Moving to Become Better
The Embodied Performance of Musical Groove

Listening to music literally is more than meets the ear. It is not only hearing that is involved in a musical experience. The perception, experience and creation of music is always also a bodily activity. Music does something with listeners, both to their bodies and to their minds and does this in such a way that it bypasses their conscious awareness. It affects listeners without them having full control over this influence. As theorists such as Steve Goodman (2010) and Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan (2008) assert: listeners, including musical performers who are at the same time listeners, are always vulnerable to the influence generated by the perception of music.

One musical characteristic that elucidates the affective and intrusive power of music is groove. Groove, the sense of propulsive rhythmic feel created by particular interactions of musical sounds, elicits a visceral response from listeners and performers alike. It literally makes them move by making them tap their feet, nod their heads or hum along with the music, often without them being consciously aware of it. In
other words: these visceral responses are the result of the infringement of the listeners’ and performers’ bodily autonomy caused by the musical groove.

Groove is a continuing intrusion into the bodies of listeners and performers. As soon as music generates a groove, these bodies have to respond and cannot stop responding until the music has stopped. It is a disturbance of the listeners’ and performers’ bodies at rest, and entices them to move, bypassing their conscious control. Musical groove is an influential intrusion.

Whereas the concept of groove has been extensively discussed both as a general phenomenon and from the perspective of the listener, the ways in which groove can affect and influence the performer and the musical performance deserves more attention. [1] In my own practice as a double bass player I am in many cases (co)responsible for the creation of groove. This responsibility incites questions regarding the way I should relate to this musical phenomenon. Do I, as an individual musician, always have the liberty to instigate a groove, to decide to go along with an existing groove or to resist it, to break the groove down? In which ways do the other musicians, as well as the musical sounds they produce, impose constraints on the possibilities to create or prevent groove? Moreover, since, as a player, I am (at least) equally affected by the sonic intrusion caused by groove as the listener is, the question arises whether or not I am always in full control when it concerns the creation of groove, even in those cases in which I am playing by myself. Perhaps the sounds the music consists of provoke the possibilities for creating or terminating a groove, exactly because these musical sounds affect me via the groove.
In my composition called *Moving to Become Better* I address these questions. This piece, written for keyboards, sampler, double bass and drums, offers the musicians possibilities to experiment with groove. Through the performance of *Moving to Become Better* I intend to explore the mutual influences of groove and the performance of musicians. More specifically, with this performance I aim to investigate the influence, or more precisely, the responsibility, musicians have to instigate or resist a groove. In this way I expect to be able to elucidate both the role of the performer in the creation of groove and the effect groove can have on performers and their performance, since performers are at the same time listeners that are vulnerable to the affections groove can elicit. [2]

I will start by outlining how groove is generally considered by music theorists. Next, I will discuss the process of writing *Moving to Become Better*, a piece in which groove is thematized. I will focus especially on moments during the compositional process in which theoretical considerations of groove conflict with the practice of trying to create, in the musical score, possibilities for groove to emerge. The writing of this composition itself thus already is an artistic investigation into the phenomenon called groove. Since this piece is supposed to offer the musicians possibilities to experiment with groove, the actual performance of *Moving to Become Better* is an artistic research into the notion of groove as well. It is a research which is crucial to properly, productively explore the mutual influences of groove and the performance of musicians. Therefore, the results of this investigation feature prominently in this essay. Finally, I will assess the findings of this artistic research by discussing them within a theoretical context, more specifically within the context of embodied Deleuzian ethics. This will enable me to articulate the consequences of these research outcomes for the
ways the relation between groove and musicians can be viewed.

The Corporeality of Groove

Musical groove is a highly affective phenomenon. According to Matthew Butterfield, it ‘[...] evokes the impulse that makes music come alive and induces listeners to movement, to a feelingful (sic), corporeal participation in the ebb and flow of a given performance’ (2010: 157). [3] Groove makes listeners move, and through this groove, this movement, the music becomes even more expressive.

