improvising musicians. Furthermore, this ideal of spontaneous creation also applies to the interpretation of composed music, which is typically not mechanically reproduced, but creatively interpreted; here, spontaneity at the micro-level, while still following a score, can create a higher level of creative performance. An aesthetics of imperfection therefore provides a theoretical framework that contrasts with traditional “perfectionist” attitudes across the range of performance practice, and deepens musicians’ capacity to understand and appreciate both improvised and composed music.</p> <p>Hamilton argued that this distinctive aesthetic of spontaneous performance could be found in the testimonies of musicians – initially, jazz and improvising musicians, but also interpreters and composers – and that an aesthetics of imperfection affords the resources to articulate and understand those musicians’ tacit insights. His 2007 book <i>Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser’s Art</i> developed the aesthetics of imperfection through its sustained dialogue with a leading contemporary jazz musician and with other musicians he has worked with. Using his aesthetics of imperfection, Hamilton was able to articulate previously-neglected insights that subtly inform practices of improvisation within jazz, correcting longstanding misunderstandings concerning the significance of improvisation within contemporary music, and more widely about its status as a skilful and teachable musical practice.</p> <p>For Hamilton, an aesthetics of imperfection addresses related problems: (1) improvised music is often assessed using standards derived from composed music, diminishing its perceived status and affecting the ability to listen to it appreciatively; (2) its distinctive aims of spontaneous creation are misunderstood by listeners, critics, teachers and even musicians themselves; (3) its distinctive model of preparation and study is also poorly understood – for example, one conventional model of preparation involves rehearsal of patterns to be repeated in live performance. Hamilton’s model helps musicians to improvise at the highest level, showing how they can prepare for spontaneous creation in the moment, in interaction with others from whom they draw material – how they can ‘prepare for the spontaneous effort’. Although the aesthetics of imperfection is reflected in the reports of some improvisers, before Hamilton’s work it had been neglected by philosophers and musicologists, and Hamilton’s work shows how philosophical aesthetics offers rich resources for its articulation. It should be stressed that the research on the aesthetics of imperfection concerns musical performance of all kinds owing to its implications for our understanding of interpretation</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

and performance of composed music – indeed, jazz emphasises the interpenetration of composition and improvisation. The aesthetic can, moreover, be extended to all performing, and indeed non-performing arts, a process that is under development.

3. References to the research

Outputs: Publications on the aesthetics of improvisation include:

- Hamilton, A. 2011. 'Rhythm and Stasis: A Major and Almost Entirely Neglected Philosophical Problem', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 111 (1): 25-42.
- Hamilton, A. 2010. 'Jazz as Classical Music', in M. Santi (ed.), *Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 53-76.
- Hamilton, A. 2007. *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hamilton, A. 2007. *Aesthetics and Music*. London: Continuum.
- Hamilton, A. 2003. 'The Art of Recording and the Aesthetics of Perfection', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43 (4): 345-362.
- Hamilton, A. 2000. 'The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (1): 168-185.

Research Quality: The quality of Hamilton's research is indicated its inclusion in two very positively reviewed peer-refereed books with respected presses, and articles in leading journals.

Associated Research Awards: The research has been supported by three awards:

- 'ArtMatters', Beacon Bursary, March-December 2009, Beacons for Public Engagement, grant number 310087.
- Visiting Adjunct Lectureship, the University of Western Australia, Perth, 2008-10.
- Visiting Professorship, the University of Hong Kong Department of Music, March-April 2013.

