Improvisation on a triple theme: Creativity, Jazz Improvisation and Communication

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It takes two to know one[1]

This paper focuses on jazz improvisation, and how this activity seems to create optimal conditions for creativity to unfold. It also deals with how improvisation may be used as a pedagogical strategy in the dialogic aspects of human communication. As such it is a brief introduction to a very complex and largely unexplored field and an implicit argumentation for increased research based on interdisciplinary perspectives. The form of this presentation aims to be improvisational, and accordingly touches on a wide range of phenomena more or less related to the main themes.

LOOKING BACK

Derived from the Latin word *creare,* to create, the term creativity can be related directly to improvisation. In everyday language, though, improvisation covers a host of different meanings. Its various usages often cause confusion especially when used as a concept and phenomenon. Two main meanings of the word spring to mind: First, improvisation as an emergency measure, as in "the plans failed and hence I had to improvise." Notably such a statement presupposes that human action is normally based on rules and instructions. Second, improvisation as an acute state of readiness, internalised skills

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and practice; a highly rated way of acting. Here this meaning is based on another important concept, namely one that involves tacit knowledge. During adolescence, one develops a kind of preparation for "whatever may happen." This form of readiness is acquired mainly through a direct involvement in various problem-solving situations, producing a type of knowledge that is mediated via bodily experiences and alert awareness. In this article I will argue that improvisation is understood in accordance with the second meaning. A primary goal will be to acknowledge improvisational activity as a crucial and inevitable activity within a variety of contexts that require training and practice.

Whatever their background, all human beings possess a degree of creative potential. Given this, it would seem pertinent to underline that creativity and improvisation are of a general character which we may recognise as easily in a masterpiece as in everyday activities. Throughout history, it is likely that improvisation as part of tacit knowledge has been decisive in the active creation of knowledge and survival.[2] Even though the word improvisation was not used in a musical context until around1850, improvisation as activity has a long history. In antiquity, it was an important part of rhetoric training. Moreover, in Western music history we know that Medieval music was mostly improvisational and that composers such as Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Chopin were formidable improvisers. Significantly, the Latin *improvisus* refers to the "unforeseen" or that which occurs "on the spur of the moment." The root of the word improvisation, *visus,* is the Latin word for 'to see' while *pro* means before, in advance. *Provisus* does not exist as a separate word in Latin, but it would have referred to that of "something which has been seen in advance." In addition, the prefix *im-* is negative, yielding meaning to "something which has not been seen in advance." From *improvisus*, then, which gradually acquired the meaning "unforeseen" or "unexpected", "surprising," Italian has formed a verb *improvisare* – to do something without preparation, to solve an unexpected situation, and, accordingly, the noun improvisation derives directly from this verb.[3]Another Latin term for consideration, *extempore actio,* originally designated "acting outside time" or outside the normal flow of time, could be related to the term "experienced" time. (Bergson, 1990) With this in mind, let us now turn to some other definitions of improvisation.

That ancient Greek and Roman performance culture was mainly oral, has many parallels in music cultures of today, not least in the broad fields of folk, jazz, and popular music. This ancient literacy was both a tool and basis for oral communication. We know that in Athens around 500 BC, there were annual, organised recitals that lasted for many days. The Greeks grew up with the epic poems such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* But rather than read they were heard. This is a good illustration of the importance of the aural aspect which involves recitation and learning by heart as crucial elements of improvisation, irrespective of historical period. The Roman Quintillian (35–100 AD) provides the following statement on good speech: "to be free to improvise, you have to know the speech so well that you do not feel restricted by it."[4]

Proficiency as an improviser in rhetorical contexts, according to these ancient sources is due to two factors – natural predisposition and practice; in other words, talent and training. While the former is regarded as the more important, it is the ability to improvise that is also a matter of practising. One can find much explicit advice and instructions for the improviser concerning memory techniques and elements that influence the performance, including voice, face, body, ear and rhythm. (Andersen, 1990) Even the pressure to deliver and the whole question of nervousness is treated in this connection. For instance, Crassus said: "… if not even the most proficient and relaxed speakers go to work with a certain anxiety and are moved by nervousness when they start to speak, well, then they are lost to all sense of shame."[5] Here the focus falls on the very important role of emotion, state of mind, and mood in performance situations. Thus, from ancient times up till today, we find improvisation in every known musical culture, despite a great deal of variation in how it is handled in the different traditions.

