Essay question: Discuss the creative compositional processes and the extent to which improvisation share similar characteristics with composition.

The study of musical creativity has mainly been concerned with the activities of composition and improvisation (Hargreaves, 2012:545). However, the majority of studies focus on the product rather than on the process. One reason for this is the difficulty of organizing an efficient experimental procedure to capture the complexity of the creative process gaining access to internal cognitive mechanisms (Baroni, 1999). Despite the fact that the elusiveness of artistic creativity poses considerable challenges, a comprehensive look into these fundamental musical processes is possible through various methods, such as, the study of musical sketches of the composer, his/her reflections on his/her own compositions, the observation of spontaneous improvisational material as it is generated (Sloboda, 1985) and empirical studies (Collins, 2005, Reitman, 1965, Seddon & O'Neill, 2003).

This paper examines the creative process of musical composition, exploring the cognitive and socio-cultural factors which influence the process. A closer look at improvisation is also taken through a comparative approach with compositional processes in order to examine the extent to which these creative activities may intersect. By addressing these points, this essay seeks to shed new light on what is involved in the creation of music.

To begin with, descriptions emerging from the literature regarding compositional process seem to share some similar points about its characteristics. Many researchers characterize the initial stages of composing as a period of 'exploration' (Wiggins, 2007, Kratus, 1994, Bennet, 1976) where composers generate musical ideas. Sloboda (1985: 115) refers to this stage as 'inspiration' where a

skeletan idea or a theme appears to consciousness. The next stages of the compositional process involve the ‘contextualization, elaboration, development, revision and refinement’ of the initial musical ideas (Wiggins, 2007:459). Sloboda (1985:116) calls this stage ‘execution’ where the composer, with deliberate processes of extension and transformation of the thematic kernel, is building his material by means of augmentation, transposition, subdivision, recombination etc.

Furthermore, compositional process is described as recursive with considerable interaction among elements (Wiggins, 2007:461, Collins, 2005:193). According to Sloboda, the output of one stage is not necessarily the input of the next stage as plans can be changed in the light of the way a particular passage turns out. Bennet (1976: 8) goes further on saying that, through revision, the composer is able to evaluate constantly the results of his creative thinking. The element of judgment which can alter the primary goals set by the composer is also demonstrated in Slodoba’s model (1985).

Additionally, there is considerable evidence (Wiggins, 2007, Collins, 2005:196) that there is an interaction between local and global structure, detail and larger design. Throughout the process the composer forms a holistic conception of the work, elaborating the note to note details in the full light of its structure. Wiggins (2007: 460) demonstrates how musical initial ideas are generated and are immediately contextualized, that is, are embedded and operate in the context of the whole. Sloboda (1985:137) also argues that starting points for continuation derive from previous material but in relation to the entirety. These observations suggest a cumulative conception since one event is an aggregate of its predecessors (Sarath, 1996:4) and a kind of hierarchy, given that persistent occurrence of superordinate structures guide and determine the detailed note by note working out (Cook, 1990:200). Moreover,

this evidence also implies that one basic goal of the composer is to succeed a past – future unity by bounding together events in a kind of overall logic.

Moreover, compositional process involves parallel thinking (Collins, 2005: 193) since concurrent streams of thought can enter in the process. Stravinsky (Sloboda, 1985:109) notes that he often works on several things simultaneously and Wallas (1926:80) claims that, 'even exploring the same problem the mind may be unconsciously incubating one aspect of it while it is consciously employed in preparing or verifying another aspect'. This simultaneous handling of multiple operations suggests that composition could be regarded as a highly organized system of interacting rules.

Many scholars also have postulated that the model of creative thinking in music (Webster, 1990) could be applied to composition. At the heart of its model lies a sequence of divergent and convergent thinking. Divergent thinking concerns 'opening up the problems to different kinds of explorations' while convergent thinking is about 'arriving at a single accurate solution, respectively' (Webster, 1990:22). Creative thinking also involves making associations, combining broader categories and working simultaneously on many ideas (Cropley, 2000). Compositional activity seems to share these characteristics.

Composition is also an intentional and cognitive activity which requires a decision – making and reflective process (Sloboda, 1985:115). According to Collins (2005:209), it involves problem – solving processes where the composer is a problem solver who moves from the initial stage of the problem to its goal state. In his model demonstrates how a germinal idea generates particular subgoals which lead to a problem proliferation out of which arouse certain solutions. Each problem – solved generates an ongoing set of sub goals and sub problems. Thus, composition seems to

be an expressive solution – generating activity meeting the constraints of problems set by the composer himself. It is worth noting that problem – solving modes can occur within an emotional or cognitive context since the complex nature of creative act has both emotional and intellectual attributes (Nagy, 2015:71).

