Skipping the tracks
The experience of musical improvisation online

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1. *Introduction*

Music is present in nearly all our daily activities: while we are jogging, on our way to work. In my case, music is the background in writing a philosophy article. This is especially due to the widespread of new technological devices allowing us to listen to music anytime and anywhere we want. Through tools as You Tube, Spotify or mp3 recorders, such as iPods, our way of listening to music has changed: recorded music is now available everywhere we are and anything we do.

The present article aims at analyzing the social and ontological effects of listening music online, with particular attention to the artistic practice of improvisation. In the first paragraph, I will briefly explain the essential concepts of traditional music ontology, and I will suggest a different approach, that I would define as *ontology of musical act*. Then I will investigate the relation between recording practices and improvisation. In the final paragraph I will compare some features of musical recordings (suggested by Andrew Kania) with those of technological devices that allow us to listen music online.

2. *Ontological framework: towards an ontology of musical act*

During the last six decades, ontology of art has known an increasing degree of attention. The key question of this philosophical branch (or, to be more precise, this set of philosophical issues related to art) can be sketched as follows: what kind of entities are works of art? What criteria should we refer to in identifying them? What is their mode of existence? In music, as in all performing arts, is also relevant the way in which an artwork is presented. Therefore, other questions can emerge: what is the relation between a work of music and its performances? How can we identify a work of music through its various performances? Is there any difference between performing and instancing a work of

music (Kania [2008, 2012])? The list can be further prolonged. In any case, most scholars have always made many efforts to preserve the identity of works of music despite their repeatability[1]. As a consequence, the main ontological task has been conceiving works of music as relatively stable entities. This kind of approach origined three main lines of thought:

1) *radical Platonism*: works of music are eternal, abstract, universal and non-creatable types. Being a type means to be liable to be repeated (or, better, instanced) on multiple occasions, giving rise to contingent, concrete and singular entities that are rendition of that type, i.e., tokens (Kivy [1983, 1987, 2002]; Dodd [2007])[2];

2) *moderate Platonism*: works of music are types – i.e., repeatable sound struc-tures –, but they are characterized by the notion of *creatability*. Against position 1), moderate Platonists suggest to consider works of music as indicated types. This means that works of music are sound structures that, although abstract, are not eternal. Ra-ther, they result from an act of «fine individuation». Through this creative gesture, the composer brings the artwork into existence in a determinate cultural-historical context and conceives it as suitable for certain instruments (Levinson [1990a, 1990b]). Thus, in-dicated types possess a certain structure, but they are also liable to be identified and judged as works of music through artistic, social, conventional – and, therefore, not merely metaphysical – criteria.

3) *Nominalism*: this view does not consider works of music as abstract types any-more, but as a set of *concreta*: a work of music, in particular, consists in «the class of performances compliant with a score», where a score is intended as a «character of a notational system» (Goodman [1968]: 155)[3]. A notational system, in turn, represents the criterion on which we can identify a correct exemplification of a musical art-work[4].

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[1] See for example Bertinetto (2012b, 2013).

[2] It should be noted that type/token ontology has been also adopted in non-radical Platonist the-oretical contexts: see, for instance, the Aristotelian perspectives of Margolis (1958, 1959, 1977) and, more recently, Walters (2013).

[3] Some scholars, such as Bertinetto (2013): 86, have noted that Goodman's reference to classes is against his official Nominalism. To my view, it could be argued that this claim makes Goodman closer to the type/token ontology. Nevertheless, due to space reasons, I will not deal with this topic in the present article.

[4] Goodman himself recognized the fact that, according to his theory, if a musician plays a wrong note while trying to perform, say, Chopin's *Polonaise*, does not give a correct rendition of this work (Goodman [1968]: 162-163). An interesting and original reinterpretation of Goodman's Nominalism is that of Predelli (1999a, 1999b).