‘Moving the listener’ is not just a metaphorical way of speaking about musical experience. It indicates a very important aspect of listening and of perception in general; namely that it is embodied. The body is always involved in this activity. As recent cognitive and empirical research has shown, every act of perception and cognition is necessarily embodied. [4] Perception, comprehension and intelligence in general, are acts in which the entire body is involved. Intelligence is not restricted to the brain exclusively. Human subjects need a body in order to perceive, think, comprehend and understand.

This is particularly true for the musical phenomenon called groove. To fully understand what groove is, it needs to be felt. To respond in a physical manner to a groove, Lawrence Zbikowski explains, is a proper way to demonstrate ‘[...] a particular kind of cultural knowledge’ (2004: 280), i.e. knowledge regarding musical time, meter and rhythm.
Listeners who respond physically to a groove have succeeded in selecting salient features out of a sequence of sounds and related these features in such a manner that they were able to identify a sense of regularity, differentiation, and cyclicity in the music. According to Zbikowski, the process in which such rhythmic understanding is established draws on focal features of both the listeners’ embodied experience, and their musical one (2004: 279). He concludes that ‘[...] knowing that rhythmic events are cyclic allows a response to a sequence of musical events that plays out over a larger time frame; and knowing that musical rhythm is associated with a strong sense of embodiment suggests that the most proper response to musical rhythm is to move’ (2004: 296). To know what a groove is, implies moving along with it as soon as it is recognized in the music.

Guy Madison defines a groove as ‘[...] wanting to move some part of the body in relation to some aspect of the sound pattern’ (2006: 201). Butterfield explains that this desire to move along with sound patterns is created by the tension generated by the interaction between performers, especially the bass player and the drummer (2010: 158). The ‘push and pull’, as he calls it, between performers generates ‘[...] a ‘productive tension’ thought to drive the groove with energy’ (2010: 157). Groove is a particular interaction between musical sounds and gestures that creates a sense of propulsive rhythmic feel.

*Moving to Become Better* (2011) offers the musicians possibilities to experiment with groove, and as such it can serve as an exploration of the mutual influences between groove and the performance of musicians, as a study of the responsibility musicians have to instigate or resist a groove and the effects groove has on their performance. The title is
derived from a famous quote by John Dewey: ‘The good man is the man who, no matter how morally unworthy he has been, is moving to become better’ (2004: 101; emphasis in original). Just as a good man (or woman!) needs to move on in order to improve him- or herself, a good musician also needs to move on, along with the music he or she produces, in such a manner that the music is able move on, too. And in the case of music that is supposed to groove, movement and propulsion become even more vital. A musician who is capable of creating and sustaining this groove can justifiably be called ‘better’ than one that is unable to move along with the groove and in doing so basically destroys what this music is supposed to be about. Yet, just like the man Dewey refers to in his quote, a musician always deserves another chance to become better in letting the music move.

*Moving to Become Better* offers the performers several opportunities to become better at making the music (and the listener) move via the generation of groove. The piece consists of seven so-called scenes and each of these highlights a particular aspect related to musical groove. In this way, this composition explores the possibilities to create and to play with (as well as against) groove.

*Scene 1*

The first scene is supposed to set the stage for groove to emerge. With a 4/4 time signature and a tempo of 75 quarter notes per minute the first musical elements that make groove possible are put into place. [5] This scene starts with a bass line over two bars, which is repeated during the entire scene. This bass line is supposed to groove on its own, it is important that it does not contain too many irregularities or musical changes. As Zbikowski (2004) observes, an excess of musical
change inhibits groove. Groove is best created by regularity and repetition.

However, I also intended to make this bass line interesting from a melodic point of view and since the rhythm needed to be relatively simple in order to groove, I experimented with the extent to which the melodic material can be complex without inhibiting the groove. I ended up with a bass line that has no clear tonality, but does suggest a degree of harmonic movement because of the low A flat and G in the second bar. These notes create a sense of tension, which is resolved by the reappearance of the low A in the first bar.

