A Conflux of Musical Logics
Memory, History and the Improvisative Music of SLANT

DAVE WILSON

The author discusses SLANT, an improvisation-based project he coconceived, recorded and performed on tenor saxophone in duo with pianist and new music specialist Richard Valitutto. The project deconstructs sound worlds such as late nineteenth-century Romanticism, avant-garde/free jazz, microtonal spectralism and southeast European rural music. Drawing on George Lewis’s systems of improvisative musicality, the article analyzes SLANT through the lens of sociomusical experience. The author shows how Afrological, Eurological and other systems of musicality participate together, manifesting in dialogical improvisative music-making that emerges from multiethnic and multicultural histories of improvised music.

SLANT (2019, pfMENTUM) is a duo album that I coconceived, cocomposed and collaboratively performed on tenor saxophone with pianist and new music specialist Richard Valitutto. For the nine improvisation-based concepts constituting the project, we drew on sounds of Ornette Coleman, Alexander Scriabin, Eric Dolphy, Horațiu Rădulescu, Keith Jarrett, Cecil Taylor and others as we engaged the musical worlds of our personal experience. Valitutto’s and my lived musical experience as individuals spans a broad swath of overlapping terrain: The sociomusical ways that SLANT came together were crucially informed by his involvement in improvisation in new music and other European classical traditions, and by mine in jazz, Arabic maqam and other styles. I analyze SLANT through the lens of sociomusical experience, employing George Lewis’s concepts of Afrological, Eurological and other systems of improvisive musicality [1–3], understanding the album’s improvisations as “temporally multilaminar” [4]—they flow in the present, sounding multiple layers both of the past and of potential futures—and agreeing with him that American experimentalism (still) needs to “assert its character as multicultural and multieth-

AFROLOGICAL, EUROLOGICAL AND OTHER SYSTEMS OF IMPROVISATIVE MUSICALITY

The terms “Afrological” and “Eurological,” coined by Lewis, “refer metaphorically to musical belief systems and behavior that . . . exemplify particular kinds of musical ‘logic’” [6]. Lewis introduced the terms, in part, to provide analytical tools to “squarely and honestly” face racial and ethnic components of historically emergent sociomusical groups, while decoupling ethnic essentialism from speaking and writing about music [7].

One principal point of divergence between Eurological and Afrological music-making lies in dissimilar conceptions of spontaneity. The Eurological notion of spontaneity excludes history and memory; “‘real’ improvisation is often described in terms of eliminating reference to ‘known’ styles” [8]. Understanding improvisation to prioritize an illusory “pure” ephemerality, the Eurological perspective reduces spontaneity to the present moment, rejecting references to or inclusions of pasts or futures. In Afrological improvisative musicality, the spontaneity in improvisation is multiply situated in relation to sounds produced (recorded or otherwise) in varying levels of temporal proximity to the present moment, embracing memory, history and agency, both in the individual expression of personality and in the metaphor and act of storytelling. History and memory provide ways of engaging with these multiple temporalities, and can be personal, collective and/or referential to musiocultural legacies of traditions and styles.

Dichotomous constructs also often feature in Eurological musical perspectives, including the “composer-performer axis” [9], as well as binary oppositions between free improvisation and extended notated composition, and between idiomatic and nonidiomatic genres or traditions of im-

See www.mitpressjournals.org/toc/lmj/30 for supplemental files associated with this issue.

provisation [10]. Afrological systems avoid these binaries: Composition and improvisation are not necessarily seen as discrete acts, and genre labels and idioms such as “jazz” can be embraced and engaged rather than bracketed as limiting factors. In his initial discussion of the Eurological, Lewis provides the example of John Cage and others connected to music termed “experimental,” affirming these binaries through distancing themselves from “jazz” and through “othering” African American forms of improvisation. One way they did this was by coining new terms such as “indeterminacy” and “aleatoric music;” rhetorical moves that Lewis situates explicitly in terms of race, based as they are on an exnomination (or renaming, or disguising) of whiteness and the creation of epistemological others, such as “jazz.”

This example hints at one of Lewis’s underlying arguments: The rhetoric artists use to describe experimental improvisation matters, because it emerges from the sociomusical systems structuring artists’ music-making, even as it constitutes those systems and infuses improvisative musicality with ideologies (e.g., ideologies about the place of history and memory in spontaneity). Furthermore, whether and how artists attribute various aspects of experimental improvisation to particular individuals and groups similarly matter. These discursive choices are powerful. They can exnominate whiteness and exacerbate exclusions of African American and other marginalized groups; alternatively, they can highlight practices and logics of the multicultural and multiethnic history of experimental improvisation.