All these positions have one feature in common: they conceive works of music in structural terms. Whereas for 1) it seems quite obvious, this might be not the case for 2) and 3). Certainly, position 2) adds to the determination of a work of music the cultural-historical context in which the author makes her indicating gesture. Though it seems an excessive constraint trying to include the proper instruments in identifying conditions, the act of indicating a type seems to be extremely disinterested[5]. The cultural-historical context seems to be not sufficient to prevent Levinson's claim from totally losing its strength, insofar as the act of indicating conveys a sort of distance between the author and what she actually *makes*, a work of music. If producer and product are conceived as so detached one from another, the fact that a cultural-historical context links them becomes completely irrelevant. As far as 3) is concerned, the identity of a work of music has its roots, again, in intending it as a set of objects compliant with an element (i.e., the score) of an organized and hierarchic notational system (i.e., western musical notation). Even if Goodman identifies a work of music with a series of individual and concrete entities, this does not rule out the fact that they ultimately refer to a code that reveals more about how an object should *be*, rather than about how it should be *done*.

I therefore propose a different point of view to consider musical phenomena. It is focused not on the identifying properties of the result of musical activity, but on the distinctive features of the various musical praxis. I could describe my view as an *ontology of the musical act*, since I am persuaded that a philosophical enquiry on music should move from one idea: it is an activity that has the effect to produce, invent, give rise to some sort of result (say, a performance, a work of music, an instrumental session and so on). The key question of our philosophical investigation on music should sound as follows: what do we do when we make music, and how is our listening influenced by the way we describe such an activity? My point here is that our capability to define a musical product as an abstract, repeatable, created or indicated artwork derives from the essential features of the activity that has produced them. Nevertheless, traditional ontology of music does not say very much about it[6]. It is undeniably true, in fact, that every musical activity produces some

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[5] This is one of the prejudices on which aesthetics has been always based on, detected, from very different theoretical points of view, both by Goodman (1968): 5-7, 224 and Gadamer (1960): 25-131.

[6] There are partial exception to this tendency: S. Davies (2001): 11-19, Wolterstorff (1987). Currie (1989) and D. Davies (2004, 2011) define works of music, respectively, as «action types» (and therefore, again, repeatable, so that they can be more easily assimilated to traditional objects of musical ontology) or as «entities that can bear the sorts of properties rightly ascribed to what are termed "works" in our reflective critical and appreciative practice» (D. Davies [2004]: 18). Even if

sort of artefact[7], but this does not necessarily mean that every single musical activity aims at producing an artefact. Nor it is possible to say that every musical artefact consists in a type, i.e. a repeatable sound structure commonly defined as work of music (Arbo [2010]). Whereas we can reasonably say that every musical artefact has a sound structure, it should be noted that not every sound structure is a type (Canonne [2014]). In other words, not every musical act ends up with the production of an artwork – intending it as a type, containing all the instructions that should be followed by any future performer.

I distinguish three kinds of musical praxis, each one having a specific musical artefact as its own effect[8]. I rule out from this threefold model the simple music making (i.e., singing in the shower, whistling while we are walking down the street, training our piano technique in playing the C major scale on a keyboard…), since I would like to focus exclusively on those activities which are carried out for a real, or intended, audience, not necessarily aiming at being submitted to an aesthetic judgement[9].

a) the first model is *compositional*: here there is an author, who wants to be publicly recognized, and invents[10] a type. The composer creates a sound structure, conceived as repeatable by other musicians (called performers), provided that they follow her instructions; b) the second is *performative*: here we have a musician who plays a previously composed piece, aiming at following the instructions connected to the entity being performed; c) the third is *improvisational*: here the musician wants to give rise to a musical artefact at the same time she performs it[11], without the intention to leave any instruction for future performers.

These three models make us aware of the limits of ontology's sight on musical phenomenon: at first, it has precisely enquired which properties enable us to identify a work

Davies submits his view to a «pragmatic constraint», he still conceives musical ontology as a discipline that studies a certain kind of objects and the properties defining them.

[7] With artefact I intend «an object that has been intentionally made or produced for a certain purpose» as Hilpinen (2011) argues; for a general overview on ontology of art considered through the notion of artefact, see Levinson (2007).

[8] This does not mean that hybridizations among these models are not possible, but here, for space reasons, I will leave aside this aspect.

[9] Consider, for instance, the function of musical pieces during a ceremony in church, or ritual music in general.

[10] Here I use the verb "to invent", rather than "to create", "to discover" or "to indicate", in order to make my position neutral towards both moderate and radical Platonism.