From composing this bass line I learned that, at least for me, the best way to create music that grooves is to imagine how the music would literally feel, both to listeners and to the musician who performs the music. Since groove has such an explicit embodied character, it was almost impossible for me to try to write music that grooves without in some way or another refer and listen to my own body while composing. Consequently, Zbikoski’s suggestion that groove is a form of embodied knowledge was already confirmed by composing this single bass line.

Furthermore, I noticed that, to really let this bass line groove, I had to play it slightly behind the beat. When I played the line as metronomically accurate as possible, it did not groove as much as I anticipated. Only by dragging the notes a bit, the music started to groove. It is possible that this has to do with the ‘push and pull’ Butterfield (2010) mentions. Although he refers to the push and pull between different musicians, this could also refer to the push and pull between the strict temporal grid of a metronome and the music. This tension is underlined in the bass line itself by the notated accents and by
the syncopation of some of the notes. These musical elements stress the push and pull between metronome time and musical time, a push and pull that, in this case, constitutes a groove.

At a moment of his/her own choosing, the keyboard player enters and plays chords that create a rhythmical counterpoint with the bass line. This in turn creates a push and pull between the bass and keyboards. The pitches of the chords are derived from the bass line. Interestingly, theories on groove would suggest a syncopating counterpoint, since the bass line itself is generally on the beat with the exception of a few notes. However, a fully syncopating keyboard part resulted in a musical movement that did not really groove anymore. I discovered that, to really make the music groove, at some point the beat should be emphasized in the keyboard part. This is done in the second bar, where the keyboard player plays on beats two and four (which can be considered a syncopation of the meter, but not of the beat).

The fact that the keyboard player can decide when to join the groove imposes a great responsibility on them. When do they feel confident enough to join the groove? Any rhythmical imprecision might result in the termination of the groove, set up by the bass player.

The same holds for the drummer, who may also decide when to enter. Moreover, they have an even greater responsibility. Not only because the drums are such a determining factor in the creation of groove, but also because there is no prescribed drum pattern. The drummer can play anything, as long as it complements and supports the groove.
Scene 2

This scene begins as soon as the keyboard player starts to improvise. The bass and drums continue playing the bass line and drum pattern from scene 1, respectively. The keyboard player is supposed to slip in and out of the groove, to experiment with going with and against the sense of propulsive rhythm set by the bass and drums. In this way this scene can be considered as an exploration of the possibilities
of cooperating with and working against the other players. How hard is it to resist an existing groove? Is it possible to eliminate a groove by trying to ignore it and play something completely unconstructive for the groove, or will it result into another ‘push and pull’ that only enhances the groove?

Scene 3

The beginning of scene 3 is signalled by the drummer who, at a certain moment, decides to terminate the existing groove. The other players stop playing the groove, too. Now, all players have to negotiate what the new situation will be. This could be the initiation of another groove, or a phase in which no explicit groove is created, or even a return to the groove from scene 1. Consequently, this scene focuses on the extent to which performers are open to other players’ ideas, and are willing to go along with and complement these. In other words: it is an investigation into the performers’ hospitality to musical intrusion, and the ways in which, on a musical level, these kinds of intrusions can be dealt with. This scene ends with another intrusion: a cue that is played by the keyboard player at a moment of their own choosing. This cue is derived from the final part of the bass line from scene 1.
Scene 4

During this scene a theme is played in unison by the keyboards and bass. The melodic material is derived from the bass and keyboard groove from Scene 1. This theme is not supposed to groove, and therefore the rhythm is complicated and does not contain any repetitions or cyclical moments. Instead, it consists of an excess of rhythmical change, which prevents the theme from grooving. To be able to write such an un-grooving theme, imagining how the melody would feel when played was crucial. It appeared to be quite difficult for me to write an un-grooving theme, and I really needed to imagine how the melody would sound and feel in order to arrive at a satisfactory result. Because the drums are supposed to play a groove — except for the final two bars in which the drums are silent — in this scene the tension between groove and non-groove is central. Does the music as a whole still have the opportunity to groove, exactly because of this tension?
Scene 5

After the theme, the bass improvises and tries to avoid grooving, while the keyboards play the groove from scene 1. Very gradually, the keyboards join the bass in improvising and avoiding the groove, until both instruments play completely
out of the groove. This improvisation continues until the drums give a musical cue, consisting solely of four quarter notes, after which the drums and the bass stop playing. Like scene 3, this scene is an investigation into the performers’ hospitality to musical intrusion, and the ways in which, on a musical level, these kinds of intrusions can be dealt with.