UNWRITTEN VS. WRITTEN TRADITIONS

Improvisation in all kinds of nuances strongly depends on how society is organised and how it functions. In his article "Medieval Improvisation," Leo Treitler points out that the very concept of improvisation is a product of cultures that have valued the opposite form, composition, as a norm.[6] According to Treitler, descriptions of improvisation are linked mainly to Western societies, even though one can find descriptions of improvisation in early Indian and Arabic writings. In these cultures improvisation is considered a basic prerequisite for all music behaviour, although it is not necessarily referred to in theoretical writings. Consequently, music was performed before the notation system was invented and music outside the confines of the Western world *was* and *is* produced and presented in unwritten traditions.

Improvised music has a longer history than the history of written music; both traditions have existed side by side as musical expressions through the last millennium. Improvised music happens "in the course of performance" and is not written down on paper; consequently it has not been a part of a notated musical tradition. This might explain why it has not gained the status, attention and scientific significance it deserves. As Bruno Nettl states, "it must be repeated that among activities and processes studied by music historians and ethnomusicologists, improvisation plays a small part."[7]

IMPROVISATION AND SOCIETY

In European art music history, improvisation had a central place from the early medieval ages until the age of romanticism. But around 1850 a great deal of the improvisation of this tradition became invisible. Part of the explanation for this seems related to social changes; the different functions of society became more and more specialised,

and economic systems with increased efficiency rapidly developed towards a top-ruled, pyramidal organisation in different parts of society. The rise of the formal concert hall during the 19th century gradually put an end to concert improvisation as the industrial era brought with it an excessive emphasis on specialisation and professionalism in all fields of living. Indeed most musicians confined themselves to the note-for-note playing of scores written by a handful of composers who somehow had access to the mysterious and godlike quality of the creative process. As a result, composition and performance progressively split from each other to their detriment; the new and the old lost a sense of continuity. Thus, a period was entered into where concertgoers came to believe that the only good composer was a dead composer or – in some cases – a contemporary hero who could be a worthy heir to the deceased.[8]

JAZZ AND "AFRICAN WAYS"

At the beginning of the 20th century, New Orleans became the centre for the development of a new musical expression called jazz. Improvisation reappeared in this music in a way that proved to be of vital importance and an influence on all kinds of music throughout the century. "Of all the musical forms to emerge during the twentieth century, jazz was by far the most significant."[9]

Jazz has a relatively short history. Its first references are found in the west coast of America, where the *San Francisco Bulletin* of March 1913 used the term to describe a dance music full of vigour and "pep."[10] Various attempts to define this expression have since stimulated many discussions, although even today the discussion has not reached a final conclusion. In a sense, this should be taken as a sign of good health and evidence of a vital cultural expression. The *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* definition of jazz is as follows: "A music created mainly by black Americans in the early 20th century through the amalgamation of elements drawn from European-American and tribal African music." Such an open definition recognises that " …on the whole, ethnicity provides a core, a center of gravity for the narrative of jazz, and is one element that unites the several different kinds of narratives in use today."[11]

With the emergence of jazz in the first part of the 20th century, improvisation gradually found its place on the musical scene, and in recent years has generated interest within different fields of research. Jazz has spread all over the world to the extent that it can be referred to as a global music. One of the main reasons for this relatively fast dispersion is to be found in the African elements of jazz. By this I am referring to the African ways of behaviour with respect to life and music, which are closely interwoven. The expression "African ways," however, should not be construed as something unambiguous or homogenous. "African refers" to heterogeneous practices. Fundamental to these ways of communicating is the inclusive, interactive, dialogic aspect; where the actor or musician *is the message.* (Sidran, 1981) In the combination of singing, dancing and

drumming, there is a celebration of life which has many layers of tacit knowledge, experience, religion, and joy. In every such performance and meeting it seems very important to bring forth personal, individual voices, inviting others to make their contribution and to be open to all directions and possibilities such dialogues and interactions may take. Behind these actions and activities, which involve communities of practice full of joy and sorrow, there is a deep sense of belonging to a collective of local identity where nature plays a decisive part. This identity is referred to as "humanity" by Charles Keil, who goes on to define it "as entertainment from the white or public point of view and as ritual, drama or dialectical catharsis from the Negro or theoretical standpoint."[12] Keil points out how the idea of ritual has a clear connection to West African musical practices, arguing how "entertaining" black musicians became masters of what concerns sound, movement, timing and the spoken word, all of which he sees as the kernel in the black culture.

