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Dossiê Experimentalismo na Música de Concerto e na Música Popular: conceito, práticas e historicidades

On the Afrologic/Eurologic Dialectic

Frederico **Lyra**
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1228-5480
(Université Paris 8, École Doctorale Pratiques et Théories du Sens, ED31, Paris, France)

Abstract: This essay revisits the debate proposed by George Lewis between two logics of creating indeterminate music, namely Afrologic and Eurologic, with the aim of critically updating it in the form of a dialectic. We aim to show that this dialectic conceals tensions both within and beyond music that were not fully developed by the author. Additionally, the rhythm, a particular conception of sound, and the notion of freedom inherent to what he calls Afrologic are of investigative interest. Our hypothesis is that the confrontation Lewis elaborates between Parker and Cage proves fruitful for thinking about contemporary political relevance and opening doors to a past often forgotten, particularly regarding contemporary experimental music.

Keywords: Afrologic. Eurologic. Dialectics. Freedom.

Sobre a dialética Afrologic/Eurologic

Resumo: Este ensaio recupera o debate proposto por George Lewis entre duas lógicas de criar música indeterminada, a saber, afrologic e eurologic, para tentar atualizá-lo criticamente sob forma de uma dialética. Tentamos mostrar que essa dialética esconde tensões no interior e para além da música que não foram totalmente desenvolvidas pelo autor e que o ritmo, uma certa concepção de som e a noção de liberdade, inerentes ao que ele chama de afrologic, são de interesse investigativo. A nossa hipótese é que a confrontação elaborada por Lewis entre Parker e Cage parece frutuosa para pensar a atualidade política e tentar abrir algumas portas de um passado muitas vezes esquecido no que tange à música experimental contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Afrologic. Eurologic. Dialética. Liberdade.

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In this essay, we propose shifting the usual discussion on the relationship between music and politics to show that music theory itself can be a site of political dispute. We aim to demonstrate how political implications emerge from the improvisational logic that trombonist and theorist George Lewis calls Afrologic. This is a musical and political theorization of a particular way of creating experimental music. Largely due to its integration into the global music industry, it is often forgotten that jazz was, already by 1945 with Charlie Parker, one of the most radical forms of music of the era. Parker opened a door to radical and immanent experimentation within this tradition and in all musical parameters, which quickly became more radical and developed into several branches, the most notable of which is free jazz, emerging in the early 1960s. The theoretical and political debate rearticulated by Lewis is one of the most insightful reflections on this way of inventing music.

1. Towards a dialectic

Our starting point is George Lewis's Afrological and Eurological theory, first developed in the essay *Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives* (Lewis, 1996). Lewis distinguishes between two musical logics to create spontaneous music: Afrologic, rooted in the African American jazz tradition, and Eurologic, associated with Western art music. Contrary to the dominant reading that attributes this shift to John Cage, Lewis highlights jazz and Charlie Parker, who had anticipated these practices by nearly a decade. He demonstrates that improvisation played a fundamental role in reintroducing indeterminacy into music after World War II. This historiographical reassessment aims to shift the analytical focus and recognize improvisation as a force of musical and social transformation. Rather than embracing randomness, Lewis seeks to show where the true conceptual rupture of indeterminacy occurred: it was reintroduced through improvisation, not by musical chance.

Lewis finds himself compelled – due in part to the unidimensional socio-historical configuration of post-war United States (Marcuse, 1964) – to consider music beyond certain boundaries, such as those between art music and popular music. Another important epistemological move made by Lewis is to first situate his subject within the United States before later expanding it to Europe and the rest of the world. *Afrologic* only indirectly refers to Africa, just as *Eurologic* only indirectly refers to Europe. In this sense, it is also an implicit attempt to reclaim this history from the perspective of the oppressed. The reintroduction of improvisation happened, in a way, despite society – or perhaps even against American society itself. As Lewis states elsewhere:

> Between 1920 and 1960, the rise of jazz as a potent competitor to the primacy of Western classical music reintroduced a notion of improvisation as a professional practice with an associated aesthetic that also articulated social and cultural instrumentality. Jazz improvisers, routinely caricatured as unable to theorize their own practices, developed their highly influential musical directions in large autodidact circumstances: private listening, practicing, and performing sessions, public and semipublic 'jam sessions', home and talent show performance, and professional touring bands (Lewis, 2008, p. 1).