Another important issue that we should take into consideration is the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness that occurs in the compositional process. Aranosian (1981:71) speaks of a 'musical stream of consciousness' which is that part of the mind at which preconscious meet conscious producing the flow of 'auditory imagery' (internalized sound). Collins (2005:198) states that compositional activity can encompass sudden 'eureka' gestalt moments of illumination where the composer grasps the overall structural view of the evolving composition. Sloboda (1985:118,119) also makes a distinction between conscious – easily reported by composers – and unconscious – not easily reported – processes by arguing that the conscious successive procedure of the composer is moulded both by conscious goals and constraints as well as by the unconscious mind. The first stage of 'inspiration' seems to be often obscure to consciousness whereas the later stages of elaboration and refinement are more conscious. As Sloboda puts it, (1985:115) 'composers by themselves cannot articulate exactly where the inspiration comes from […] very often are unaware of the process of thought until they are through it'. However we should acknowledge the fact that every composer works in a different way, thus this kind of generalization could be regarded as misleading to a certain extent. For example, Robert Saxton (Cook, 1990: 11) claims that for him the later stages of the detail composing out of the initial material are more unconscious than the first stage, where he defines the idea and its premises.

The fusion between conscious and unconscious mind seems to be an indispensable condition for all creative work since the unconscious mind needs the conscious one so as to be expressed and symbolized. Composers in their verbal reports (Bennet,1976:10) emphasize their need to preserve these 'altered states of consciousness' by having one part of their mind serving a self monitoring function by paying attention to what the 'stream of consciousness' is producing. Bernstein (1970:271) claims that 'half of you is allowed to do what it wants, while the other half has to be in attention to watch what the first half is doing'. Yet, does this transformation in consciousness imply a passive creative act? It seems to me that composition could have a receptive element where consciousness is relaxed and a state of passive receptivity is created. However, this does not imply a neutral passive activity since composition is a very active creative process.

Apart from the cognitive and emotional, conscious and unconscious forces that constitute the compositional process, we should not circumvent the sociocultural context within which it unfolds. Brown and Dillon (2012) demonstrate how compositional activity is embedded in its sociocultural contexts by arguing that it involves type of actions ('attending, evaluating, directing, exploring, embodying') that take place in contexts ('social, cultural, personal'). This view suggests that composition is an enactment of cognitive and sociocultural forces where interrelationships between social factors and musical process are created. Folkestand (1996) also argues that composition is a 'situated process' where the composer is influenced by social and musical enculturation and is engaged in an act of personal expression of ideas that others may share. This idea could lead us to the notion that composition reflects composer's musical enculturation, their individual memories and life experiences. Therefore, we could argue that the compositional creative process is

constructed from elements of their entire mental reservoir and is fed up and constrained at the same time by experience.

Reaching now this point, provided that the study of musical creativity has largely been concerned not only with the activity of composition but also with improvisation, two intriguing questions seem to arise. What improvisation has to do with composition and at what point we can say that somebody is composing or improvising? In order to address these issues, a closer look at improvisation is needed that view this creative act not necessarily associated with jazz but as an ‘art of in – the moment – creation’ (Lopez-Gonzalez, 2012) apart from any particular stylistic parameters.

Many scholars have postulated the importance of improvisation in the compositional process. Bach points out how central improvisation is to composition by arguing that ‘a good future in composition can be predicted for anyone who can improvise’ (Aranosian, 1981:67). Bennet (1976:12) considers improvisation as an external variable that may play a role in generating the germinal idea and Sloboda (1985:408-409) believes that improvisation can give insight to composition. Busoni suggests that successful acts of composition are improvisatory (Solis & Nettl, 2009 :242) and Stravinsky (Bennet, 1976:12) claims that ‘accidents’ that occur in his improvisations may develop to something substantive. These views suggest that improvisation is integrated to compositional process to a certain extent. However, in what they could be distinguished? Should they be distinguished at all? What about the aleatoric compositions of John Cage and Stockhausen which have an improvisatory quality? Could these be regarded as compositions or improvisations?

Sarath (1996:1-4) points to time as the essential parameter of difference, by arguing that the two processes have contrasting temporal directionalities. On the one

hand, improvisation is driven by an ‘inner directed’ and ‘vertical’ temporality since spontaneous creation and performance take place in a real time format, where the localized present is intensified because of an unmanifest future and an unchangeable past. On the other hand, composition has an ‘expanding’ and ‘multi – layered temporality’. The composer is involved in a discontinuous process of creation, usually through notation, where he/she can freeze time and revise at any given moment. Therefore, we could argue that even if some compositions have an improvisational approach, the discontinuity of the process accounts for not being regarded as improvisations.