Clearly, such a generalised description and essentialist perspective requires further commentary. In the context of a postcolonial period, large parts of Africa have been saddled with poverty and deep conflicts between tribes and regions; a dismal fact that strongly contradicts an idealisation of African ways of acting. While these human, political, social and global complex questions impinge on the context of this paper, they will not be discussed directly. Rather the main focus of this paper is on specific aspects of African ways of acting, which I have experienced in different musical settings – for example, in West African traditions and in the interplay with African-American jazz musicians. These experiences provide a valuable basis for the discussion of and discourses on interaction and communication in a global world.

UBUNTU

In his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, the Reverend Desmond Tutu talks about a South-African term *ubuntu,* which means "to be a human being." All human relations that are characterised by notions of mutual respect, dignity and community are terms or expressions for *ubuntu. Ubuntu-Botho* means "the art or virtue of being a human creature." We are born to live in a subtle network of mutual dependence. "I am only a human being through another you." We say "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think, – therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share."[13]

This view of the world or humanism represents a universal *ubuntu* that includes all people irrespective of race, sex, ethnicity, political, cultural and/ or religious belonging. As Tutu has claimed in his many speeches: "We are all born different, – like a rainbow. A rainbow is a rainbow just because the colours are different. The different colours come together, and then we get a rainbow."[14] The influence of "African ways," then, seems to represent a potential for action that may be looked upon as "an alternative modernism": the

celebration of the unpredictable – improvisational – rooted in tradition and internalised knowledge and experience combined with a training to act "on the spot."[15]

THE IMMOVABLE AND THE STATIC

African-American jazz which includes improvisation can be positioned philosophically in a tradition that radically contradicts central parts of Western rationalist thinking: a static-mechanistic worldview rooted in the immovable world of Plato's ideas. In this respect, jazz can be linked to the thinking of the French philosopher Henri Bergson and the American pragmatists of the early 1900s, John Dewey, William James and Charles Peirce. Flexibility and process are focused on when life is considered a stream of movements and changes, processes and tendencies that cross and intermingle to form the complex. In this sense, consciousness and rationality are constituted through a creative action that is often compared to an eco-system.[16]

In his reference to Bergson's process philosophy, the Norwegian eco-philosopher Sigmund Kvaløy Setreng has developed a pedagogic model to elucidate the difference between European traditional system thinking and a philosophy grounded in process thinking. Setreng employs the concepts "complicated" and "complex." Here the complicated can be compared to a machine based on reversibility – a closed system – controlled from a centre. Similarly, the symphony orchestra's hierarchical structure is used as a metaphor for this form of organising, hence the complicated. In contrast to this Setreng uses the term "complex" which is open and irreversible, self-organising, grounded in interaction, comparable to an eco-system. Similarly, the jazz combo, a small group of two to six members, is used to illustrate the notion of complexity.[17] Setreng underlines that his models are simplified ideal types, used to illustrate a basic difference in organisational thinking, representative of two different cultures.[18] Above all, Setreng's thinking seems to have parallels in Edgar Morin's concept of self-eco-re-organisation, suggesting that the nature of the organisation changes as well. And while this is an ongoing process of self-renewal that always happens in a context, in an environment, it is never in isolation or abstraction. No self without an eco. No text without context.[19]

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES, OBJECTIVE-SUBJECTIVE

Research undertaken in the field of creativity during the 20th century has mainly concentrated on the individual, and has often been based on a Western, modernistic understanding where the emphasis falls on objectivity, rationality, order, and theory. The traditional goals of Western universities have been largely based upon a theoretical understanding of the world. Practical knowledge-based traditions, with their background in what everyday people are engaged with, have received little attention, as practice is

often regarded as less important than theoretical issues. Nearly all knowledge and the search for the truth is grounded in traditional systems of thinking where logical-rational thinking expressed in a technical language. As a result, subjective, emotional, accidental, and tacit knowledge have had almost no space within this hierarchic, hegemonic paradigm, which in the context of art is often grounded on a "genius-aesthetic" alien to most cultures outside the Western world.[20]

This way of conceiving the world is mainly rooted in the metaphysics of antiquity where inflexibility is regarded as synonymous with absoluteness and perfection; a world view that has contributed to a static understanding of reality in which control and prediction in human interrelationships have had the highest priority, expressed in quite simple, mechanistic models. Within the field of musicology one would expect that studies of ethnic music cultures should lead to new and extensive research on creativity. Yet research within this field appears to be marginal. At the end of the last millennium, however, there was some evidence that some research in this area was being undertaken. However, it is remarkable that new, innovative research, based on impulses from, say, jazz improvisation occurs quite often within disciplines such as organisational theory, economics, business, social science, and psychology, albeit only haphazardly within musicology.

"ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES" AND IMPROVISATION

At the beginning of this millennium there is a growing tendency to acknowledge a new kind of modernity, which is global and multi-faceted and no longer in line with a Western "governing centre." The idea of "alternative modernities" holds that development always unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations and that a different starting point of the transition to modernity will lead to different outcomes.[21] This alternative perspective will hopefully help generate more adequate descriptions and analyses of different cultures and music. That is, in order to understand the emergence of jazz and jazz as a cultural expression, we do not necessarily have to use Kant's rationality as a basic model for explanations and interpretations.

This change in perspective is now leading to an increased interest and research activity that centre on different musical expressions that will probably display new aspects of human interaction and communication. Improvisation is part of all musical cultures, traditions and styles. But in jazz, improvisation plays a key role in the aspects of interaction which seem to be of a different character from that of other musical expressions, an argumentation that I wish to further substantiate.

Even if jazz has been traditionally regarded as structure-less or chaotic, there is a growing interest in jazz improvisation as a topic for serious interdisciplinary research. In this context, improvisation is now often used as a metaphor to shed light on creativity and interaction in group activities with a focus on the balance between structure and

flexibility within that activity. It should be noted that the act of improvising is a risky business, and even among professional jazz musicians, improvisation can be a more or less successful pursuit.

When discussing jazz improvisation, it is very easy to make idealisations – to refer to the best and ideal moments in this kind of interaction and communication. However, improvisation is more a process than a product. For the purpose of this enquiry then, one might say that whatever quality the improvisational activity possesses, it is important to investigate the rhythms of interaction that ensue during the course of performance.

JAZZ METAPHORS: WORDS, MYTHS AND DEFINITIONS

Paul Berliner's book, *Thinking in Jazz* (1994), is a seminal text in understanding jazz culture and has inspired various writers to use jazz improvisation as a metaphor for knowledge, innovation, and creativity in organisational connections.[22]

However, when using the jazz metaphor, one needs to be aware that jazz has changed through the years and that the metaphor has to be used carefully as the difference between, for example, swing jazz from the 1930s and free jazz from the 1960s is critical. But in spite of differences, one element has always been central to the jazz tradition: improvisation. In Bailey's words:

> The word improvisation is actually very little used by improvising musicians. Idiomatic improvisers, in describing what they do, use the name of the idiom. They "play flamenco" or "play jazz"; some refer to what they do as just "playing". There is a noticeable reluctance to use the word and some improvisers express a positive dislike for it. I think this is due to its widely accepted connotations which imply that improvisation is something without preparation and without consideration, a completely ad hoc activity, frivolous and inconsequential, lacking in design and method. And they object to that implication because they know from their own experience that it is untrue. They know that there is no musical activity, which requires greater skills and devotion, preparation, training and commitment. And so they resent the word, which in some places has become almost a term of abuse. They recognise that, as it is generally understood, it completely misrepresents the depth and complexity of their work. But I have chosen to retain that term throughout this 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.[23]

One of the most common myths surrounding improvisation is a romantic one: the improvising jazz musician is the incarnation of God; improvisation is a supernatural phenomenon, a privileged gift of the chosen few. When we position improvisation on a high artistic level, it may be correct to speak of a special talent, of which not all of us are in possession of. But if there is one thing that gifted people and others have in common that deals with jazz improvisation, it seems to be hard work – the long and demanding way to achieve an instrumental standard and personal strength that justifies the power of intuition.

Now there are various definitions of improvisation, of which I will briefly make further mention. Dictionaries provide definitions such as: "a performance according to the inventive whim of the moment"[24] or "to perform without preparation."[25] "Improvisation" is confined here to the first usage of the term mentioned at the beginning of this article, something that is an inferior and second-hand solution. But the second mentioned usage, one that is more relevant for jazz, is something quite different. It constitutes an activity that requires thorough preparation of a set of skills that need 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.