[11] Similar positions can be found in several essays on musical improvisation: Alperson (1984, 1998), Benson (2003), L.B. Brown (1996, 2000a), Canonne (2013), Gould, Keaton (2000), Hagberg (1998), Saint-Germier (2011), Sparti (2007), Sterritt (2000), Valone (1995), Young, Matheson (2000).

of music, but it has neglected the idea that the mode of existence of a musical entity – i.e., an artefact – mostly depends on the functions this entity assumes in the processes of production and reception in which it is located (Arbo [2013]). Secondly, because it has always regarded works of western classical music as the only entities worth being considered as the primary focus of philosophical attention Kivy (1987, 2002). Our view, on the contrary, intends to include a larger amount of musical activities, one of which consists in improvisation[12].

The next paragraph has the purpose to shed light on how recording technology – which represent the most common way of experiencing music nowadays – influence the listening, and, sometimes, the production, of improvisational processes.

3. *Recordings and improvisation*

If we think about improvisation, what we immediately see is a situation in which one or more musicians are standing on a stage, playing or singing in front of an audience, inventing a piece of music while they perform it. It seems therefore that improvisational processes always include a moment of *presence* (L.B. Brown [1996]: 356, 365; Fischer-Lichte [2004]): 253-259), in which both audience and musicians can look each other in their eyes while the music is being produced, giving rise to a complex web of immediate and extemporaneous interactions[13].

Nevertheless, we have to admit that nowadays this is not the commonest way to experience musical (including improvised ones) pieces. Mostly we face with recorded music, and this may determine some differences in how we perceive musical properties now compared to what we used to do before the appearance of recording technology (Dogantan-Dack [2009]). As long as improvisation is concerned, this has always been seen as a problematic situation by scholars: not only because recordings «calcify» (L.B. Brown [2000b]: 122) or «ossify» (S. Davies [2001]: 304) the musical event, making it an object liable to be reproduced anytime and anywhere we want, but especially because recordings seem to deprive improvisation of one of its most relevant features, i.e., presence (L.B. Brown [1996]: 365-366). Living in a world of recordings could represent a serious risk of

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[12] At this point, an objection could be raised: many scholars have underlined how improvisational processes are involved in several pieces of western classical tradition, including avant-garde music: see for example Sparti (2007): 165-204. Nevertheless, in these cases, improvisation is required only to have correct instances of a certain work of music, written by a determinate author or composer. In other words, this usage of improvisation belongs to model b) of our view, rather than to c). See Bertinetto (2012b): 118-119.

[13] I am here referring to the phenomenon of *interplay*: Caporaletti (2005): 159-170; Monson (1996).

losing familiarity with live events, which would definitely undermine our experience of improvisation. Furthermore, many scholars are persuaded that recordings can hide the fact that improvised music is created spontaneously and in real-time (L.B. Brown (1996): 354), whereas for some other authors this fact provides the listening of such pieces of music with a sort of "improvisational" nuance (Iyer [2004a, 2004b], Lewis (2004)][14].

In addition, as Edidin points out (Edidin [1999]), not all recordings aim at faithfully reproduce how the piece would sound if it were performed live. In Edidin's terms, not all recordings have a documentary function. On the contrary, they often represent an autonomous product, since they are produced with massive editing, mashups and studio doctoring (L.B. Brown [2000b]: 122-124; Hamilton [2003]; Kania [2009]). This dramatically changes our way to evaluate an improvised piece: what counts here should be the immediate and real-time production of a brand-new musical entity, but recording technology allows us to substantially modify the outline of a sound wave.

The impression we had so far could be summarized as follows: listening to a recording of an improvisational performance always makes our musical experience «poorer» than it might have been if we had attended to that event live (Thom [1993]: 172)[15]. When we listen to a recorded improvisation we are not listening to a real improvisation anymore. As Bertinetto writes, «recordings document, manifest, represent improvisation; yet, they also show the absence of improvisation» (Bertinetto [2012b]: 121). Such analyses seem to imply the question if listening to a recording represents a correct way of having access to a piece of music compared to attending a live performance. Or, otherwise, if recordings could be equally considered performances of a musical piece, as live renditions are[16].