In the rhetoric and practices of SLANT, it was crucial for us to avoid dichotomies such as composer-performer and composition-improvisation binaries typical of Eurological perspectives, to allow a broad range of musical and social experiences to shape the project, from Eurological, Afrological and other belief systems [11]. We have also been explicit in our discourse about the many “logics” that emerge from our experience and converge in the project: In contrast with Cage and the experimentalists who disregarded contributions of African American artists, we name the artists and musical worlds that have inspired us, and we endeavor to squarely and honestly face the racial and ethnic components of those worlds.

Lewis’s concepts, referring as they do to social and cultural location, point the way to artists self-reflexively understanding how they sound out both memories from the sociomusical systems of their experience and histories of these systems beyond their experience. As I reflect on SLANT, it has become clearer to me how Valitutto and I strove to embrace memory, history and personality as we drew on our multiplicitous musical worlds. I turn now to some brief reflections, which attempt to integrate my own personal biography into a description of how Valitutto’s and my participation in various sociomusical systems have shaped our musicalities as individuals and the musicalities of SLANT.

**BIOGRAPHY, EXPERIENCE, MEMORY, HISTORY**

I grew up in a suburb bordering Chicago’s northwest side, near O’Hare airport. My classmates were, like me, predominantly middle-class and white, with parents who were engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers and other professionals, many, but not all, Christian and politically conservative. Our local high school had, over the years, produced several prominent upwardly mobile middle-class individuals, including several sports figures, a few entertainers and, most notably, Hillary Rodham Clinton, reportedly a member of the high school young Republicans club in the 1960s. I studied classical piano beginning at age four; my teachers combined the Suzuki method with sight-reading and music theory–based ear training skills, and when I began learning jazz on the saxophone in the 1990s, I participated in what was becoming standardized jazz education based on traditional jazz historiography.

Having been inculcated with Eurological notions of the composer-performer division of labor and of improvisation as a mystically spontaneous activity in my presaxophone life, I began to learn, in my public school jazz education, strategies for improvising in bebop and hard bop styles over chord changes that I practiced with Jamey Aebersold play-alongs on record, tape and CD. However, before my studies at Indiana University under David Baker (who was key in carving out legitimacy for jazz in tertiary education), I learned little about the social and received worlds of the music I was learning to play. As a child I registered no strong sense that jazz was African American music, other than perhaps in its representations on The Cosby Show, which featured prominent African American jazz musicians performing in jazz clubs visited by the middle-class Black family whose day-to-day lives I watched on television every Thursday night. Although I had some familiarity with jazz as African American music within my own class- and whiteness-based constraints, my experience was distant from many sociomusical elements of jazz and other African American music, in particular, elements rooted in notions of emancipation, activism and collectivity.

Twenty-five miles down the Kennedy and Dan Ryan Expressways was the home of the AACM (Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians), a collective formed in the particular sociomusical conditions of Chicago’s racially segregated all-Black South Side. In Lewis’s analysis of a 1969 encounter between members of the AACM and musicians from the European free improvisation movement, he describes how the AACM challenges Eurological binaries by engaging with all kinds of traditions and genres, with original music and with both composition and collectivity (their European counterparts had rejected individual composition as a binary opposite to collectivity). In Lewis’s words: “AACM musicians constantly challenged racialized hierarchies of aesthetics, method, place, infrastructure, and economics that sought to limit their mobility of genre, method, and cultural reference” [12].

In stark contrast to the ironic assertion by the European free improvisation musicians of their “emancipation” from African American domination, the radical project the AACM articulates is one of emancipation from boundaries of all sorts, particularly those of race and place. The AACM
philosophy rejects temporal boundaries as well, embracing history and memory, and leaving no room for the Eurological notion of the detached “spontaneous.”

Although the AACM was geographically near during my childhood, it was so aesthetically and ideologically distant from the binary-driven sociomusical systems of my upbringing that even when I heard and saw members of the AACM perform at Grant Park in Chicago in the mid-1990s as a proficient high school jazz musician, I had a hard time understanding much about the performance. The sonic and visual aesthetics were far removed from the music that I was learning to produce, and the sociality of their musical performance was also unfamiliar to me, ignorant as I was of the AACM’s values and of their celebration of both collectivity and individual composition. Their performance did not resonate with my personal experience then—and yet I still remember the event. Today I wonder if there was some sort of resonance, or other impression, at a different level.