All professional jazz musicians know that playing jazz – improvising – is about striving hard to obtain the ideal state in the "golden moments" – ecstatic heights in musical interaction that are the main reason for why we play. But, unfortunately such moments occur all too seldom. However, behind the motivation and intention to reach a level of "peak-performance" there has to be an existential urge. Besides such qualitites, it is crucial that there is a good balance between challenges and skills. If this balance is not optimal, the musicians will either feel bored or anxious, and thus weaken their potential for interaction. This will have a negative impact on the ensemble's performance. However, when this balance is optimal, the musician will feel good; in this "aesthetics of presence" a state is reached that is often referred to as flow. Musicians describe this state as "being played" when they only observe their fingers playing their instrument. In this instance, the performer's condition is a kind of constructive uncertainty and confusion, thus being in a transcendental state. This seems close to social psychologist Mihaly Csikscentmihalyi's description of the "flow" concept:

> Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement. [...] It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic, which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future.[26]

When jazz musicians are asked to define improvisation, they often answer, as Bailey has indicated, "I am just playing," or they try to find metaphoric terms, such as those provided by composer, arranger and trumpeter Thad Jones:

> Here the aesthetics of presence holds unrestrictedly. You give yourself up, surrender without ulterior motives; egoism and spirit of competition yield for generosity, presence and interdependence. One develops a presence that is like telepathic intuition …during such moments, improvisation is like the language that develops between two loving partners and that usually is called eroticism.[27]

It might be tempting to link Jones' poetic description of improvisation to the old Sanskrit word *lîla*, meaning "divine play," the play of creation, destruction and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lîla*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.[28] As we can see, to find adequate descriptions or definitions of this transient phenomenon in scientific linguistic terms is difficult, which underlines the complexity of interactions "in the course of performance." Amongst the many different definitions of jazz improvisation, Paul Berliner's definition is particularly useful in this context:

> Improvisation involves reworking pre-composed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation.[29]

This definition recognises that successful, creative improvisation is dependent on preparation and training as fundamental factors in spontaneous and intuitive action.[30]

IMPROVISATION IN OTHER CONTEXTS

Despite the large amount of literature on improvisation outside the field of music that was forthcoming in the past century, the necessity of improvisation has been rarely recognised in different organisational contexts, such as industry, management, education, etc. This is probably due to these activities being mainly grounded in a reliance on linearity and traditional systematic thinking. When regular planning breaks down, and on-the-spot solutions are needed, such as through improvising, this way of acting is often regarded as a sign of failure and referred to as "emergency solutions" or "fire fighting." There is all too often a plea for new and more detailed plans, which results in a huge amount of newly written, detailed, complicated instructions and bureaucratic procedures. The ability to find on-the-spot solutions to local problems is, as men-

tioned, rarely accepted in work life. In other words, there is a tendency to regard improvisational activities as unfair and as a rupture in the activities of a canonised, official administration system.[31] To solve problems and meet local challenges that continually emerge during a working day, employees closest to such problems then have to improvise in an off-the-cuff manner which draws on their tacit knowledge. Improvisation is thus regarded as a temporary expedient, something risky and dangerous, and, accordingly, a practice and activity that should be avoided. As such the status of improvisation can be evaluated as very low. Not surprisingly, such an outlook has inspired little research activities related to this vital topic.

I would suggest that the aspects of interaction one observes in a jazz group might be fruitful for finding metaphors that can be used to illustrate ways of improvisation in other contexts. Although a metaphor has its limitations, it is a tool that only temporarily suits our purposes and imaginations. Thus, in developing and applying a metaphor, it is not difficult to become so caught up in the similarities between vehicle and target that differences are ignored. However, metaphors can be valuable as tools to inspire divergent thinking and engaging emotional and aesthetic dimensions of our being.

ORGANISATIONAL IMPROVISATION

The relatively new field of organisational improvisation is concerned with the pressures on organisations to react continually to today's ever-changing environment. One often comes across questions such as, "what can organisations learn from jazz?" In the book *Organizational Improvisation*, Frank J. Barrett has contributed with an article entitled "Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations." According to Barrett, jazz improvisation has seven features that could have implications for other contexts:

1. Provocative competence: Deliberate efforts to interrupt habit patterns;
2. Embracing errors as a source of learning;
3. Shared orientation toward minimal structures that allow maximum flexibility;
4. Distributes task: continual negotiation and dialogue toward dynamic synchronisation;
5. Reliance on retrospective sense making;
6. "Hanging out": Members in a community of practice; and
7. Taking turns in soloing and supporting/ accompanying.

