

Section A		
Institution: Durham University		
Unit of Assessment: 30 – Philosophy		
Title: The Aesthetics of Imperfection: Changing Improvisational Practice in the Arts		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Andy Hamilton	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Professor of Philosophy	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1994-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>The aesthetics of imperfection is an approach to the creation and evaluation of artistic works that values spontaneity and the process of performance over planning, preparation and revision. Hamilton's development of the aesthetics of imperfection has had a worldwide impact on how artists – primarily musicians - reflect on, develop, communicate and educate others about their creative practice. Musicians and artists have testified about its effect in producing new creative outputs; outputs that would not have happened otherwise. The discussion of Hamilton's ideas in public forums has also produced impact on the wider public, especially on those working within the 'improvised music' community from Newcastle and the North-East to New York.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>In [R1] Hamilton interprets practice in performing and non-performing arts through the opposition of the <i>aesthetics of perfection</i> and <i>aesthetics of imperfection</i>. The distinction originates in Ted Gioia's <i>The Imperfect Art</i> (1991), which contrasts the imperfectionist aesthetic of improvisation, especially jazz, with the perfectionist aesthetic of composition. Hamilton develops the contrast with philosophical rigour, arguing that the rival aesthetics are manifested across <i>all</i> musical performance – thus the aesthetics of imperfection is found in interpretation of composed works too. These ideas are revised and developed as part of the monograph [R2], and they also inform the edited volume [R4].</p> <p>The case study reflects the conviction that both practical and academic perspectives are required to fully grasp this contrast, and that the views of practitioners concerning their creative activities must be taken very seriously.</p> <p>The aesthetics of imperfection is most readily illustrated by music and performing arts. The aesthetics of imperfection involves <i>openness to contingencies in the performing situation</i> – valuing spontaneous creation, which it forces or compels by excluding the possibility of correction. The aesthetics of perfection, in contrast, favours planning over spontaneity, encouraging rigorous refinement of form through preparation and revision. In music, the aesthetics of perfection particularly emphasises the timelessness of the work and the authority of the composer; ultimately Platonic, it views works essentially as abstract sound-structures. The aesthetics of imperfection, in contrast, is humanistic, valuing the event or process of performance. These rival aesthetics are prominent in the modern Western artistic system, but occur across history and cultures in different forms. In Western classical music, they were crystallised in the contrasting modernisms of Arnold Schoenberg, who stressed the authority of the composer and obedience of the performer, and Ferruccio Busoni, who valued the individual interpretations of performers.</p> <p>In the 20th century, the aesthetics of imperfection appears most strikingly in jazz, and the improvised musics jazz has inspired; Hamilton explores this in conversation with leading musicians in these fields, both in the biography [R3] and in his music criticism in international London-based new music magazine <i>The Wire</i>, and elsewhere [R5]. But the aesthetics of</p>		

imperfection is by no means limited to improvised forms, or indeed to music; for Hamilton, there is a reciprocity between improvisation and composition, and between the aesthetics of perfection and imperfection. Successful improvisation has the appearance of composition – it is well-formed. At the same time, a compelling interpretation of a composition has the appearance of an improvisation – it seems spontaneously created. So the dialectic of imperfection versus perfection applies to the interpretation of composed works, as well as to improvisation; the aesthetics of imperfection is not simply an aesthetics of improvisation. Another way of putting these claims is to say that improvisation and composition are interpenetrating opposites. Although the main focus of the research has been music, it is a key finding that the aesthetics of imperfection applies beyond the performing arts, notably in the visual arts. It should also be stressed that the underpinning research has itself been affected by continuing debate with the artists and musicians who have been impacted. There is a continuing exchange of ideas.