Valitutto grew up in North Carolina in a similarly white and middle-class community, studying Suzuki piano (also from age four), expanding his musicality in middle school and high school and later enrolling at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, an institution, like the Indiana University School of Music at the time, largely in the traditional conservatory model. We met in Los Angeles in 2012, in the context of a workshop put on by the American Composers Orchestra called the Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute. I was a composer-participant in the workshop under the mentorship of composers including James Newton, Nicole Mitchell, Derek Bermel, Anthony Davis, Lewis and Anne LeBaron. Valitutto was involved as a member of new music ensemble Wild Up, whose members taught techniques for notation and orchestration. We brought our more recent pasts to our first encounter, he having lived in Los Angeles since beginning master’s study at California Institute of the Arts, participating in Afrological and other sociomusical systems beyond those of his conservatory days and becoming a new music pianist in the Los Angeles classical scene. I had spent a number of years in Macedonia and had been based in Los Angeles for seven years, playing more pop and commercial music and less of the traditional-narrative mainstream jazz that had provided decreasing inspiration since my time studying under Baker. In Macedonia I conducted ethnographic fieldwork through performing and spending time with musicians of a plethora of styles, many of them new to me. There, I began to participate in systems of improvisative musicality grounded in Macedonian lived experience and its cosmopolitan and transcultural intersections with Eurological and Afrological belief systems, with perspectives connected to Ottoman and Yugoslav-era musical legacies.

Valitutto and I forged a friendship grounded in shared musical interests. Over 2014–2015 we attended LA Philharmonic’s “Green Umbrella” new music concert series, where Valitutto also had performed. We shared conversations about politics, musical economies and aesthetic resonances. My understanding of the racial politics underlying jazz, improvisation and composition had been shaped by Newton during my UCLA studies, nudging me toward the Afrological sociomusicalities of Dolphy, Coleman and the AACM. Valitutto, based on his knowledge of improvisation in many eras of the European classical tradition, was comfortable improvising in the context of a range of Eurological and Afrological systems. We found sounds and musicalities that stimulated us even as we sought to move past racially inscribed aesthetic and geographical perspectives that had structured our early musical lives.

The sonic relationality of SLANT reflects, embodies and engages with the multiple sociomusical worlds Valitutto and I have experienced and shared. Two examples from the project illustrate our engagement with history and memory, avoid the composition-improvisation binary and reject conceptions of an autonomous work in favor of an improvisative dialogical process between us in a confluence of various sociomusical systems.

CONVERGING SOCIOMUSICALITIES IN TWO CONCEPTS FROM SLANT

The album’s first track, “set (zajdi),” takes its inspiration from the Macedonian traditional song “Zajdi, Zajdi Jasno Sonce” (Set, Set Bright Sun), composed in the 1950s by Aleksandar Sarievski, a folk musician prominent in the Yugoslav period (1945–1991) [13]. Debates in Macedonia abound regarding the extent to which Sarievski drew on rural music (narodna muzika) when he composed “Zajdi, Zajdi.” This suggests a logic of authorship that includes an individual as well as a “people” or “folk” (narod), whose communal musicality permeates a song’s melody, rhythm, ornamentation and other performative elements. My saxophone playing in “set (zajdi)” generally follows the melodic contour of “Zajdi, Zajdi,” and I improvise a version of the improvisative ornamentation style typically performed by vocalists on the song, a Macedonian rural style dating to the Ottoman era and developed during the Yugoslav period. Valitutto’s forceful playing references the spectralist techniques of Romanian composer Horățiu Rădulescu, particularly those that coax combinations of partials from the piano’s lowest strings. My playing responds to those complex partials, remembering that in some women’s rural traditions in southeast Europe, vocalists’ clashing partials are experienced as “pleasant” and “smooth” [14]. Our dialogical improvisative process for “set (zajdi)” is driven, in part, by histories and personal memories of Macedonian traditional music, with particular logics of communal composition and ways of listening attuned to partials guiding the performance.

