

B j ø r n A l t e r h a u g
I N T E R D I S C I P L I N A R Y
P E R S P E C T I V E S O N
I M P R O V I S A T I O N ¹

“Do not fear mistakes. There are none.” – Miles Davis

Improvisation² as a phenomenon and as action seems to be a field where the scientific research and literature are not overwhelming. The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl supports this statement in his article “An Art Neglected in Scholarship” (from the book *In the Course of Performance*, 1998): “...it must be repeated that among the activities and processes studied by music historians and ethnomusicologists, improvisation plays a small part.” Various factors, like ideologies of music research and choice of methods, could account for this neglect. In my opinion, the most important factors that maintain the situation, are the prevailing scientific ideals and thinking, i.e. Western rationalist terminology, and consequently the problem of finding adequate terms for a description of improvisation. With some honourable exceptional cases, writings on improvisation very often ends up in far-off theorising and models of generalising explanations.

The motivation for applying for a grant to further research in this field is primarily due to my experiences as a jazzmusician and pedagogue for about 35 years.³ A few of my colleges and myself at the music department had for many years worked hard to include improvisation as a discipline in the study of music. From 1994 improvisation finally was accepted in our curriculum. After working a year with this old—but to many of us—new branch of knowledge, I realised to my great surprise that clever music students started crying when they were asked to drop the sheet of music and just play something by ear. The students had obviously in their earlier formal musical education never been invited to improvise, which means that they have had few possibilities for developing crucial abilities like aural awareness, imagination and being creative. This depressing fact compared with my experiences among improvising and highly creative musicians inspired me to search for more knowledge about improvisation. The work with the application led me to papers written 10–15 years ago in co-operation with the eco-philosopher and jazz fan Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng. One of Setreng’s basic inspirations has been models taken from music, with jazz versus pyramidal organised European symphonic music as extreme points on a scale: a) improvisation/internalised spontaneous-organising b) top-organised/externalised directing.

These music models and metaphors have been used to shed light on heterogeneous types of society; with weight on interaction within a group. The extensive, topical gist on this matter is as follows: globally we are faced with a diversity of societies/cultures: some are flexible towards new situations, others are rule following and stiff, vulnerable towards situations which are breaking the rules. A related subject of current interest is the contrast between “the collectively improvising nature” and the scientific models for understanding nature. To get a kind of understanding how this contrast has emerged and grown into two separate worlds of comprehension, it can be worth taking a short glance back in parts of Western thinking and history. For nearly 400 years the conceptions of rationality from Descartes and Locke have influenced our self-understanding and have made a strong impact on the Western culture. The myth of rationality claiming that we are born as a “tabula rasa”, and as we are growing we are filled with “information”, i.e. ideas, conceptions, from the outside world, has been the dominating pattern in Western thinking. This worshipping of an one-dimensional rationality has led to a development in the higher educational system that by its recirculation of knowledge is in the act of being strangled by its own regurgitation. This again has led to a school system which has been oppressive towards individuals, and which has functioned as a sorting machine where numerical abilities, diligence and a bright memory have been ruling virtues.

These systems conception of reality as split into measurable bits—is a useful and typical remedy to describe the surrounding world and oneself; in the purpose of achieving control and command through the stigmatising mechanisms: marks and examinations. The result has been a development into two separate cultures—the rational and the emotional, where the scientific way of thinking even has permeated the humanistic disciplines.

These days, however, we can hear voices, which no longer have the complete trust in the type of rationality that has been dominating our way of thinking about the world for such a long time. Remarkably, one of these voices is George Soros (one of the worlds richest men) who in an article in the Atlantic Monthly 1997 writes:

We have had 200 years of experience of the age of Rationality, and as rational human beings we should realise that rationality has its limits. The time has come to develop a conceptual framework based on our fallibility. Where the rationality has failed, maybe the fallibility will succeed.

Another is the sociologist Anthony Giddens: "...human rationality alone is not sufficient to control and understand the world; we also have to have confidence to emotions and tradition." (From "Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics", 1994.) By the end of this millennium it seems that our way of thinking is changing and that a fruitful dialogue between the so-called "rational" and "emotional" are developing. Science is no longer seen as a continuous accumulation of established knowledge, but rather as a set of changing ideas. A new cultural diversity, the multiethnic society and the information society have rapidly grown. We are experiencing and understanding the world in a new way. Our surroundings are changing, complex structures create patterns which are represented in new ways—we are talking about changing paradigms.

Part of this change is attributed to what is called a "cognitive revolution" in two phases. The first one (in the fifties) was inspired from the computer and tests on Artificial Intelligence. A quote from Mark Johnson, 1996, should be illustrating: "...It (the first generation cognitive science) took the MIND AS COMPUTER PROGRAM metaphor quite seriously, and it had (and has) virtually nothing to say about morality, politics, social theory, and social relations. " The second phase started in the eighties with the book of Rummelhart and Mc Celland: *Parallel Distributed Processing* (1986), where the network-model ("connectionism") seriously was brought up. Someone wants to add a third phase, because they think that the network model, especially in the beginning, still was based on the Cartesian dualism (Clark 1997). The most important about this last phase is that the body and the environment finally have been given weight in cognitive studies. This last acknowledgement leads directly into the core of the processes of improvisation, communication and socialisation. In short: time has come for appreciating the qualities represented by improvising traditions all over the world in understanding human activities in different contexts.