**Scene 6**

The keyboard player continues to improvise in a non-grooving manner and samples the final two seconds of their improvisation. This sample is then looped, and thus made cyclical, transformed into a repetition. In this way, the excess of musical change that the improvisation consisted of is turned into musical regularity. The drums and bass join this loop, trying to create a groove along with the loop. In this way the extent to which something that initially sounded like musical chaos can still result in a groove, as soon as it is subjected to rhythmic cyclicity. The keyboard player improvises over this groove, and signals the end of this scene with the cue that they also played at the end of scene 3.
Scene 7

In this final scene, once again, a theme is played in unison by the bass and keyboards, while the drums play the pattern from scene 1. This theme is rhythmically identical to the theme in scene 4, but this time the pitches are the same as those in the bass line from scene 1, and also appear in the same order. This melodic material is repeated during this theme, demonstrating that melodic cyclicity alone is not sufficient to create a groove. In each phrase the melody of the bass line starts over, as if unsuccessfully attempting to reinstate the groove with which the piece began.
Groove as Embodied Performance
While the process of composing *Moving to Become Better* can be regarded as an investigation into the possibilities to create, in the musical score, possibilities for groove to emerge, the actual groove won’t present itself until the piece is performed. After all, groove is the result of a particular interaction between musical sounds created by one or more musicians. It is also something that is greater than the sum of its parts, i.e. the individual contributions of the performers and/or the individual sounds that together constitute a groove. Moreover, the sonic entity that results from this interaction no longer belongs to, the musicians’ individual bodies. Instead, it is another, transcending, vibrating body that will interact with the human bodies it originated from. Peter Szendy calls this phenomenon the ‘airealisation’ of a performer’s body (2002: 128). A vibrating, sonic body is produced by musicians, with their own bodies — indirectly, by playing an instrument — while these same vibrations act as sonic entities that are separated from the musicians’ bodies, but which, in turn, can affect those very same musicians. The musicians’ movements — the playing of their instruments — are transformed into sonic movements which in turn can affect listeners, but also the musicians themselves. [6]

The performance of *Moving to Become Better* by my trio Molloy, with Jasper den Hertog on keyboards and sampler, Marc Huisman on drums and me on electric upright bass, makes the phenomenon called airealisation explicit. Take for instance the moments in which a groove is established by all three musicians after a phase that did not groove, such as after the termination of the groove by the drummer in scene 3 and the establishment of a groove on the basis of a loop in scene 6. During these moments I no longer seem to have conscious control over my body, my limbs, my facial expression. Instead, it seems as if I am subjected to an experience which
Szendy describes as ‘an infinite number of phantom limbs that are performing a sensational wild dance’ within my body (2002: 12). My fellow musicians acknowledged that they experienced similar effects. By making music, performers create vibrations in sonic and human bodies, including their own. At the same time, they escape their own bodies — or, more precisely, their bodies escape them — and phantom limbs take over control — all as a result of creating vibrations and being affected by those very same vibrations. Is it still me that is playing the music, or is the music playing me?

The sonic vibrations in *Moving to Become Better* are created by three musicians. This means that there are many bodies, both human and sonic, that have to be reckoned with during the performance. Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin (2009) explain that making music with others requires gestures that bind the actions of the performers, just as it requires listening to all musical participants. Ensemble playing consists of corporeal imitation and variation. The musicians are influenced by each other's movements. Playing music together not only means paying attention to the sound each performer makes, but also coordinating each other's bodily movements. Making music with others is thus not only a temporal affair, but a spatial activity as well.