Afrologic and Eurologic now share the necessity of being understood as the result of a double negation. However, the nature of this double negation differs for each logic. One of the defining characteristics of Eurologic is that the European heritage must be negated in a twofold manner. First, it is denied as a European inheritance, transforming it into an endogenous issue within the United States. Then,

in a second step, it is negated again as a residual European influence within American music. In this sense, as we have suggested, Eurologic – perhaps unintentionally – directly inherits the legacy of North American settlers. This negation of the negation, which ultimately results in something entirely distinct from the original position, was treated by John Cage as an attempt to start from zero – a *tabula rasa*. On one hand, this issue initially appears as an internal debate within the United States. On the other hand, emphasizing this double negation more clearly highlights the theoretical and social stakes of this perspective. It also raises questions about the absorption of Eurologic ideas beyond the United States. Given Cage's immense influence on the subsequent development of experimental and avant-garde music, these issues quickly became global. How can this kind of musical and political gesture be adopted and transposed to Europe? To Brazil? To China?

On the other hand, the double negation necessary to conceptualize Afrologic follows an entirely different path. It also unfolds in two distinct steps: there is a negation of North American colonial logic and a negation of the colonial, slave-based past – which, in the U.S., evolved into legalized racial apartheid, enshrined in the Constitution until 1965. In this case, one negation does not arise from the other; rather, both positions are negated simultaneously. Ultimately, since this double negation addresses both the internal and external aspects of the same colonial past, Afrologic offers a potential openness that is absent in its counterpart. It is possible that, to be truly radical, any critique of colonial history – whether related or not – must take the form of a double negation, one that simultaneously denies both the internal and extraterritorial dimensions of the historical problem at hand. Perhaps this is a way of looking for new openings for experimentation.

This conceptual framework allows us to reconsider the place of African American musicians – from Parker onward – within the history of radical musical experimentation. Far from being a normative theory, Afrologic serves as a model for analyzing improvisation beyond rigid categories. It challenges the divide between composition and improvisation and highlights the historical impact of Charlie Parker and the entire radical branch of jazz in reclaiming improvisation as a musical, artistic, intellectual, and political act. This approach situates music theory within a field of tensions where social, aesthetic, and historical stakes are at play.

2. Inside/Outside

The concepts of Afrologic and Eurologic articulate a dialectical antagonism between two logics of musical creation that do not synthesize but rather continuously oppose each other. The dialectic we aim to elaborate on the basis of Lewis's essay is grounded in Negative Dialectics (1990), in which Adorno, rather than focusing on the movement of synthesis, seeks to construct a series of antinomies and antagonisms wherein the poles are maintained in a state of constant tension and movement, remaining mutually imbricated without, however, yielding a synthetic resolution. This dialectical tension crystallizes around the problem of musical indeterminacy: improvisation on one side, randomness on the other. Although Lewis presents them as metaphors, we argue that both should be considered as materialist concepts, intrinsically linked to their musical object. To reveal the political dimension of an object, one must

identify the antagonisms it entails. In this theory, antagonism first manifests within music before being transposed to other social spheres. This musical antagonism can be understood as a reflection of the tensions between a peripheral logic and a central logic within the capitalist system. However, it is important to emphasize that these two logics are not racially determined but historically and subjectively shaped. Thus, a Black musician can adopt a Eurological approach, just as a white musician can operate within an Afrological framework. It is a matter of musical choice and engagement. Afrologic and Eurologic are not essentialist categories but historical ones, open to future developments. But they are also embedded in the history of racial divisions in the United States, thus avoiding any ontological fixation. We are warned that

> my construction of 'Afrological' and 'Eurological' systems of improvisative musicality refers to social and cultural location and is theorized here as historically emergent rather than ethnically essential, thereby accounting for the reality of transcultural and transracial communication among improvisers. For example, African-American music, like any music, can be performed by a person of any 'race' without losing its character as historically Afrological, just as a performance of Karnatic vocal music by Terry Riley does not transform the raga into a Eurological music form. My constructions make no attempt to delineate ethnicity or race, although they are designed to ensure that the reality of the ethnic or racial component of a historically emergent sociomusical group must be faced squarely and honestly (Lewis, 1996, p. 93).

