

Improvisation as a tool for worldwide communication and interaction

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Improvisation as a concept and phenomenon has remained a largely unstudied and untheorised topic, especially in terms of its relevance for contemporary work in cultural studies, anthropology, pedagogy, sociology, and philosophy – in other words, it is an interesting and obvious topic for interdisciplinary research. Improvisation is the human practice from which all music derives; as such, it represents a tool for communication and interaction that seems crucial in a global context. In this paper, I reflect on improvisation and argue that improvisation with its dialogic character has the potential to play a vital role both as an artistic phenomenon and as a social force.

The directness and dialogic nature of improvisatory practice, which is something that happens “face to face”, makes it particularly relevant and interesting in relation to communicational aspects in a globalised reality. In the book *“The Other Side of Nowhere,”*¹ Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (editors) argue that music “*specifically, creative improvised music and free jazz - can reinvigorate our understanding of the social function of humanities research within the broader context of how that research plays a role in shaping notions of community and “new forms” of social organization.*” (21) This rather optimistic, and one could easily say naïve, attitude to the potential of improvisation of these editors largely converges with my own attitude; an attitude that has grown out of experiences and efforts to shed light on this topic during my 35 years as a jazz musician and an academic.

It is strange, however, how improvisation, as concept and phenomenon, often creates hot discussions on the concept’s significance and relevance. I have often met, especially among people with a high level of competence within music – musicians and academics – an inexplicable antagonistic and almost aggressive attitude towards the term improvisation and also to the activities associated with the term. The rationale behind this enmity is often their conception of improvisation as something arbitrary, involving poor training, which they think can do more harm than good to the students’ practical musical abilities.

I strongly disagree with such contentions, and it is my firm opinion that the phenomenon of improvisation has qualities that are of special current interest, and that there is an imperative need for redefining the concept of improvisation. Although I do concede that some of the musical training labelled improvisation is of a dubious character, this fact only furthers the urgent need for giving this underexposed phenomenon the meaning and significance it deserves.

Among jazz musicians, you often find a kind of disengaged and egocentric attitude when talking about improvisation. “I just play” is often the answer to questions about how they work. This is perhaps part of the reason why investigating what goes on when one “just plays” has not been regarded as very important. Consequently, there has not been any real effort to understand these processes in music research, and this may partly explain the peripheral role of improvisation in music education. Another possible reason is that improvisation requires

¹Fischlin, D and Heble, A. (red). (2004). *The Other Side of Nowhere*. Wesleyan University Press. USA.

both independent thinking and personal initiative, both of which do not harmonise very well with learning systems with a hierarchical design, for example our Western educational systems.

For academics, the somewhat arbitrary and loose structures connected with improvisatory practice obviously make them insecure and uncomfortable with this “immeasurable” concept and phenomenon. It is interesting that a highly respected contemporary composer and musician, Pierre Boulez, (who has even written a piece entitled “Improvisations sur Mallarmé”) expresses largely negative views on improvisation (Quoted in Attali, 145-146)²:

“Finally, improvisation is not possible. Even in a baroque ensemble, where the laws were more or less codified, where you had figures instead of chords, in other words, where you could place them in a certain position but not in just any way – even in this period improvisation did not produce exclusively masterpieces. People speak of Bach’s improvisations, for examples. I believe that Bach wrote on the basis of what he had improvised, and that what he wrote was the more interesting of the two. Often, these improvisations are nothing more than pure, sometimes bizarre, samplings of sound that are not integrated into the directives of a composition. This results in constant arousal and appeasement, something I find intolerable...The dialectic of form take precedence over the possible; everybody arouses everybody else; it becomes a kind of public onanism.”

For me this expresses typical Western rationalist thinking: a static-mechanistic worldview, one shaped by post-Enlightenment, rooted in the immovable world of the Ideas of Plato. This thinking has been hegemonic in all kinds of musical expression throughout the last 200 years: privileging the written (logocentric) over the aural (phonocentric).

Naturally, it is just as difficult to find a meaningful description and definition of improvisation as it is to delimit the meaning of ambiguous words and concepts like *freedom*, *music*, *democracy*, etc. In order to come up with a concise description of such terms, one needs to explore the historical and discursive context of the words. There are people who contend that the term ‘improvisation’ should be dispensed with immediately, while other people claim that a verbal description of the phenomenon of improvisation is a futile task. A proponent of the latter view is the British musician and author Derek Bailey. He opposes analyses of and attempts to describe improvisation, and in his book “Improvisation” from 1991, he states that “[...] any attempt to describe improvisation must be, in some respect, a misrepresentation, for there is something central to the spirit of voluntary improvisation which is opposed to the aims and contradicts the idea of documentation.”³ However, in his conclusion, he says “[But] I have chosen to retain that term throughout the book; firstly because I don’t know of any other which could effectively replace it, and secondly because I hope that we, the other contributors and myself, might be able to redefine it.”

Nevertheless, it is my belief, and this is an opinion I share with many other people,⁴ that an interdisciplinary approach to the phenomenon of improvisation provides us with good and apt tools for understanding crucial forms of interpersonal and intercultural communication in a world of music, race, place and globalism.

² Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996

³ Bailey, D. (1992). *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. (p.1) New York: Da Capo Press.

⁴ Fisclin, D and Heble, A. (eds.). (2004). *The Other Side of Nowhere*. Wesleyan University Press. USA.

Improvisation is a potential for action⁵ latent in all human activities. When we improvise, this activity is an existential act, which on a basic level is detached from qualitative assessment. Improvising thus involves initiating processes based on previous experience and activities, which in turn will generate new processes in which learning, insight, and knowledge acquisition form part of a meta level and make up a platform for further development in a variety of contexts. Within such areas of proficiency, for example in music, one may establish so-called idiomatic quality criteria by which improvisational skills can be measured. However, the most important aspect of improvisation is “the open, unfinished, unexplored space” where one has every possibility to create, “to bring different identities together,” and where descriptive phrases only to a limited degree can serve as a meaningful description of what takes place in the course of performance.

Improvisation⁶ pervades all music genres, and improvisation is often used in the sense “on the spur of the moment” or as “unprepared performance;” in my view a rather misleading and myth-building description. This description often lead to the assumption that improvisation is a kind of emergency strategy that involves adherence to neither conventions nor protocol, and that it tolerates no system of constraint and requires no prior thought. (For a more extensive exploration of improvisation, especially jazz improvisation, see Alterhaug, 2004⁷)

To put it simply: good improvisation demands extensive preparation and knowledge. It constitutes an activity that requires thorough preparation of a set of skills that needs to be internalised. This means that the performer is prepared to handle the unexpected, to handle an error as a new creative challenge, and thus to break with habitual patterns. As an example, we can look at the activity of giving a speech. The best speeches are often those that sound as if they are given off the cuff; however, this performance presupposes a thoroughly worked through and well-reflected foundation. The speaker has to learn the speech by heart, which means that her/his referential material is internalised and thus she/he can play around with it in an effortless and confident manner; “it’s played by ear.”

A situation where several people are supposed to “talk to each other” in a meaningful way, is demanding in a different way. It requires that the interlocutors are confident with the basis for the musical dialogue. Therefore, when we improvise, we often have some form of foundation, a sketch or some basic game rules, which serve as a foundation for the dialogical, communicative action. (Of course, improvisation does not necessarily need a reference point; musicians at a high level could just start playing something, and then the process has started.) What happens in the process is highly unpredictable and rests on a good balance between the individual initiatives and the collective understanding of the activity and the whole situation. To obtain this balance one must be sensitive to what goes on, as well as being alert and attentive to each other, and not least, it requires an atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence

⁵ Jørgensen, Svein-Halvard. (2004). *På sporet av improvisasjonens potensiale*. (In search of improvisation’s potential). Doctoral dissertation, Faculty of Arts, NTNU, Trondheim.

⁶ The origin of the word and concept of improvisation, Latin *improvisus*, is found in the rhetoric of antiquity. *Visus* means ‘to see’, *pro* means ‘before’, and *im* is the negator ‘not’, and a combination of the three should give the meaning ‘not seen before’ or ‘unforeseen.’ Personal communication with Professor Gunhild Vidén, Dept. of History and Classical Studies, Faculty of Arts, NTNU. For a more detailed introduction to the phenomenon, concept, and word “improvisation,” please see Nettle, B and Melinda Russel (eds). (1998). *In the Course of Performance. Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*. The University of Chicago Press.

⁷ Alterhaug, Bjørn (2004) *Improvisation on a Triple Theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication*. *Studia Musicologica Norvegica*, Vol 30.

in which the exposure of one's own abilities feels natural and not intimidating. "An atmosphere of mutual trust and confidence" is just one aspect of improvisation which is important when we talk about improvisation as a social force. Here improvisation has a strong potential to contribute to changes in the areas of marginalised races, gender, and ethnic groups.

It is very important here to make clear that improvisation is not only a life strategy for expression of individuality, originality and creativity, but more important, improvisation is, and has been, about community building, about fostering new ways of thinking about and participating in human relationships. Christopher Small⁸ states that to improvise "*is to establish a different set of human relationships, a different kind of society from that established by composed forms of music making*" (296).

My experience as a jazz player is that playing jazz has always been about dialogue and collaboration. Acting in a jazz context, which often means to communicate "on the spot" with individuals you haven't met before, helps to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to develop new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries.

Attali⁹ argues that music exists to help us hear the sound of change (my underlining). "*It obliges us to invent categories and new dynamics to regenerate social theory, which today has become crystallized, entrapped, and moribund*" (4).