All of these characteristics are essential to the understanding of this form of musical expression. In this study what I find most pertinent is the third feature, "shared orientation toward minimal structures that allow maximal flexibility," which Setreng has referred to as "light bridges,"[32] something that best captures the core of interaction and creativity in a jazz group. The relationship between structure and flexibility is therefore

an important point concerning the best balance between order and chaos in a space where creativity is given optimal conditions.

STRUCTURE AND FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility is a term applied to various contexts, although the concept is seldom defined. In the early 1970s, Gregory Bateson defined flexibility as unused potential for change.[33] Flexibility consists of the possibilities one has not yet utilised, within defined frames. When the frames become narrower, the structure is filled with detailed prescriptions, and flexibility and creativity are reduced. When the structure in jazz and other human actions is too complicated or rigid, flexibility and creativity do not have the chance to unfold. Below I have provided an example from the offshore industry.

A manager of the deep-sea diving section on a North Sea oil platform talked about his experiences with training deep-sea divers in emergency situations.[34] The managers tried to give the divers highly detailed and exact written instructions on how to react in dangerous situations. However, when the divers followed the instructions to the point of placing themselves in dangerous situations, they concentrated on the prescribed rules so much that they forgot to use their own imagination and creativity to deal with this complex situation. The result was critically dangerous and they needed outside help to save their lives. The instructions were then reformulated in just a few fundamental points which were easy to remember and which gave a better balance between structure and flexibility. In other words, the divers were given the opportunity to improvise on internalised knowledge, trusting their intuitive capacities. This meant that they could keep calm without panicking; accordingly, they handled the most complex situation in an adequate way through improvising.

In ordinary language, jazz is often described in terms such as "unstructured" and "lacking structure." However, as we will see jazz is based on structure, but not as distinctly as other forms of music. The structure in jazz is minimal (to a certain degree dependent on the musicians' stylistic familiarity) and thus serves as a basis for the development of creative ideas, the patterns on which musicians improvise. In this respect, jazz differs from other styles of musical expressions (e.g. pop, rock, art music) insofar as structure is used as a frame for creative interaction.

ORDER – CHAOS

From a personal perspective, I do not take to the word "structure" in a musical context very much. Structure is often described negatively, with connotations of limitation and restriction. Instead of structure, the words "agreement" or "mutual consent" might be more meaningful descriptions. "Mutual consent" provides an understanding of the frames the musicians have agreed upon. Such consent is not imposed from outside, but

rather its mutuality serves as a point of departure for creative activity and display. In this sense, the agreement part of this is flexible; it can be enlarged and changed depending on the interaction in the collective dialogues. But should the mutual consent become too loose, the participants will not recognise the fundamental pattern, and will therefore lose contact with the agreement and with each other. The interplay breaks down and the result may be one of chaos. Chaotic performances may of course, for a short period, be interesting and even exciting, although the collective creative forces are clearly at a disadvantage where chaos rules.

STANDARDS AND DIALECTICAL PARADOXES

Notions of agreement within jazz are often rooted in what are called the "standards;" evergreen American film and musical tunes that have become famous. "Autumn Leaves," "Summertime," and so on, are examples of how the basis of mutual consent provides a creative interaction in a jazz group. Standards are often built on musical forms of 32, 16, and 12 bars, which can be said to function as minimal structures. Many other references for improvisation are of course also used by mutual consent, such as melodic fragments, rhythmic ostinatos, melodic modes, bass figures, etc. These agreements (structures) are the tools whereupon improvisation unfolds; the structure is internalised and experienced implicitly: i.e., it is not necessary to accentuate the "one" in every bar. In this context, the "one" is implicit and does not have to be articulated.[35] Further, structure is not sacred to the jazz musician; it encourages its own alteration. This freedom imparted by not having to play structural features means that the musician can play around them, which thus encourages creativity.