This physical attuning is also very important in the performance of *Moving to Become Better*. In scene 3, for instance, it was not only important to listen to the drummer in order to figure out what he was going to play next, but also to actually watch him play and change the mood of the music. By looking at the drummer it becomes possible for the keyboard player and myself to almost predict the new groove that he intended to play next. [7]
Another example of the importance of physical attuning between musicians during the performance of *Moving to Become Better* are the musical cues in scenes 3, 5, and 6. Even though these cues are designed to be easily recognizable by ear, musicians often prefer to play with them: to suggest these cues, but not actually execute them. In the performance of this piece by Molloy, the keyboard player in particular created such allusions. In these cases a visual/physical confirmation of whether or not the actual cue is played was necessary.

Watching each other's bodily movements also proved essential during other, rather unexpected, moments in the performance of the piece; namely in scenes 4 and 7, in which the themes are played. Because the rhythm of these themes are so irregular and are played without the drums, it was necessary to watch each other carefully in order to correctly play the phrases in unison. Just counting and playing the score was insufficient to achieve this. Here, musical synchronization was only possible by means of physical synchronization. We needed to be able to feel, or rather, to be moved by each other's physical movements to be able to properly execute the phrases in unison.

One provisional conclusion that could be drawn from this observation is that physical/visual contact is even more important when playing music that does not exhibit an explicit groove. Moreover, it could even be argued that the physical aspect of musical performance is so explicitly present in musical groove itself that additional observation of the performer’s physicality is not necessary in order to play together in a proper fashion. Put differently, physical attuning is a necessary precondition for correctly performing, together with one or more other musicians, music that is rhythmically too complex to groove; whereas physical attuning is an
unavoidable consequence of music that exhibits an explicit groove. The creation of the groove in scene 1 resulted in synchronized bodily movement between performers, but the performance of the themes in scenes 4 and 7 necessitated the proper perception of the bodily movements of the other instrumentalist with whom these themes are played.

Rolf Pfeifer and Josh Bongard (2007) show that musicians are indeed literally moved by the movements of their fellow musicians. They remark that human subjects have so-called mirror neurons that fire when a subject performs a movement or observes a movement in another subject. Performing actions and observing actions activate the same brain areas. Watching movement thus can lead to sensing this movement within the subject’s own body, as if the subject is actually performing this movement.

This is also the case when it concerns musical performance. When musicians are watching their fellow musicians perform, they are able to sense these musicians’ movements within their own body, because of the way their mirror neurons function. The physical movements of their fellow musicians are literally felt within their own bodies.

Moreover, the body is also included because it kinaesthetically senses the gestures produced by the musical sounds. It feels the music by sensing its dynamic and temporal flow. The body mirrors the movement of the music. Sonic vibrations are transformed into bodily movements that can be felt. This is corroborated by Marc Leman (2007), who suggests that sound literally does something with the listeners’ bodies. These bodies kinaesthetically sense, and subsequently process, the dynamics and the physical properties of sound and music. Thus, these bodies are literally moved by musical vibrations;
they kinaesthetically move along with the movement of sound. Perhaps the phantom limbs that Szendy discusses, which can be produced by music that grooves, might actually be generated by the firing of mirror neurons.

I tried to create such a kinaesthetic sensation in *Moving to Become Better*. As I explained above, the bass line is composed by imagining how it would feel when it was played and listened to. It was my intention to elicit in the listener the movements I felt when writing the music, to create a series of sonic vibrations that in turn are able to set human bodies in motion. And of course, these sonic vibrations can only be created by performers who, through their movements, produce these vibrations.

According to Gilles Deleuze (1988), all these vibrating bodies — the sonic, the listeners’ and the musicians’ — have the capability to affect each other. Sounds are created by musicians, these sounds affect listeners and musicians alike, and this influences the creation of future sounds. Moreover, witnessing, both aurally and visually, my fellow performers playing under the spell of phantom limbs can be in itself highly influential. It changes the relation between the performers and the music. Watching and hearing my fellow musicians play induces movement in myself, and the same holds for the other musicians, who report similar experiences. It emphasizes the physical character of music and maximizes the affective capacities of the musical performance.