4. Details of the impact**Dissemination and Overall Impact:**

The research was originally disseminated through two monographs, eight journal articles and, more widely, through Hamilton's reviews and articles in jazz and classical music journals, and his public presentations. One monograph is used as a teaching resource for musicians, the other is widely read by non-academic musical practitioners. Published research generated further correspondence with musicians, which then led to speaking invitations and public engagement activities. These include invited keynote addresses on the aesthetics of imperfection to non-academic events at Kunstuniversität Graz, Royal Northern College of Music, UK Centre for Contemporary Music Practice, Music Faculty Brunel University (all 2012), WDR jazz project, Cologne (Munster Jazz Workshop, 2011), New York Jazz Journalism Conference, Columbia University (2007), and Grahamstown Arts Festival (South Africa, 2007). Hamilton is engaged in regular correspondence with several leading contemporary musicians. He has discussed the aesthetics of imperfection in radio interviews for Australian Broadcasting Corporation, San Francisco Jazz station KCSM Jazz 91, JAZZ 91.7 San Antonio, Radio Tees, Estonian Radio, Radio Corse and others.

The level of interaction with relevant professionals has grown and diversified over a period of several years. As a result of this interaction, the research has also influenced teaching and training courses. A master class at the Siena Jazz Festival (July 2008) was attended by around eighty musicians, and a series of classes at Hong Kong University Music Department (March/April 2013), were attended by young composers and musicians from East Asia, Europe and the USA. Hamilton's work forms the basis of the 'Philosophy of Music' course at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, 'Aesthetics of Music' course at Brunel University, 'Sound Cultures' course at the RMIT

Impact case study (REF3b)

School of Art (Australia), and other courses elsewhere. Hence impact has occurred not only through Hamilton's direct engagement with musicians and other relevant professionals, but also through its subsequent inclusion in teaching and training courses.

Most recently, a cross-disciplinary workshop on Aesthetics of Imperfection at Durham in May 2013 involved musicians, critics and artists. Contributors addressed issues and arguments in Hamilton's seminal *British Journal of Aesthetics* article (2000). A leading American jazz critic and historian commented on the event that "this type of meeting-of-minds is as invaluable as it is rare. The workshop was a unique event in my experience. It will have an impact on my work in showing how dialogue between musicians, composers, visual artists and philosophers can develop a deeper aesthetics of spontaneous musical performance, which will inform my music criticism and historical writing – challenging me to question conventional dichotomies of improvisation and composition". An Italian critic commented that "Accepting imperfection...opens a different way of thinking about performance and recording of music, but also about other artistic expressions and methods of teaching...I came back with my views enriched and changed". And a leading Italian jazz pianist commented that "my mind was strongly stimulated to think about perfection/imperfection as a dyad".

As a result of all this, the research has contributed to musical practice by providing an original account of the nature of improvisation, and the interpretation of composed works, that (1) clarifies the music performance practices, especially those of improvised music, (2) affirms similarities as well as contrasts between improvised and composed music, and (3) affirms improvisation's distinctive nature, revealing practical and aesthetic complexities obscured by the prioritising of composed music. Increased self-consciousness in interpreting practice helps musicians improvise with greater spontaneity and artistic depth. Principal users are: (a) established musicians; (b) young musicians who are in training; (c) music critics and commentators; and (d) other artists. The impact on these users can be analysed as follows:

(a) Impact on established musicians:

The aesthetics of imperfection has provided accomplished and leading musicians with a fertile new understanding of the distinctive nature of improvisation and interpretation. One San Francisco-based jazz pianist writes that Hamilton's work has "tremendously enhanced my life as a creative musician". He observes that "Andy's ideas that improvised music adheres to an aesthetics of imperfection that is distinct from the aesthetic values we associate with composed mediums has influenced me a great deal...When you realise that the standards of logic and balance that one expects from an edited composition are different from those of an improvised musical event, it affects the way you approach practising. For instance, practising being aware in the moment with its rhythmic and melodic possibilities (or sources) takes precedence rather than over polishing a melodic phrase." An eminent Australian improviser and composer credits Hamilton's work with being an "important part of a small revolution" in his music, as it dissolves misunderstandings surrounding improvised performance versus composition: "His writings have helped to give me an historical perspective of my own musical endeavours. They have helped to provide me with a framework with which to assess the relevance and 'positioning' of my work artistically, enabling me to think more clearly about what I am hoping to achieve as a musician and composer." Citing Hamilton's article 'Rhythm and Stasis' (2011), which argues that rhythm cannot be characterised simply in terms of duration, another musician has been drawn to working with extended duration – a longer time-scale of musical events – on his album on the Alt Vinyl label.