For “i—e—,” we use pitch as our main organizing principle, drawing on a Dolphy synthetic scale both as a pitch set for solo improvisations and as a framework for a notated sequence of pitches that we composed to structure the concept’s conclusion (Fig. 1) [15]. This scale appears as a framework for improvisation on Freddie Hubbard’s handwritten trumpet part for the Dolphy composition “Gazzelloni,” which I had come across in rehearsals of the UCLA Charles Mingus Ensemble directed by Newton. By the time Valitutto and I recorded “i—e—,” we had performed it several times and
had agreed that I would play first. During our first take, after I finished my solo turn, Valitutto began with a technique I had never heard before: He played a chord containing 10 pitches from the Dolphy scale and began releasing his fingers from the keyboard percussively one by one. I was stunned and stimulated by the sound—even though I assumed this moment had a precedent, I felt that I was listening to something Eurologically spontaneous, with no reference to the past, yet also firmly connected to Dolphy, Hubbard, “Gazzelloni,” and my experience with the UCLA Mingus Ensemble. A few minutes later, as we sounded out repetitions of the final two pitches of the prenotated section to finish the take, I began playing softer, hoping that Valitutto would play this technique again, and he did so immediately. My/our desires for these sounds to return may have had to do with ways of listening that gestured toward cyclical repetition, or with desires for a brief recapitulation, or perhaps with something else. The strong memory of that studio session has typically shaped subsequent performances in one way or another, allowing each new performance to take new temporally multilaminar form as we embrace our personal memories of the performance’s previous iterations and sound out the histories embedded in the structure of the concept [16].

We have performed these two concepts and the rest of SLANT twice since the album’s recording, once at the Macedonian Philharmonic in Skopje and once at Richard Barrett and Milana Zarić’s Spectrum East in Belgrade. Those spaces, and the personal experiences within which our performances were embedded, also shape the ways that we listen to, and play, SLANT. New history, memory and agency continually infuse our individual and collaborative embodied musicality, shaped as it is by musical systems Eurological, Afrological, Macedoniological, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

These and the other concept-driven improvisations in SLANT are rooted in our commitment to the temporally multilaminar nature of improvisation, in our rejection of dichotomous binaries and in our explicit rhetoric about our engagement with multiethnic and multicultural histories of improvisation. Expanding on Jason Stanyek’s notion that Pan-African music-making is a space that allows for the simultaneous
enactment of multiple perspectives, discourses and identities [17], I suggest that the enactment of multiple systems of improvisative musicality in sociomusical confluence around Afrological priorities of history, memory, personality and agency can make a resonating statement against the erasure and denial of the musical impact of African American and other communities subject to race-, class- or place-based domination and marginalization. That being said, and while Valitutto and I don’t hide our positionalities, or the communities based in whiteness that shaped us, I also recognize that we encounter minimal barriers—to race, gender, ethnicity or (dis)ability—to our fluidity among multicultural and multi-ethnic legacies of improvised music. We seek to responsibly live in the reality of our positions vis-à-vis those legacies: Unlike the European free improvisers Lewis describes, we don’t require some sort of “emancipation” from African American aesthetics to move toward collectivity; nor do we reinscribe the pattern wherein white male jazz musicians strive to mitigate their fragility and bolster their legitimacy (e.g. the legitimacy of their masculinity) through associations with African American male musicians [18]. And yet as Michael Dessen cautions:

It is all too easy in writing about improvisation to embrace overly simple or utopian discourses about its power. . . . [We], who are aware of the sacrifices that others have made in order to enact such collective rituals of performance, cannot help but keep a hopeful eye out for new openings and new ways of understanding the legacies (literally, “gifts”) embodied in these practices [19].

While the sacrifices we have made in SLANT have been minimal, and as Valitutto and I recognize our privileged position to represent multiple musicalities in an unjust and uneven landscape, the project is perhaps a glimpse of an opening, of a way of understanding and embodying the multiple legacies of improvisative musicality. Through embracing memory and history in our music and our sociality, we seek to acknowledge and extend those legacies in sound and in word, offering our own dialogical contribution.

Acknowledgments
I thank the Aaron Copland Fund for Music Recording Program, the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music, the Longy School of Music of Bard College, Victoria University of Wellington and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia for their generous support of SLANT and related research.

References and Notes
11 Afrological and Eurological sociomusical systems are complementary as well as transcultural, leaving room for other actual and potential musicocultural logics. See Lewis [2] p. 168; see also Appendix A in the online supplemental materials for references expanding on Lewis’s concepts.
13 For musical examples, see Richard Valitutto and Dave Wilson, SLANT (ptMENTUM): https://open.spotify.com/album/1UxUf6P6y5MToAy313440si=aBGrLdEtYK5dVbyPiOaxgQ (accessed 30 September 2019).
15 “i—e—” is among the most extensively notated of SLANT’s concepts.
16 See Appendix B in the online supplemental material for discussion of a third example from SLANT.
18 Appendix C in the online supplemental materials lists relevant references.

Manuscript received 5 February 2020.

DAVE WILSON is senior lecturer in music at the New Zealand School of Music–Te Kōkī at Victoria University of Wellington. He is a composer, saxophonist, clarinetist and ethnomusicologist, and received a PhD in ethnomusicology from UCLA in 2015.

Wilson, A Conflous of Musical Logics 83