Towards an Ethics of the Groove
The artistic research conducted by performing *Moving to Become Better* suggests that performers are not always in full control when it concerns musical groove. Both the musical sounds as well as the presence of other performers influence and effect their actions. The question then arises how performers should react to these influences. On the one hand, one might argue that it is the performer’s responsibility to sustain a groove once it emerges. To accept this musical phenomenon that is created by the interplay of musical sounds and gestures and to go along with its flow. However, a groove cannot continue indefinitely. At some point a performer has to decide to terminate it. But when and how? And what should come next? In short, in what ways is a performer supposed to engage with the sonic sensation called groove?

Deleuze suggests that encounters between bodies and sensations (such as music) can be conceptualised in ethical terms. Here, ethics is not considered in terms of morality, but conceived as ethology instead. It is ‘[...] the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterises each thing’ (Deleuze 1988: 125). These things can be anything, Deleuze explains: ‘[...] an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea’ (1988: 127). Bodies and thoughts can be defined as capacities for affecting and being affected. Referring to Baruch de Spinoza, Deleuze asserts that everything that increases or enhances the subject’s power to act is good, whereas everything that diminishes it is bad. As Deleuze explains, the power to act is a positive expansion of affective capacity and therefore a ‘good’ thing is one that enables the body to be affected in a greater number of ways (1988: 71). A bad thing, on the other hand, results in a decrease of the power of acting, and is therefore a negative stagnation of feeling (1988: 72). Anything that inhibits a body’s ability to be affected is bad. This amounts to
what can be called an ethics of joy, with joy understood as a maximisation both of the capacities for being affected and of the possibilities for establishing any kind of connection between the affecting and affected bodies.

This means that a ‘proper’ attitude is one of openness. Openness, exposing oneself to influence, contributes to the enhancement of the possibilities to be affected and thus can be considered as ethically good. At the same time, however, this openness to affection implies vulnerability, a vulnerability towards intensities that affect the body.

According to Barry Hoffmaster, this vulnerability has its own ethical consequences: ‘All human beings are born into vulnerability and remain vulnerable for some time [...] Moreover, our universal vulnerability resonates with moral significance. For one thing, it is our very vulnerability that creates the need for morality’ (2006: 43). Alasdair McIntyre (1999) adds that the vulnerable body is the basis of all ethical thought. Consequently, vulnerability, the condition to be able to be affected, is in itself already ethically laden. Thus, musical experience can be productively approached from an ethical perspective, since it is an event that acts on and affects the performers’ vulnerable bodies, while it is exactly this vulnerability that enables music to affect them through musical phenomena such as groove. [8]

Musical groove acts on the vulnerable bodies of performers, as it is a phenomenon that infringes the autonomy of these bodies. This implies that groove can be considered as an intruder. As Jean-Luc Nancy explains, ‘[the intruder’s] coming does not stop: he continues to come, and his coming does not stop intruding in some way: in other words, without right or familiarity, not according to custom, being, on the
contrary, a disturbance, a trouble in the midst of intimacy’ (2008: 161). A groove is a disturbance, one that transforms normality into an extraordinary situation by violating the autonomy of the bodies of performers by stimulating these bodies to move. A groove intrudes in perhaps the most intimate place performers can inhabit: their own bodies.

Since the effect that groove has on performers is involuntary, inescapable, and at the same time highly influential on them, musical groove can be regarded as a characteristic that makes up the ethical aspect of music. If, as Deleuze does, one defines bodies and thoughts as capacities for affecting and being affected, encounters between bodies and sonic sensations can be considered in ethical terms. Groove is an aural phenomenon that enhances the music’s affective capacity. Moreover, it is a sonic intrusion that makes use of the vulnerability of the listeners’ and performers’ bodies. Performers, for their part, are enticed to react in some way or another to the groove. It is impossible for them to ignore the influence caused by musical groove and they need to do something in response to this. According to Deleuze’s ethics of joy one should always strive for a maximisation of the capacities for being affected. Consequently, in this view performers should try to be open to the influence of the groove and try to establish some kind of connection with this sonic phenomenon. They should try to act faithfully to the intrusive sonic event. [9] They should try to accept this event and explore its otherness, its idiosyncrasy. They should move along with the groove created by the music and enjoy the power this music has to move their bodies. If they refuse to do so, the music will almost literally be pointless to them.