(b) Training young musicians:

The research has inspired young musicians to transcend more mechanistic, unspontaneous approaches in favour of greater creativity. For one Melbourne-based sound-artist and teacher who incorporates Hamilton's work into two of his courses, it "provides a unique viewpoint founded on a long and deep engagement" with the audio arts, pedagogically valuable because it is "directed towards themes and ideas [like improvisation] that are usually overlooked or little discussed" but are of central importance to training musicians.

(c) Music reviewers and commentators:

Impact case study (REF3b)

Hamilton is widely credited – in such journals as *The Wire* and *Current Musicology* – with an innovative approach to musical biography, exemplified in his book on *Lee Konitz*. Here, philosophical aesthetics informs a style of interviewing which articulates tacit insights and ideas of musicians in a way that traditional biography cannot achieve. It “rethinks many of the conventions of the ubiquitous jazz biography” and offers a “model for future writers” (Brian Kane, *Current Musicology*, 2008); for one eminent Miles Davis sideman it represents an “extraordinary approach to a biography” and is “the definition of a living history”. The research has thus (1) demonstrated how philosophically informed musical biography can capture practicing musicians’ insights into improvisation (and other musical practices) and (2) provided a model for future biographers who draw on the testimonies of musicians – hence one leading contemporary music magazine’s suggestion that Hamilton’s research “may well mark the inception of a format new to writing on Western music” (*The Wire*).

(d) Other artists:

The aesthetics of improvisation is enjoying widening influence on other artists who use improvisational techniques. One UK-based photographer elucidates the impact of the imperfection-perfection dichotomy: “[Instead of trying] on every occasion to make a ‘perfect’ image in the camera, i.e. exercise full control over the aperture, speed and framing of the image at the ‘decisive moment’ [with] little work in post-production...I would work more spontaneously... in a less pre-conceived way, to pay less heed to technical issues....instead of always striving to obtain maximum depth of field when working close up...I began to experiment with random selections of speed and aperture, focus and framing...There are fewer successes [but] Andy has opened me up to new possibilities”. And, concerning Hamilton’s application of the aesthetics of imperfection to recording, one London-based recording engineer states that “although the idea of ‘pure’ or ‘authentic’ recordings persists...through considering Andy’s work I have become aware that such conceptions of fidelity and authenticity are questionable, irrespective of genre. I find this a liberating challenge.” Hamilton’s research on improvisation has therefore had significant impact on artistic practice beyond music.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Participant feedback on the Durham workshop on Aesthetics of Imperfection, May 2013.
2. The co-founder of Blue House Productions (a San Francisco-based jazz company) has testified to the significance of the aesthetics of imperfection on the performance of jazz.
3. A distinguished Australian jazz pianist and composer has reported on the significance of the aesthetics of imperfection to jazz composition and performance.
4. A leading Australian experimental sound artist at the School of Art, RMIT has reported on Hamilton’s impact on contemporary experimental music and sound culture.
5. A respected photographer, poet and musician has reported on the application of the aesthetics of imperfection to the visual arts.
6. A London-based recording engineer has reported on the impact of the aesthetics of imperfection on contemporary recording techniques.
7. The website of the Beacon-funded project ‘Art Matters’ includes details of all project events, including the musicians and artists who participated:
<http://www.dur.ac.uk/philosophy/events/conferences/artmatters/>.
8. A sample of Hamilton’s music journalism and contributions to the jazz press is available from his website: <http://www.andyhamilton.org.uk/>. Others are available from the respective websites of *The Wire*, *Jazz Journal*, *Jazzwise*, *International Piano*, *Gramophone*, *The Scotsman* and *BBC Music Magazine*.