3. References to the research

- [R1] Hamilton, A., "The Art of Improvisation and the Aesthetics of Imperfection", *British Journal of Aesthetics Special Issue*, Vol. 40 No. 1, January 2000, pp. 168-85. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/40.1.168>
- [R2] Hamilton, A., *Aesthetics and Music* (London: Continuum, 2007).
- [R3] Hamilton, A., *Lee Konitz: Conversations on the Improviser's Art* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.130264>
- [R4] Hamilton, A., Paddison, M., and Cheyne P., (eds.) *The Philosophy of Rhythm: Aesthetics, Music, Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
- [R5] Hamilton, A. "Jazz as Classical Music", in G. Tomasi and M. Santi (eds.), *Improvisation: Between Technique and Spontaneity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

Evidence of the Quality of Research:

[R1] was peer reviewed, and the publishing journal is one of the two leading international journals of aesthetics. The article has 257 citations (Google Scholar) and has been anthologised in *Teaching Music in Secondary Schools*, ed. Gary Spruce. A second edition of [R2] is to be published by the major academic publisher Bloomsbury, who have taken over the original publisher. It has been called "a rich and interesting study" (Stephen Davies, *Analysis*) and has 86 citations (Google Scholar). Reviewer praise for [R3] includes: "Meticulously researched, detailed and documented" (John Zorn, composer and jazz musician). "'An extraordinary approach...The asides by noted musicians are beautifully woven throughout the pages. I couldn't put the book down – it is the definition of a living history" (David Liebman, jazz musician). Hamilton was awarded a Small Grant of GBP4,734 by the British Society of Aesthetics for a 2019 workshop.

4. Details of the impact

Hamilton's research has changed the creative practices of an influential body of reflective musicians and artists innovating in avant-garde disciplines in the UK and beyond. The practitioners involved are leading representatives of jazz and related improvising-based art forms, and contemporary Western classical composition. The principal beneficiaries of this case study are from the field of art music. In the Western world, art music is divided into the performance of composed music (such as Western classical), and the performance of improvised music (including jazz). The latter has the smaller category of musicians and listeners, and involves some of the most radical and experimental music.

Impact was generated through a series of workshops that involved approximately 30 leading improvising musicians over three years in Newcastle and Durham (April 2016, April 2017, October 2018, and October 2019). The workshops provided an opportunity for knowledge exchange between Hamilton and the musicians present, and invited participants to respond directly to Hamilton's work on the aesthetics of imperfection. Resulting from the workshops is the edited collection, *The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Music and the Arts*, eds. Andy Hamilton and Lara Pearson (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). It was decided that statements of

impact would be solicited in the form of testimonials, but the testimonials must be understood in the light of their authors' contributions to the above volume, which provide necessary context and explanation. In their articles, contributors showed the influence of Hamilton's ideas on their thought and practice, which is clarified in some cases through testimonials.

The Director of Jazz North East, the oldest grant-supported jazz promoting body in the UK and a leading specialist promoter of improvised music from around the world, described the musicians involved in the project as "a remarkable collection of many of the major figures in improvised music in Britain and Europe, plus important players in North America and Australia" [E1]. A sample of the musicians involved include improvising saxophonist Evan Parker, "a major force in European improvising", who has released over 200 recordings and regularly plays at major international venues including London's Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, and Wigmore Hall. Others, including Joe McPhee (US), Dave Brown (Australia), The Necks (Australia), Linda Catlin Smith (Canada) and John Snijders (UK/Netherlands) are internationally known performers and composers whose work can be heard at major festivals and venues such as Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Sydney's Now Now, Other Minds Festival San Francisco, Amsterdam's Bimhuis, and London's Café Oto. They have performed with such major ensembles and figures as the London Sinfonietta, Ives Ensemble, and other top practitioners of avant-garde music.

Beyond art music Hamilton's workshops attracted people from a range of other art forms: people in the field of comedy, including one participant who works with leading UK stand-up comedian Stewart Lee, and commercially-successful metal band Sonic Youth draw on improvised techniques in their practice.

Impact on influential musicians

The four workshops described above took place over a period of three years, and invited creative practitioners in attendance to reflect on, and respond directly to, Hamilton's research meaningfully and in a sustained way leading to changes in professional creative practice. The workshops attracted approximately 200 attendees, including music fans, students, amateur musicians, teachers and arts administrators. Ideas about improvisation and imperfection in performance arising from Hamilton's research were exchanged, and then developed by individual practitioners in relation to their own work.