Or is it? Even though *Moving to Become Better* is all about the groove, a large part of this composition consists of moments in
which the groove is supposed to be resisted, at least by one or more performers. Therefore, the point of this piece might just as well exactly be the resistance to the groove. Moreover, if the maximisation of influence is the goal, the termination of a groove can also contribute to this end, for terminating a groove can be highly influential in itself. Also, the tension between grooving and non-grooving instruments can be influential, as happens for instance in scene 5. In this scene the bass is supposed to resist the groove while improvising, whereas the drums and keyboards play the groove from scene 1. This creates tension on at least two levels, which in both cases can be very effective, especially for the performers themselves. Firstly, the (rhythmical) tension between the bass improvisation and groove created by the keyboards and drums. Secondly, the tension within the bass improvisation itself to resist joining the groove. It seems almost impossible to completely ignore the groove and not go along with it. There were moments in the performance where I, as the bass player, could not resist this temptation any longer and I just had to groove along with my fellow musicians. Sometimes this happened without me being consciously aware of it. The groove simply seemed to intrude into my playing and alter it. Only after I had realized that I was actually grooving while I was not supposed to be, did I try to change the improvisation in order to avoid the groove again. In short, I was not supposed to be hospitable to the intrusion of the groove. Still, this does not mean that there was no affective response. Quite on the contrary, at least for me, the bass player, these moments were highly affective, sometimes even more so than the affects getting into the groove might elicit. Thus, not being hospitable is not necessarily unethical in a Deleuzian sense.

The same holds for the keyboard improvisation in scene 2, only here the improviser is supposed to slide in and out of the
groove. Consequently, the tensions and affects experienced by the keyboard player are different. In this case the freedom to choose how to relate to the groove diminishes the affects that going with or against the groove may elicit.

One of the most affective aspects of *Moving to Become Better* remains the groove and its intrusive character. And we, the performers of this piece, are very well aware of this. Consequently, we know we have a responsibility to create and support this groove whenever the music calls for it. This responsibility weighs heavy on the performers, for instance, at the beginning of the piece. I, the bass player, need to be able to groove right from the start. Also, the keyboard player needs to find the proper moment to join the bass. Moreover, there is always the risk of inadvertently terminating the groove established by the bass through imprecise playing or entering at the wrong moment. The same holds for the drummer, who has the additional responsibility to not only enter at an appropriate moment, but also with an appropriate drum pattern.

Once a groove is successfully set, at some point it needs to finish. But when, and how? How to satisfactorily end the influential intrusion called groove? A groove starts at some point, and this beginning arouses the desire to experience it from the beginning onwards. The beginning elicits desire, the desire to undergo the groove until the end. To paraphrase Peter Brooks, the beginning is desire and this desire is, ultimately, the desire for the end (1982: 284). But when and in what way, this end should come, is the responsibility of the performers. The performers of *Moving to Become Better* need to face this question at several moments, for instance in scene 3, where the drums decide when the groove ends, or scene 6, where this is the task of the keyboard player.
With regard to beginning and ending, Brooks recognizes a parallel between narration and life: ‘All narration is obituary’, he contends, ‘in that life acquires definable meaning only at, and through, death’ (1982: 284). Life is finite, and because it is finite and thus has an end, it has meaning. Hence, death is the final reason life makes sense. Yet, Brooks stresses in reference to Sigmund Freud, that the human subject is not supposed to achieve this ultimate meaning-giving moment too soon. Living organisms instinctively head towards death, but only in a way that is proper to them. So, it must neither be reached too quickly, nor in a way which does not suit them (1982: 290-291). Similarly, a groove only has the impact it has because it terminates at some point, because it is something out of the ordinary and not a phenomenon that is permanently present. But this end must not come too soon, otherwise the groove cannot have a genuine affective, intrusive impact, and thus act as a proper ethical musical phenomenon.