Focusing on improvisation, there is a rich debate about recognizing to a recording the status of real improvisation (L.B. Brown [2000b]; Canonne [2013]: 352-354; Kania [2011]: 398-400; Caporaletti [2005]: 128-132; Eisenberg [1988]: 206-207; Goldoni [2013]: 135-136; Hodeir [1976]; Schuller [1986]). In the present article, however, I am not interested in adding something to this debate: as we noted in the previous paragraph, the way we receive a musical entity (being that a traditional work of music, or an improvised piece) changes how we look at it. Saying that live performance is the proper vehicle to have access to a work of music does not mean that things will continue to go that way forever,

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[14] For a critical point of view on these analyses, see Bertinetto (2012a).
[15] Gracyk (1997) argues against Thom's claim.
[16] See the debate between Mag Uidhir (2007) and Kania (2009).

because production, reception and functions of socially influenced entities, such musical entities are (Ferraris [2009]: 43-45), change with time and technological development. As a matter of fact, if we could not have access to musical entities through recordings, most of our critical and philosophical points about music would be seriously flawed (L.B. Brown [2011]: 431-433; S. Davies [2001]: 295-340; D. Davies [2011]: 160-164). Consequently, we can question if recordings impoverish our experience of music, and, in particular, of musical improvisation.

Fair enough, improvisation is essentially a live event, and it is impossible to consider recordings separately from what actually happens on stage[17]. But it is worth noting that our consideration of musical entities is increasingly influenced by new technological devices which exploit recording techniques: in fact, such tools enhance diffusion and availability of an almost unlimited number of musical productions, making them part of our daily activities. If art, as Georg Bertram writes, is a human activity through which we can reflect on the profound sense of our everyday practices (Bertram [2005]: 231-235), how can we better understand such a claim than making aesthetic experience interact with everyday practice as much as possible? And why cannot we use technology in trying to achieve this goal?

In such a context, improvisation can play a relevant role, since this practice fairly exhibits the tension between process and product (Bertram [2005]: 226-228; Bertinetto [2010]). Improvisation is essentially an activity, and this can make this musical practice closer to everyday life (Sparti [2005]). Improvisation, though, is also an aesthetic activity. For that, we cannot determine its value without making reference to a proof that such an activity has taken place – i.e. an artefact, usually a live event or a trace of it, a recording –. Therefore, we are unlikely to understand improvisation if we consider the process and the product as worlds apart. Hence, it should be now clear that the problem is not to establish if a recorded improvisation is or not an improvisation: rather, we should ask us how listening repeatedly to easily available tracks could influence activities such as those of making music (especially in what we have previously called improvisational praxis) and of attending live to it.

4. *Experiencing improvisation online: what is more (and less) in it?*

In an article published in 2009, Andrew Kania tries to detect the features allowing us to dis-

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[17] That is why in §4 we will analyze Andrew Kania's view, which compares another time recordings and live performances.

tinguish a recording from a live performance Kania (2009): 29. He makes a list of five points:

1) recordings are *repeatable* entities, while live performances are singular and unique events; 2) recordings are different in terms of *sound* from live performances; 3) in recordings lacks the *visual element*[18]; 4) in recordings there is no form of *interaction* between the audience and the performers; 5) recordings do not imply any kind of *rituality* and *social element*.

As we mentioned above, it seems quite spontaneous comparing recordings with music performed live. This is valid for all kinds of music, and for improvised pieces even more, since we can grasp the core of this artistic practice from what actually happens on the stage. Listening music online, using tools such as Spotify, You Tube and similar, can substantially change the meaning we give to improvisational processes: not only in terms of massive and easily available diffusion, but also thinking about which relational features these technological devices can add to live experience of improvisation. In other words, we should understand how listening music online affect our reception of improvisational practices. Furthermore, we should understand how listening to reproduced music online influence the ontology of musical act sketched in the first paragraph.

To begin with, we will thoroughly compare the features of traditional recording listed by Kania with the characteristics of technological tools for listening music online, to identify what is more (and less) in experiencing improvisation through them[19].

4.1. Repeatability

Just like traditional recordings, online tracks can be repeated as many times as we want. Nevertheless, in listening music online this aspect increases as long as tracks are made immediately available anywhere we are (for instance, thanks to smartphones and iPod equipped with Wi-Fi access), and this happens not depending on possessing a single tape, vinyl disc or CD and a playback device, but exclusively on the availability of some means of reproduction and a virtual platform. As Kania opportunely argues, there is a distinction between *factual* and *in principle* repeatability. If the first is linked to a sound signal fixed on a single material medium put into a playback device, the second is represented by the playback device itself. Therefore, Kania continues, «that signal is repeatable in the relevant sense» (Kania [2009]: 26): this means that the core of repeatability stands in the de-

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[18] Canonne (2013): 347-352 notes, in a similar way, that recordings lead to an acousmatic listening, i.e. especially focused on the pure sounds rather than on the source producing those sounds. Canonne is obviously referring to Scruton (1997).