(a) *Brighton-based pianist-composer Stephanie Cant* has derived insight and practical tools from Hamilton's research. Cant's music is performed by internationally-recognised musicians including Michala Petri, Evgenia Startseva, Bobby Chen and Andrew Bernardi/BMG. She has performed her own works at St James's Piccadilly, Chapel Royal Brighton, Sage Gateshead and other UK venues, and runs the Butterfly Concerts to promote serendipity in performance. She writes: "[Hamilton's research] provided an impetus to reset aspects of my artistic endeavours... As a performer, I have begun once again to prepare with a general view of a work in mind, rather than attempting to hone a particular and detailed response to it... I am seeking to [show] others how the now prevalent rigorous predetermination of performance often misrepresents the intentions of past composers...[Hamilton's research] helps these ideas...have a voice in the wider musical world – which needs them, or concerts will die. It will help my recording engineer to understand how some of his techniques privilege this sort of 'anti-music' and why. Giving legitimacy to the problems I raise... he cannot brush them away as my incompetence."

These changes to her practice have impacted on audiences: "I have discovered that audiences really appreciate an inspired performance arising from this kind of preparation, and are mostly not aware of slips or errors...The response is far more positive than the response to a contrived interpretation." This impact is tangible through Cant's teaching: "Reading Hamilton's work [I] realised that my own artistic activity... had been drifting in the directions I now censure. Teaching students preparing for undergraduate piano performance examinations, I had begun to privilege accuracy and certainty over inspiration and serendipity of outcome." Cant reports that the impact of Hamilton's ideas on the musical activities she organises: "They encourage me to pursue my activities as a concert organiser, through the series of 'Butterfly Concerts' I have established, in which serendipity is encouraged and

audience engagement is profound. I also support artists who run more established festivals and concert series from motivations similar to mine” [E2].

(b) *Visual artist and 2018 workshop participant Claire Zakiewicz* develops ideas from the project in a February 2019 article in *The Hypocrite Reader*, A New York based monthly magazine: “I was influenced by Hamilton’s ideas to recognise the value of developing process-orientated practices and in particular an imperfectionist aesthetic in my drawings, drawing practice (drawing performance) and collaborations. I have much better understood how embracing or even using imperfections, glitches and mistakes as material, taking risks (impulsive as well as thought-through) and exploring degrees of control and letting go can lead to an increasingly inventive and resourceful practice” [E3].

(c) *Adam Fairhall a Manchester-based jazz and improvising pianist* described by *The Independent* as “a total star,” recent commercial recordings show the impact of Hamilton’s ideas: “Hamilton’s account of idiosyncratic technique as a function of an improviser’s aesthetic... led me to consider more systematically the...functions of idiosyncratic technique in free improvisation and jazz. This led me to consider my recent practical experiments with unusual keyboard instruments as constituting an overall project, an investigation into idiosyncratic technique. Hamilton’s article provided a critical framework for this project, resulting in insights into my practice that have clarified its purpose and potential [and] a renewed vigour in my work on these instruments, and last year resulted in a commercially released album which features this work. This year will see the release of at least two more albums” [E4].

Direct impacts have extended to this jazz musician’s collaborations: “Hamilton’s notion of composition and improvisation as ‘interpenetrating’ opposites has led me to reflect on the use of composition in the projects I am involved with, particularly a piano trio – ‘Fragments’... This piano trio has just released its debut album, and I have cited Hamilton’s notion of composition and improvisation as ‘interpenetrating opposites’ in correspondence with potential reviewers” [E4].

(d) *Jazz pianist Darius Brubeck* describes the broader impact of Hamilton’s research on jazz. In a chapter for *The Aesthetics of Imperfection* volume, interpreting the work of his father Dave Brubeck, he writes: “The challenge of grappling with jazz as a serious art form has accelerated the development of the discourse about the aesthetics of imperfection. This wouldn’t happen, of course, unless philosophers like Hamilton took jazz seriously” [E5].