Conclusion

This project posed the following question: What are the mutual influences of groove and the performance of musicians? In order to answer this question, the project started with a study of existing theories on groove. This study suggested that groove is about musical and bodily movement, that it depends on rhythmic regularity and repetition and that a certain degree of musical, rhythmic tension is necessary. These outcomes were incorporated in the compositional process of Moving to Become Better, which was an artistic research into the possibilities to create, in a musical score,
opportunities for groove to emerge. This investigation showed that it is vital to imagine how the music would literally feel, both to the listener and to the musician who performs the music, in order to write music that is supposed to groove. Moreover, this also holds for music that should be as non-grooving as possible.

The performance of *Moving to Become Better* was an artistic research into the mutual influences of groove and musical performance. This research indicated that performers are not always in full control when it concerns musical groove, since both the musical sounds and the presence of other performers influence and affect their actions. Finally, the outcomes of this research were discussed within the theoretical context of embodied Deleuzian ethics. In this way it was possible to articulate the responsibility musicians have to instigate or resist a groove, to discuss the extent to which performers can control the groove, but also how the groove, as an intrusive phenomenon, is able to control the performers. Here, too, affecting and influencing proved to be key notions. Musicians should maximise the influential potentialities of music, and establishing a groove is a very effective way to do so. However, resisting or terminating a groove can also exert influence, sometimes even more so than instigating or sustaining a groove, depending on the musical context.

The artistic research was crucial to this project. Not only did it provide the ‘data’ that could be interpreted within a theoretical context, it also enabled me to properly assess theories on musical groove. Moreover, the artistic research prevented me from making claims about the relation between groove and musical performance that were unfounded. My conclusions regarding the ethical aspects of musical groove, in particular, although speculative in themselves, have gained considerable
support from the experiences obtained by performing *Moving to Become Better*, a piece that offers the performers the opportunities to experiment with groove.

Ultimately, this composition can be regarded as an exploration of sonic and human movement, and interaction. It is an study into the ways in which performers engage with sound, as well as the possibilities sound has to influence, and perhaps even manipulate, performers. One of the most effective ways in which sound can achieve this is by establishing a groove.

References


[1] See for instance Butterfield (2010), Keil (1966), and Madison (2006) for studies on the influence of groove on listeners. Friberg and Sundström (2002) and Honing and De Haas (2008) are examples of studies in which groove is studied from the perspective of the performer, more specifically the manner in which jazz drummers create swing. On a more anecdotal level, Berliner (1994) also discusses the relation between jazz musicians and groove/swing.

[2] Consequently, I will not explicitly discuss the influence of groove on the listening public. My focus here is the relation between groove and musicians. As mentioned above, the influence on groove on the listener is already discussed in numerous other studies, whereas the perspective of the performer deserves closer attention.

[3] Although Butterfield is talking about swing here, I consider his comments also pertinent to groove. Swing can be considered a subset of groove, referring to a special kind of groove commonly associated with jazz.

[5] Although Zbikowski suggests that the optimal tempo for groove is between 85 and 100 quarter notes per minute (2004: 279), during rehearsals it became clear that even a tempo of 85 was too fast to make the music groove. Perhaps this is caused by the fact that the bass line and keyboard part contain many sixteenth notes, and because the drummer chose to play in double time. Zbikowski’s suggestion that repetition and cyclicity are crucial for groove to emerge, on the other hand, was corroborated by performing the music. A regular time signature such as 4/4 enables the listener to easily recognize rhythmic cyclicity, and in *Moving to Become Better* this supported the creation of groove.


[7] Of course, the fact that we have been playing together for many years helps in predicting this. We not only know what our respective musical styles and preferences are, but we are also able to more or less correctly interpret each others’ body language.

[8] And of course the vulnerable bodies of the listening public as well, but since this is an investigation into the relation between groove and musicians, I will not discuss the listener here.

[9] This is similar to Alain Badiou’s (1988) ideas concerning the event and the manner in which human subjects should act in order to be proper subjects.