[19] We will not consider the difference in *sound* (2), because it seems us to be straightforward.

vice that enable us to playback tracks (i.e., the CD player) rather than in the signal encoded on «the plastic-encased metal disk of a CD» (*Ibid.*). Great importance assumes in this context the function of archiving re-playable items. In one case, collecting vinyl discs and CDs (what Eisenberg has called «the ceremonies of a solitary») (Eisenberg [1988]: 61-96) consists in archiving single material objects; in the other case, "collecting" tracks online is embedded into the means of reproduction of musical material (i.e. the iPod, the laptop or the smartphone). As we shall see, massive and easily available repeatability makes the social aspect of listening to music even stronger[20].

To end with, there is a risk in collecting recordings in Eisenberg's fashion and that with music online can assume other configurations: the risk of idealizing the material object. As Stephen Davies points out, an ordinary CDs or vinyl discs collector easily «purchase only a single recording of any given piece» (S. Davies [2001]: 328) accumulating «works rather than performances» (*ibid.*). This means that most people limit themselves to possess of only one version of a work of music in CD or vinyl disc, running the risk of considering that version as the one and only possible. As long as music online is concerned, this risk can be sharply reduced, because when we listen to a certain track the system instantly makes us visible similar versions or artists, allowing us to browse through the archived files. Certainly, this brings new risks, especially to the listening of improvised pieces, that will be fully analyzed in the next paragraphs[21].

4.2. Visual, ritual and social element of performance

In his article Kania mentions the fact that recordings deprive listeners of the visual and social aspects typical of any live performance. But does this stay true in listening music online? Yes and no. Yes, because playback always prevents the listener from having a real-time interaction with performers on stage, influencing (and sometimes determining)[22] the musical event. No, because technological devices such as smartphones can represent a vehicle of anticipating or prolonging the interpersonal relations involved into a musical performance.

If this is true for any kind of musical event, it becomes even more remarking for improvised music, in which artists try to invent something new at the same time the event

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[20] See below, §4.2.

[21] See in particular §4.3.

[22] Extremely famous is the episode in which Miles Davis rephrased with the trumpet an enthusiastic "yeah!" coming from the audience during a live performance (Alessandro Bertinetto, private conversation).

takes place. It often happens, in fact, that concertgoers «familiarize themselves with the repertoire of the artist to be able to appreciate the performance» (Kjus, Danielsen [2014]: 668) that is easier to do having at our disposal a platform with a nearly unlimited, free and easily available database of files. Furthermore, if we intend improvisation as facing with «the grammatical conventions of a style» (S. Davies [2001]: 19) we should reconsider Session's claim that «repeated music is not music anymore» (Sessions (1950): 70-71). At first, because expecting something from a performance is different from anticipating the show (Negretto [2010]: 121). Furthermore, because our memory's schemes are not strict enough to preserve all the inflections of a given performance (Raffman [1993]: 63-98). In other words, you can appreciate more an improviser's style if you listen her repeatedly, and if you become able to compare different performances and to isolate their essential and recurrent features. Similarly, to build a personal style, an improviser has to listen repeatedly other "colleagues" and to exercise her memory (Lewis [1996]: 109; Berliner [1994]: 64), and the possibility to find a huge amount of files online makes this task considerably easier.

In the end, it is worth mentioning another widespread practice. This practice makes the expectation to attend a live event higher, and yet it allows who has already attended a performance to have a trace of the pleasure eventually connected to it. People usually post video on You Tube or Facebook to share with their contacts a document of the experience they lived, although recurrently a low-quality one. Of course, this does not appear to be a «documentary recording» (Edidin [1999]: 29-31) and as a consequence a real aesthetic object, but rather a recalling, an appendix of the social aspect connected to live performance (Kjus, Danielsen [2014]: 673).

This aspect assumes particular relevance, since it allows other people to have at least a vague, audio-visual idea of what happened during the event and to prolong the interactions between members of the audience, expanding them to people that were not present and, possibly, raising their curiosity, encouraging them to discover new artists and to attend their concerts.