(e) *Ben Holmes a New York-based jazz and klezmer trumpeter* comments: “I wrote out this quote [from Hamilton’s *Lee Konitz* book] on an index card and stuck it up in my practice room: ‘It’s a matter of slowing down the process with enough space to stay relaxed. Not getting tense and breathing in a relaxed way are the keys to the good ideas department’. It’s a motif of Hamilton’s book on Konitz that to be truly spontaneous, improvising can’t proceed faster than thinking. I’ve been dedicating some time every day to playing improvised music (either standards or free), and incorporating this approach, and using it to re-evaluate old licks and habits.” [E6]

(f) *John Pope a Sage-Gateshead featured composer, improviser and educator* notes that his “...exposure to Andrew Hamilton’s ‘Aesthetics of Imperfection seminars have given me an insight into an alternative conception for the virtues of improvisation in music, and their echoes in other disciplines and artistic practices. Traditional notions of ‘perfection’ in music, especially as it relates to form and composition, frequently leave little room for the elements of improvisation that give it value to the artist or listener, and force the discourse around the music to approach it on terms unsuitable for realising the ‘real work’ that is going on.” He notes that these seminars have “been very influential in my own thinking and music making, and I believe will come to be seen as an important field of study in the acceptance of improvisation into a wider field of musical academia.” [E7]

Impact beyond professional musicians: local outcomes

While targeted at professional musicians and creative practitioners working at the top of their fields, the workshops also attracted people with different levels of involvement in art music, and at different stages of development in their own creative practice. One amateur jazz musician described how the event changed how he thought about improvisation and composition: “[It gave me] greater freedom to write less harmonically defined and unmetered sections/pieces [and] greater understanding of the process behind other people’s methods of writing and listening”. [E8]

More generally, the three public workshops have impacted on local musical communities, furthering educational aims, and changing perceptions of improvised music. The Director of the Newcastle Festival of Jazz and Improvised Music 2018 and 2019, which hosted those years’ workshops, noted its contribution in bringing improvised music to new audiences, enhancing understanding among a wider public, and developing the careers of artists: “Andy Hamilton’s participation was a key part of this engagement” [E8].

Impact beyond professional musicians: education and global reach

The impact of Hamilton’s research also extends beyond those who attended the workshops into a wider body of practitioners, educators and a broader public not involved in the workshop/volume project. A prominent Australian sound artist, scholar and curator with a specific interest in remote wilderness regions and their communities has taken Hamilton’s research as the basis for his work in music education. He comments that: “Hamilton’s sustained and thoughtful research... into the Aesthetics of Imperfection underpins my own approach to teaching in which I use the classroom to experiment with different modes of delivery in order to introduce moments of chance and spontaneity to my lessons. In these circumstances I invite imperfection into the classroom to privilege different ways of knowing and communicating – a force to disrupt routine and expectation. I also direct my students to many of Andy’s scholarly works including the remarkable body of work he has produced for *The Wire* tracing some of the most important developments in the field of Jazz, Classical Music and Sound Art. Andy’s *Aesthetics and Music* has been on my recommended reading list since it was published...and is an important source for discussion regarding the nature and origins of perception and aesthetic appreciation.” [E9]

The global reach of Hamilton’s research within the music-community is further evidenced by its online profile. In the period November 2018 to March 2020 there have been over 830 viewings of talks at the *Aesthetics of Imperfection* workshops [E10]. In an online video, New York-based bassist and composer Adam Neely refers to Hamilton’s research [R2] in a discussion of virtuosity and difficult music that has been viewed over 1,400,000 times (as of 24 February 2020), attracting over 4,000 comments, from across Europe and North America. He comments: “In his book ‘*Aesthetics and Music*’, [which discusses the aesthetics of imperfection], Andy Hamilton explains how the ‘devilry, risk, excitement and relief’ of virtuosity is a thing we experience in music aside from music itself.” [E10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

[E1] Testimonial from the Director of Jazz North East.

[E2] Testimonial, and chapter in *The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Music and the Arts* by Stephanie Cant.

[E3] Article in *The Hypocrite Reader* by Claire Zakiewicz.

[E4] Testimonial from a Manchester-based jazz and improvising pianist.

[E5] Chapter in *The Aesthetics of Imperfection in Music and the Arts* by Darius Brubeck.

[E6] Testimonial from a New York-based jazz and klezmer trumpeter.

[E7] Testimonial from a Sage-Gateshead featured composer, improviser and educator.

[E8] Feedback from workshop including testimonials from an amateur jazz musician and the Director of Newcastle Festival of Jazz and Improvised Music.

[E9] Testimonial from Australian sound artist, scholar and curator.

[E10] Screenshots from the *Aesthetics of Imperfection* YouTube channel ‘About’ page and a YouTube video by Adam Neely.