Furthermore, I would suggest that another factor which differentiates these musical creative processes is related to structure and the different procedures that the composer and the improviser follow in order to give unity to their creations. As we discussed earlier, an essential parameter in composition is to keep long term structural goals in sight in order to unify present material with what has gone before. Notation enables the composer to relate sections and connect ideas. On the contrary, the improviser dispense with much of the composers decision – making regarding structure and direction since there is a pre existence of formal constraints – a blueprint –. In other words, he/she uses a model supplied by culture which embellishes in various ways (Sloboda, 1985:149). Thus, through his continuous practice, he/she is familiar a priory with the structure and he relies on the given constraints of form along with his own style to give the music the desired unity.

Additionally, the context within which each activity takes place differ, in that contrasting circumstances surround each creative act. For instance, composition is temporally and spatially separate from performance. Although the composer responds to environmental influences during the creative process, feedback from listeners and

the properties of collective consciousness are absent. On the contrary, improvisation usually involves a singularity of performance and creation of playing and listening at a particular time and place. In such instances, a wide spectrum of environmental information could access during the creating process, affecting the resultant work during the creative act.

Sloboda (1985:103) also regards these processes fundamentally different pointing on time and fluency. He argues that, while in improvisation fluency is essential, given that the crucial factor is the speed at which the stream of invention can be sustained, in composition fluency is less important. Although an idea could come instantaneously, its subsequent development and moulding may take years, whereas in improvisation the reworking of ideas is not possible. We can move then toward the notion that the composer and the improviser have different expressive goals to a certain extent. While improviser's goal is freedom and immediacy, composer's aim is the resultant structure of a finished autonomous work.

However, according to many scholars, there is no fundamental distinction between the two processes or there are points where they can intersect. For instance, Nettle (Sarah, 1996:32) considers improvisation as an 'accelerated or instantaneous version of composition' and Schoenberg shares a similar view by describing composition as a 'slow – down improvisation'. According to Sarath (1996:6), although composition and improvisation have different temporalities, they both involve a similar temporality which he calls 'retensive – protensive' temporality. That is, the 'projection of awareness in past – future directions that occurs both in the expanding conception of composer and in the continuous framework of improviser'. Seen in this light, there is a constant interplay between moment to moment and

teleological structure. Yet, it is upon which temporality dominates that the categorization of the creative format depends.

Moreover, in both cases the originator must have a repertoire for extracting musical material formed by his experience and knowledge within his musical environment and both processes involve the interplay between the conscious and the subconscious mind, since transformations in consciousness are also commonly cited by improvisers (Sarath, 1996:2).

Finally, and most importantly, I would argue that both composition and improvisation are two complex cognitive processes which involve parallel and creative – divergent and convergent – thinking. They both take place in the wide scope of a decision – making procedure within which the improviser/composer is the problem solver. In this solution – generating space, the interplay of emotional and cognitive factors influences their decision – making process. Thus, I would suggest that their point of intersection is to be found in this deep contextual level of creative procedure which traces a path from the intangible to tangible through the interaction of complex cognitive mechanisms influenced by sociocultural factors.

At this point, after examining both the creative processes of composition and improvisation, we could argue that the above observations provide evidence of different conceptual strategies from which different expressive goals emerge and thus, contingent contrasting analytical frameworks. However, it would seem facile to me if we circumvent the fact that they both share a somewhat similar way of creative thinking, considering that both belong to the wide spectrum of musical creativity. Furthermore, it is worth noting that both are processes conditioned by the full complexity of human experience, shaped by cognitive, emotional and environmental forces. Viewed as such, the precise nature of musical creativity is a highly individual

question and therefore, it feels necessary to enlarge the scope beyond the confines of mental processes alone. The multidimensionality of music creation calls for a multidisciplinary approach. For instance, a new dialogue between psychology, sociology and music could generate interesting scientific research.

Concluding, fruitful area for further exploration could be the study of the effects of emotion during creation, which remains a topic to be fully explored. How creative compositional behavior interacts with emotion may be another piece to the puzzle of how and why we create since emotion guides much of artistic creation. Despite the difficulty in examining the elusive nature of musical creativity, I firmly believe that it is indispensable to shed new light to the mysterious aura surrounding the wonderful realm of musical creation.

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