

Vincent Meelberg

Dr, Senior Lecturer

Radboud University Nijmegen (The Netherlands)

Encountering Metal and Wood: The Double Bass as Collaborative and Resistive Actor in Musical Improvisation (Paper)

Traditionally, music is considered a form of human expression. Through music, human subjects may express emotions and affect other people. Often, objects are used for creating music, and although much has been written about musical performance, musical emotion, and musical embodiment, the notion of a musical instrument as an actor in performance is highly under-theorised. In this presentation, I intend to fill in this gap. By incorporating Gilles Deleuze's conception of ethics – considered as the study of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterises not only human being, but also objects and even ideas – and Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory – in which agency is extended to non-human actors – I will analyse my embodied engagement with the double bass in a musical improvisation. The double bass, like all musical instruments, is not just an instrument that passively mediates the musical ideas of musicians. Instead, it actively codetermines the way a musical performance will turn out. In free improvisation, in particular, the agency of musical instruments may become explicit. Free improvisation, in this sense, truly is a point of encounter, the result of a collaborative, and sometimes also resistive, relation between an object (the double bass), sonic phenomena, and me, as an embodied, cognitive subject. An improvisation can be considered a network in which these three elements are the actors that have agency. The double bass has the potentiality to affect the player and the sounds, just as the sounds can affect the player and the bass in return. In my analysis I will explicate these affective relations and argue that it is not so much the player that is constantly in control, but that any actor in an improvisation can at some point guide the way in which the improvisation will develop.

Vincent Meelberg is senior lecturer and researcher at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, Department of Cultural Studies, and at the Academy for Creative and Performing Arts in Leiden and The Hague. He is founding editor of the online Journal of Sonic Studies. His current research focuses on the process musical creation. Beside his academic activities he is active as a double bassist in several jazz groups, as well as a composer.