Lewis highlights that improvisation, once marginalized in Europe, reemerged in the 20th century within the former North American colony – which had itself become an imperial power, much like the old world before it. As we say, he identifies two fundamental forms that this resurgence took: the Afrological, embodied by Charlie Parker, and the Eurological, by John Cage. This parallel is still uncommon in the literature. It forces a shift in critical perspective. Lewis notes that the dominant discourse does not place Cage and Parker in the same category or propose such comparisons, even though both engaged in experimental and radical approaches. He argues that their musical differences are inseparable from extra-musical factors such as race, class, and politics. Lewis thus critiques the denial of the Afrological role in the history of improvisation[1]. He emphasizes that bebop preceded European interest in indeterminacy, presenting a challenge to Eurological musicians who sought to follow a similar experimental approach. This denial was already evident in John Cage, who refused to acknowledge any influence from Parker. Thus, improvisation becomes both a theoretical and political issue of experimentation, revealing a struggle over the very definition of music and who has the right to conceptualize it. Nevertheless, George Lewis acknowledges John Cage's contribution in expanding the concept of composition and reintroducing indeterminacy and chance into European art music. However, he highlights the tensions this approach creates with the Eurological tradition. Far from a simple rejection, for Lewis, it is a critical reflection on the aesthetic and historical implications of this music. On the other hand, it is also true that Lewis does not fully address another important – and perhaps more original – theoretical and aesthetic contribution made

[1] In Paul Griffiths' work (2010), for example, even though the influence of jazz is mentioned several times, indeterminacy is introduced through John Cage. A similar pattern can be seen in Alex Ross (2007), where jazz first appears as noise and later as a musical tradition that was influential in the creative process of minimalist composers. In *Révolutions Musicales: La Musique contemporaine depuis 1945* (1999), co-written by Dominique and Jean-Yves Bosseur, jazz appears only in a very marginal way.

by John Cage: the shift he made toward listening and composition focused on silence. This move toward silence seems, at present, to be more productive for musical creation than the emphasis on randomness. In testament to this interest, members of the AACM, such as Anthony Braxton and Leo Smith, recorded the album *Silence* (1974), paying tribute to Cage while developing a different conception of silence. However, as Smith explains in dialogue with George Lewis, their approach aimed to materialize music within space, in contrast to Cage, who prioritized the sound environment as an autonomous phenomenon. According to Smith:

> 'Silence' is a piece that has silence in it, and it came after John Cage's 'Silence', but the philosophical connection of silence in this case was to materialize music within the space, and whatever was heard in the environment, whereas in the Cage piece there was absolutely no music in the space, and the gestures were the moments of the environment, you see. So creating a piece that seemed that it would look like and feel like a piece that came out of Cage's tradition, in fact, we didn't have that problem, because as I say, we are not bound by what came in the past or this particular ensemble's history – you know, like a classical ensemble has a history that's specifically European. We didn't have to worry about that. If you have an ensemble that's essentially Asian, let's say it has instruments for India, Korea and Pakistan, you don't have to worry about the history of that. Because you function as a creative artist, you function in a zone where you can choose and pick anything that makes a music object (Lewis & Smith, 1995)[2].

Lewis, on the other hand, critiques certain compositions by Cage, such as *Music for Changes* (1951) and *Variations VI* (1966), where the procedures determine the performance without any subjective engagement from the composer or the performer. He points out a rupture between practice and outcome, rendering the music itself indeterminate. The fundamental problem, according to Lewis, is that in some of Cage's works, the compositional processes are completely external to the musical objects they generate. This ultimately removes any subjective involvement of the composer and performers. There is a break between subjective practice and the objective result, which transforms both into randomness within themselves, because the outcome could be entirely different for one or the other. One procedure could lead to any kind of music, and any music could have been the consequence of any procedure.