4.3. Inflation of musical material? Skipping the tracks

Massive availability of musical material made possible by online tools could also have, if not negative, at least questionable effects. Following Lewis, musical improvisation has two aspects: the first, eurological, focused on ephemeral nature of sound and extemporaneous invention; the other afrological, which concentrates on re-appropriation, re-processing and transformation of given musical material (Lewis [2004]:

148). Searching for music online we could get plenty of extremely various material, ready to be rephrased through improvisational practices. Thus, if we agree with Jankélévitch in identifying improvisation as a sort of searching of its own themes and motives (Jankélévitch [1998]: 27), online platforms should give us an almost inexhaustible repertoire of creative sources. From the performer's perspective, however, such an amount of heterogeneous musical pieces to cope with could lead to disorientation, especially if the musician has not yet a clear idea of the style she wants to build up. The higher the rate of potential choice is (and, consequently, the more extended the basic material for an improvisation gets), the more likely performers can fall into what Luigi Pareyson has effectively defined «a collection of commonplaces, of automatic associations […], of easily recognizable and surely successful formulas» (Pareyson [1974]: 86). This could be also due to the fact that online music is abstract and de-individualised, much more than music encoded on records (Schafer [1969]: 43-44): the number of available files and the apparent equivalence of them makes the decision on which one select very difficult.

In conclusion, we shall consider also the listener's perspective in dealing with nearly never-ending lists of files; in particular, it is worth highlighting the phenomenon of skipping the tracks. How many times does it happen to us, browsing on our mp3 recorder or scrolling down a list of video on You Tube, to get annoyed by what we are listening or watching and look at another file, whose title and, possibly, visual preview blinks from our display or screen, inviting us, simply, to skip the present track?

We can see the result of such a listening practice in how low has got our attention span as we attend to a classical concert, in which the duration of pieces is considerably longer of any music piece we come across in our ordinary life. If it is impossible to appreciate even a simple pop song in this way, it gets even more improbable we could have a valuable experience of an improvised piece listening only ten, or, say, thirty seconds of it[23]. In fact, the act of improvising is at the same time an inventing and a performing gesture. The process of invention, the one which an aesthetic judgement mostly focuses on, does not remain outside the concrete playing of music, as it happens in compositional and performative models, but it develops *in* and *during* the act itself. As a consequence, if we are not able to entirely listen to an improvisation, our judgment on it will be irremediably incomplete: since we do not have the possibility to evaluate the quality of the inventing act independently from the performance of the piece invented –

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[23] A. Brown (2011). In this article, Brown insists on the difference between listening to a cassette and searching a file on an iPod or Spotify: in this last case, the first seconds of each track acquire «disproportionate weight for the listener's judgement of music» (Fleischer [2015]: 262).

with a score or another product testifying it –, the only way to judge an improvisation is listening to that performance until the end. «Music», as highlighted by Rasmus Fleischer, «should not be thought as a thing or as a digital "content", but as something which must *take place* and *take time* in order to matter» (Fleischer [2015]: 266).

5. *Conclusion*

If the digital environment we live in appears to be inevitable, how can we manage to listen to music in a conscious way, and with a reasonably high attention span? The solution of similar problems could not be that of locking oneself in house, or enacting some ascetic practices as the «no music day» (Drummond [2008]: 240-244), i.e. a temporary period of time in which we decide to switch off any source of music playback. Needless to say, the ordinary digital world, with all its risks and traps, will overwhelm us again from the following day on.

A more reasonable and practicable solution simply consists in acquiring a double awareness. At first, we should not demonize online tools to reproduce music, since they have the enormous potentiality to increase our acquaintance with an extraordinary number of artists, even neglected ones, in a blink of an eye and with a richness of results that no record store could even imagine to achieve. Secondly, as noted above, we should have an at least vague idea of what we are looking for *before* we start to browse on You Tube or Spotify (Fleischer [2015]: 260). Otherwise, we will be likely to sink into a huge wave of digital data that seem us to be all equivalent, musical files which we will remember only for their initial ten-fifteen seconds, and, worst, we would run the concrete risk of losing the only thing that really matters in experiencing music, especially those based on improvisational practices: curiosity and our capability of being taken by surprise.

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