One important statement in this project is that improvisation as phenomenon, human interaction and behaviour reach far beyond the field of music. Improvisation is a matter of changing something, it is about transformations and altering relations, both towards others and oneself, in other words: *creating*. As improvisation always is present where people meet, it is an integral part of everyday life, carrying as much meaning as questions of existential character. Therefore it can be argued that improvisation is one of the few fields of knowledge and experience that all cultures in one or another way share, consequently its interdisciplinary possibilities are unique.

Theories from social anthropology, cultural ecology and methods on cultural processes will be essential in analysing for example cultural meeting between different continents, countries, regions, etc. This project will find its starting point in the improvisational element in all kinds of music, but with some weight on the music which through the 20th century has carried on and developed improvisation: the African-American music: jazz. Some would find it unexpected that improvisation represented by jazz is chosen as a central paradigm. One important motivation for this is the unique fact that jazz has developed a musical language which makes possible for the executants from different cultures spontaneously to join a creating community, and in this new community make their own original contribution, regardless of cultural background. Jazz improvisation was created through a synthesis between African and European musical traditions, brought to fertility via a multicultural melting pot. The outcome was a historical, dialectic jump into such a liberating way of acting, that during some few decades jazz became a common property of the world community.

An important subject for the project will be to bring forth the deep difference between this fact and todays globalisation, which among other things means a world-wide standardisation and pyramidal rulemaking; just the contrary to improvisation; i.e. personal/social creative rulebreaking. Improvisation, not merely within music, but within all kinds of human activity and organising, also has an important political function. This means that the projects social relevance is important. (In this very brief presentation I am strongly aware that I am oversimplifying matters, and I am touching upon sensitive questions and statements which deserve a far broader discussion.) As part of the social aspects, an essential and overall point in the project will be to focus on the importance of bringing the intellectual and the emotional (the body) to an interaction in different social contexts. In this way is a foundational and varied development of the potentiality of the individual early in life made possible.

Improvisation becomes in this context an important factor in the development of the personality. The purpose is to give support to a creative process of consciousness: a process where the individual is made aware of his potentialities and sees these in relation to the connections they are part of. These studies should bring new angles to the understanding of the dialogic aspects of human communication, and also with regard to introspection, alertness and social competence. Finally these studies should lead to research and production of pedagogy material on different levels in the educational system; reaching new ways of learning and perceiving.

To sum up: the essence of the project will be to understand initiatory actions and processes; how people get a start on improvisation, and how the process is reinforced. Understanding this will give a foundation for action—which should be of the most important issues at a time where solutions to conflicts are often reached through violence, and where economic globalisation and standardisation threaten democracy (“improvising local societies”) as well as non-western cultures by extinction. Questions related to improvisation and society will be central. One interesting question would for example be to find out why living improvising traditions in European art-music almost ceased around 1850.

In these days we are celebrating Duke Ellingtons centennial anniversary, and I think it would be appropriate to conclude with an extract from an interview with Ellington. No doubt, Ellington was ahead of his time with regard to his music, his organising ability, social intelligence and thinking. I believe that his legacy, and the whole jazztradition, in the future would serve as important models and inspirations for studies on processes in human activities. In this TV-interview, probably recorded in the fifties, Duke Ellington was sitting at the piano, and he was asked about his relationship to his people. “My people”, he answers, and he plays some blues licks and then he continues: “which of my people, ... you know I am in the several groups...” – and he obviously searches to find the right words for an answer to this difficult question, – he is improvising. After naming the different groups he belongs to, piano players, dilettantes, experts and many more, he concludes: “... I also have had such a strong influence by the music of the people:—*The people!* That’s the better word! *The people*—rather than my people;—*the* people are my people.”

¹ The Project “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Improvisation” is supported by the interdisciplinary research programme at NTNU (Trondheim) and had its start in 1999. This presentation of the underlying ideas for the project was held at Jyväskylä (Finland) Summer Jazz conference 1999.

² My use of the word improvisation is not limited to only music traditions, it comprises all kinds of human activity. But improvisation in the meaning of a private, therapeutic spontaneity-ideology, leading to self-indulgence and “love yourself”; is far from my intention on the understanding of the topic. Improvisation to me is a humanistic project, based on dexterity, knowledge, reflection and solidarity.

³ When I in 1995 read Paul F. Berliners Book “Thinking in Jazz” (1994). I was so inspired that I immediately made a phone call to the author, telling about my fascination for the book. This contact led to a visit at North Western University, Chicago, where Berliner is professor of ethnomusicology. Our meeting resulted in discussions about doing research on improvisation. Pauls enthusiasm, support and inspiration on this topic was of vital importance for the project coming into existence, and he is now attached to the project as a co-worker and guest researcher. Berliner visited Trondheim this autumn (2000). He presented his fieldwork from Zimbabwe, lectured on different topics, gave advice to our students and participated in discussions about further development of the project.