Pauline Nadrigny (2014) shows that Cage, in addition to being a composer, adopted an almost philosophical approach, where randomness combined discipline and the unexpected. However, she notes that his rejection of structure aimed at liberating musical time, which paradoxically resulted in a lack of creative tension. Denis Levaillant points out that, for Cage, it would be impossible to play with structure without breaking it with the concept of chance. He therefore confines himself to presenting the networks within which chance operates. This approach emphasizes 'the possibility of not choosing' (Levaillant, 1996, p. 37). Lewis argues that the improvisation developed initially by Parker maintains, unlike Cage's randomness, a tension between structure and freedom. He critiques the absolutization of music in Cage's work, which eliminates subjective expression and leads to an abstraction that prevents the emergence of a

[2]Another example would be Steve Lacy, a musician who was long very close to George Lewis and who never hid his interest in John Cage.

true musical subject. For Lewis, Parker's approach to improvisation allows for both spontaneity and structure, fostering a dynamic interplay that retains the involvement of the performer and composer. In contrast, Cage's reliance on random processes creates a distance from the subjective, reducing music to a mere result of predetermined procedures without personal engagement or emotional expression. In the end, it's as if, from Lewis's point of view, the operations introduced by Cage were less experimental than they seemed, because basically delegating all the risk of the result and the performance to chance was, in a way, a very smooth move for the composer.

As Lydia Goehr (2007) observes, Cage, in his attempt to introduce the outside world into institutional music, ended up being absorbed by it, with his work quickly integrated into the dominant system. There would be nothing more institutionalized and hegemonic in contemporary music than Cage's methods. This opposition aligns with Adorno's (2013) analyses of the dissolution of meaning in random music and its rapid assimilation by the institution. The philosopher emphasizes that Cage's compositional logic leads to a convergence between total randomness and the extreme technicization of music, neutralizing any real opposition. Thus, despite his intention to break free, Cage finds himself dialectically trapped within the structure he sought to transcend. This is precisely what the Afrological aims to avoid by maintaining a dynamic relationship between improvisation and the structure, where subject and object engage in a constant feedback loop without falling into abstraction or total indeterminacy.

The conceptual opposition between the Afrological and Eurological thus mirrors that between improvisation and randomness. George Lewis emphasizes that these concepts are often confused, even though they are fundamentally distinct. According to him, indeterminacy and randomness are sometimes preferred over the concept of improvisation in some musical discourses to avoid its association with jazz. Improvisation is a much weightier term that everyone wants to avoid because of the often negative content it carries. Giancarlo Schiaffini (2017) specifies that only the unpredictability of the result links randomness and improvisation. At the same time, he nuances this by stating that Cage was more concerned with the process than the outcome. Denis Levaillant (1996) adds that indeterminacy and chance served as prerequisites for improvisation, without fully achieving it. For Lewis, improvisation articulates spontaneity and structure, generating a creative tension that is essential. Unlike Cage, who focuses on spontaneity while neglecting construction, the Afrological demands active reflection and engagement from the musician. Furthermore, in the Afrological, external elements are integrated and transformed in real time. The trombonist emphasizes improvisation as a structured and meaningful practice, where sonic symbols emerge from both social and formal issues. The rise of bebop embodies this approach, reinventing the relationship between the individual and the collective and disrupting the notions of structure and expression. It was a quest for freedom previously unprecedented coming from a unfree community of musicians. This movement, while sharing some principles with Baroque improvisation (Caine, 2007), introduces a rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, and sonic dynamic that is both new and revolutionary.

To close, let's focus a bit more on the following three sections, dealing with rhythm, sound, and freedom.