Improvisational activities in music hinge on the dedication of all senses, and developing the musical ear is especially important for spontaneous communication. In this respect, improvisation furthers the natural dispositions and potentials that we are born with, and thus it is highly significant for the development of our aesthetic faculties. Concerning musical ear and the relationship between oral and written communication, Marshall McLuhan¹⁰ has some intriguing observations and theories about how a number of technologies – the phonetic alphabet, the art of printing, and the telegraph radically changed our way of thinking and our behaviour. He claims that the introduction of the phonetic alphabet represents the most radical change. In pre-literate societies, the auditory sense was more prominent, and there was a good balance between the different senses; however, with the introduction of the alphabet, the visual sense became more dominant, and literacy and the printed word became dominant. The following is a quotation from a 1969 interview with McLuhan, which emphasises the crucial role of aural awareness:¹¹ "*The ear, as opposed to the cool and neutral eye, is sensitive, hyperaesthetic and all-inclusive, and contributes to the seamless web of tribal kinship and interdependence in which all members of the group existed in harmony.*" He also discusses *acoustic space*, which he gives the following definition:

"Acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses: whereas 'rational' or pictorial space is uniform, sequential and continuous and creates a closed world with none of the rich resonance of the tribal

⁸ Small, Christopher. *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (1987).Hannover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Reprint Edition Paperback, 365 pages. Published by MIT Press, October 1994. Originally published in 1964.

¹¹ From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan". *Playboy Magazine*, March 1969, (p. 4).

echoland. Our Western time-space concepts derive from the environment created by the discovery of phonetic writing, as does our entire concept of Western civilization”.

He states explicitly that literacy, the printed media, electronics, and the visual culture largely have had a negative effect on the human potential for perceptual experience and the acquisition of deep knowledge. Even if McLuhan’s statements are half a century old, they seem more and more important for developing an understanding of what is happening in our present time, and that “listening” and “alertness” are crucial keywords when it comes to human communication and interaction globally.

Awareness of auditory capacities is the most crucial element in music education, and in this context, the discipline of improvisation is a very apt tool for a holistic development of all our innate senses. This is a good argument for emphasising improvisation at all levels of music education. In recent years, improvisation has gained some ground in music, and not least as an interesting phenomenon in other contexts.¹² The following quotation is from an online review of the earlier mentioned book about improvisation, “The Other Side of Nowhere,”¹³ which has contributions by authors from a range of scholarly disciplines:

*“The principal strength of The Other Side of Nowhere is its constant articulation of meaning in improvisation that goes beyond the music itself. The arguments developed by the contributors are inherently interdisciplinary; interculturalism, gender assumptions in music, race and the politics of exclusion, social mobility, and community empowerment are a few of the powerful and extremely relevant perspectives explored in this volume. I am confident that The Other Side of Nowhere will become a cornerstone in the scholarly exploration of improvised music and will help to cultivate interdisciplinary research in the humanities.”*¹⁴

Research into improvisation also suggests that having been involved in the process of improvisation contributes to a form of *meta-learning*, a form of experience and learning that transgress both stylistic and formal boundaries. The psychologist R. Keith Sawyer says: “By improvising and rehearsing together, the children were learning essential conversational and social skills: How to solve problems and develop plans in group settings, how to share decision-making, and how to collaborate on a creative task.”¹⁵

Improvised music archives historical practices and speaks to a community about its past and present, a process that engenders the possibility of solidary relations as mediated by the unified desire of the musicians to bring “*the message of this pilgrimage to the people using the voice of music.*”¹⁶

Keith Jarrett, one of today’s most influential improvising musicians, says in a recent TV-interview:¹⁷ “*But, I knew that music was more than what the musicians were talking about. Music is for me a result of a process that has nothing to do with music.*”

¹² Alterhaug, Bjørn (2004) *Improvisation on a Triple Theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication*. Studia Musicologica Norvegica, Vol 30.

¹³ Fischlin, D and Heble, A (eds.). (2004) *The Other side of Nowhere*, Wesleyan University Press.

¹⁴ Critical Studies in Improvisation, Volume 1, No. 1, 2004.

<http://www.criticalimprov.com/ojs/viewarticle.php?id=41&layout=html>. Accessed 6 June 2005

¹⁵ Sawyer, R. K. (1999). Improvised Conversations: Music, Collaboration and Development, *Psychology of Music*, 27: 192-216.

¹⁶ Quote from *The Other Side of Nowhere* (7)

¹⁷ TV 2, NRK 1. April 2005

The way I understand Jarrett, he argues that music, as mathematics, physics, etc., is just an expression of parts of a bigger and incomprehensibly complex reality. A reality that connects all human beings on this planet, and where music and improvisation are good tools for keeping communication and interaction alive in a world that presently faces great challenges concerning the growing economic and social differences among the people on this planet.

To what extent improvisation can be of value as a tool for worldwide communication and interaction is of course a complex matter. One of the most important factors is how different societies are organized, how the conditions for exchange of meaning and different world-views are handled, and how these are communicated to all members of society. My conviction, and naïve hope, is that improvising, “to bring different identities together”, will have the power to initiate processes that will generate and strengthen new processes with the sense and awareness of being part of a bigger community and a challenging, exciting, and complex reality.

(If time allows it, I will end this short paper with a video clip featuring the Keith Jarrett trio from New York, 1993, which much better than words can illustrate improvisatory practice; in this case jazz improvisation.)