3. Rhythm

Saxophonist Steve Coleman is the one who best theorizes the innovations brought by Parker in the realm of rhythm. According to Coleman, the strength of Parker's musical language lies in his phrasing and timing, as well as in how he combines these elements with musicians like Max Roach and Dizzy Gillespie. He argues that the main innovation in Charlie Parker's music lies in the rhythmic aspect, rather than the harmonic or melodic variations, which are often highlighted in jazz historiography and pedagogy. It is in rhythm that the experiment was most potent. He points out that while Western music theory has extensively explored the harmonic aspects of Parker's music, it has overlooked the rhythmic aspect, which is much more difficult to describe with traditional theoretical tools. The rhythm in Parker's music, particularly in his use of phrasing and the balance between musical phrases, has presented analytical challenges distinct from other musical parameters. His playing does not merely engage with concepts of 'swing,' but incorporates rhythmic elements more closely aligned with African music and Cuban clave. This rhythmic development, according to Coleman, should not be seen as a return to African roots but as a reinvention that specifically manifests within the context of American jazz. Coleman writes:

> In my opinion, by far the most dramatic feature of Bird's musical language is the rhythmic aspect, in particular his phrasing and timing, not only his own playing but in combination with dynamic players such as Max Roach, Roy Haynes, Bud Powell, Fats Navarro, Dizzy Gillespie, and others. Although much more has been written about the harmonic aspects of Bird's musical language, most of this harmonic conception was already present in the music of pianists and saxophonists from the previous era, before Parker arrived on the scene. Among others, the music of pianists Duke Ellington and Art Tatum, as well as saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and Don Byas, demonstrated an already quite sophisticated grasp of harmony. Just about any recording of Tatum demonstrates a harmonic language that rivaled anything from the musicians of Charlie Parker's time (Coleman, 2024).

And then he adds:

> Not a lot has been written about the rhythmic aspects of this language, and for good reason – there are no words and developed descriptive concepts for it in most Western languages. Western music theory has developed primarily in directions that are great for describing the tonal aspects of music, particularly harmony. However, the language to describe rhythm itself is not very well developed, apart from descriptions of time signatures and other notation-related devices (Coleman, 2024).

The Afrological aspect of this tradition of improvised music is not a repetition of African rhythms but a product of the musicians' engagement in a creative process unique to the United States. As Mark Abel rightly notes in his study on the phenomenon of *Groove*, "during the twentieth century black American music has grown, not less (as one would expect) but *more* 'African' as black musicians have sought to assert their distinct identity in the face of what many have regarded as the exploitation of their skills by white society" (2014, p. 76–77). Instead of being the result of an almost genetic inheritance, the development of jazz rhythm through African musical sources was a process of engagement by the musicians. It was the result of aesthetic choices that were made either consciously or unconsciously, but always in relation to history and music. Its potential connection to African rhythms thus stems from a reflexive process

that musicians from Charlie Parker to Steve Coleman and many others engaged in. The connection to African rhythms was developed immanently from the foundational material of the musical tradition itself. These African aspects were, in a way, always present, but they only became apparent through the meticulous work that emerged from the assumed material. What was assumed only emerged when the conditions for its actual emergence were historically dated, and, more importantly, when musicians committed to realizing this possibility. In this sense, the reappropriation of material and a kind of 'africanity' in jazz by certain musicians should not be seen as a return to origins but as a gesture made possible by the progress of music. Even if some musicians claim it to be a return, their musical practice contradicts this because it points toward the future. As mentioned, the Afrological logic is not essentialist in nature but rather the result of a collective invention by the musicians.

4. Sound

Lewis emphasizes that improvisation in the Afro-American tradition is defined by a personal sound and a distinct narrative work, which are central to the search for a sonic identity. Unlike the European classical tradition, from an Afrological perspective, sound is not primarily about timbre:

> part of telling your own story is developing your own 'sound.' An Afrological notion of an improviser's 'sound' may be seen as analogous to the Eurological concept of compositional 'style,' especially in a musically semiotic sense. Moreover, for an improviser working in Afrological forms, 'sound,' sensibility, personality, and intelligence cannot be separated from an improviser's phenomenal (as distinct from formal) definition of music (Lewis, 1996, p. 117)

Contrary to the classical tradition, where 'sound' primarily refers to timbre, in the Afrological tradition, it encompasses the musician's expressiveness and is tied to their engagement with a group. The search for a personal sound lies between the individual and the collective, and it is not an individualistic act but a collective process. Lewis says:

> Like cultural theories of improvisation, once sound theory exceeds its science-borrowed discourses, the poverty of expression becomes evident, at least in the English language. Moreover, discourses of sound, particularly those that are borrowed from music, quickly become mired in moralizing about the purity and autonomy of the listening experience. Ways are sought to ascetically disconnect listening from the world, as in 'reduced listening,' or ideals of 'sounds in themselves' that lack any relationship to culture, history, memory, providing fertile philosophical topsoil for an objectifying commodification of sound, where sound is distanced from interactivity and connectivity, from intentionality and empathy (Lewis, 2007)

The narrative concept in improvisation is essential. Vijay Iyer (2004) emphasizes the importance of musical narration that goes beyond tonal or systematic structure. Improvisation allows for the articulation of a non-linear type of particular storytelling that doesn't tell a story in words but in music, built from the lived experience of the improviser, particularly from the accumulation of experiences from their performances. This is reflected in the nuances of a note or a solo, which can express a fragmented story rather than a continuous narrative. Improvisation is a constantly evolving process, where musicians adapt and choose how to exploit predetermined forms. The performance is not only spontaneous but also

the result of thoughtful engagement and a creative quest. In this sense, improvisation follows a dialectic where the process is more important than the final product. But at the same time, a final product is necessary and intimately connected to the process to give meaning to it. It is in this dynamic, marked by the constitutive tension between the subject and the object involved and between continuity and discontinuity, that the essence of Afro-American improvisation resides.

5. Freedom

The opposition between the logics of John Cage and George Lewis is reflected in their conception of freedom in music. Cage advocates for music where sound is simply sound, and musicians are not subjected to external laws, such as those imposed by the composer or conductor. According to Lewis, this vision of freedom does not consider the necessary struggle to attain freedom; it appears as a given of nature, disconnected from any historical and social dimension. This is a perspective that can only be conceived by someone who is white and part of the dominant class. Lewis formulates this critique as follows: 'Cage's notion of social instrumentality, however, does not connect this very American notion of freedom—perhaps reminiscent of the frontier myth—to any kind of struggle that might be required in order to obtain it. The composer denies the utility of protest" (Lewis, 1996, p. 98). Cage rejects any form of claim, struggle, or politics related to music, preferring a holistic approach that denies any boundaries or conflicts, which ultimately aligns with the dominant structure of American society. In contrast, according to Lewis, Afrological improvisation sees freedom as a concept that emerges through discipline: mastery of musical technique, knowledge of history, and culture. In jazz, the quest for artistic freedom anticipates the struggles for civil rights and aligns with global uprisings, including the Black Panthers, anti-colonial movements, and May 1968. Artistic freedom, like political freedom, must be earned, and Cage, in his integrated vision, denies this possibility, viewing it as an immutable given.

Finally, Cage seeks to erase the history of Western music, refusing to inherit either the North American or European traditions, thereby creating a kind of *tabula rasa*. This implies a destructive relationship with history. In contrast, afrological improvisation engages in a struggle with history, memory, and musical contradictions, refusing to deny their existence in order to assert authentic freedom. This *tabula rasa* logic, in which freedom emerges as a natural given, is closely aligned with the ideology of American expansion, associated with the conquest of the Far West as well as contemporary imperialism.

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Frederico Lyra is a musicologist and philosopher. He completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Philosophy at the University of São Paulo, Brazil (2022–2025). He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Lille, with a dissertation entitled Improvisation, Jazz, and Negative Dialectics. He earned a master's degree in Musicology from Université Paris-Sorbonne and a master's degree in Philosophy from Université Paris 8. He also holds a bachelor's degree in Music and a bachelor's degree in Economics from the Federal University of Pernambuco (Brazil). He served as an ATER (Temporary Teaching and Research Associate) in Philosophy at the Université de Picardie Jules Verne and has taught at several French universities. He has published numerous articles on jazz, improvised music, Paulo Arantes, Theodor W. Adorno, Guy Debord and critical theory in general. He is currently pursuing a second PhD in the Sociology of War at Université Paris 8.

E-mail: lyrafred@gmail.com

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