A recent example of this was encountered in a concert I attended featuring the Herbie Hancock Quartet in Trondheim, Norway, July 2003. The first tune they played was the well-known standard melody "I love you," a nicely re-harmonised arrangement employing alternative chords by Hancock. Knowing the tune very well, I nevertheless experienced some difficulty in recognising the 32 bar structure of the tune. Lost by every repetition of the form, I became frustrated by my inability to recognise the well-known structure. Talking to the musicians after the concert I got the answer. At a concert in France, they told me that the musical form – the agreement – had been accidentally prolonged by one bar: "and you see, it was so much fun playing 33 bars, instead of the ordinary 32, that we still are playing this new structure!"

This little alteration, one bar, was for the musician a fresh inspiration and gave rise to new challenges for creative interplay. As shown in this case, the head arrangement could be changed in the course of performance; a way of acting and communicating that demands a lot of experience, training, and practice. This interaction implies confidence in tradition, alertness, listening and responding, and taking risks. But to a large extent it is also about confidence and a sense of security: an existential act that it

is difficult to find adequate linguistic terms for and which suggests a series of "dialectical paradoxes."

While musicians stress the importance of being able to do solos, they must also be capable of accompanying and supporting other people. They know and respect the jazz tradition and its legacy carriers, but at the same time they, at any rate the most creative, want to challenge and push the tradition forward. These "dialectical paradoxes" between immersion in the tradition and taking risks, between standing out as an individual voice and being supporters of others' voices beg new and creative ways of developing a deeper understanding of creativity and improvisation.

Improvising in jazz is about creating a situation where change, transformation and process are focused and where even the structure, the referential foundation of improvisation, may be part of the alterations. Among the most important elements in this activity is changing one's relation to oneself, a significant point of departure for change in other relations. Compare this with the Norwegian drummer Jon Christensen's attitude to preparation before a concert performance: "At least, you have to try to surprise yourself!"[36]

The communicative aspect to oneself and the dialogic aspect to others are central to all improvisational activity, which should be a solid basis for a "well-functioning democracy." In all kinds of dialogues there are always certain elements of uncertainty present because one does not know the result until the participation in the dialogue has come to an end. This fact is elegantly captured by Asplund: "I don't know what I have said until you have answered and you don't know what you have said until I have answered. You show me what I have said and I show you what you have said."[37]

PROCESS AND COMPLEXITY IN GROUPS

In different branches of life, groups of individuals face the paradox of planning (trying to create the future) which is in contrast to their inability to foresee what the future entails. To cope with this paradox, the function of leadership is often strengthened in order to get a better and more effective organisation. This type of organisation is based on a hierarchical and pyramidal form of thinking that seldom yields the expected result. This is because it neither extracts the full potential of each individual nor the complementary forces within the group. In contrast, another way of organising that converges with research in complexity theory[38] is that which we find in the jazz group. In small jazz groups, distributed tasks, rotation of soloing (leadership) and continual negotiation can lead toward a dynamic synchronisation. These are elements that create a flow of ongoing invention and mutual support within the group. An example of this type of flat structural, self-organising and "moveable hierarchies" found in a jazz group can be directly related to my personal experience as a jazz bass player.

Around 1970, the renowned tenor saxophonist Ben Webster was invited to give concerts in Trondheim, Norway, where I was asked to play bass in the quartet. Not very experienced at this time, I was full of trepidation about such a daunting task. There was not much time for rehearsals, and we hardly met before we went on stage to play two sets. During the first set, I tried hard to follow Webster's playing, very respectfully and intently, listening to every musical move he made, my sole concern being to do my very best for this celebrity. In the intermission, eager to hear what he thought about our support, and of course my playing, I sat close to Ben waiting for something to be said. After a while he said: "Yeah Bjørn, you're doing fine. But, you shouldn't listen that much, then you lose yourself. You know, I need your initiative to play my best and then our best!" What a lesson from a master! To get the best out of music you need to play in your own manner and, of course, be extremely alert to everything that happens during the performance. In this way the individual and collective forces in a team will have the best possibilities to unfold, which leads to the best result through a collective, non-hierarchical approach.

Communicating in an improvisational way gives joy, releases energy, and activates knowledge and reflection. The basis for this form of interaction and interplay is found in *trust* and *freedom*, two elements that secure the social dimension. From this perspective, knowledge is continually reproduced and transformed as a process of interaction amongst people. Being involved in improvisation therefore has a positive effect on the learning environment, social competence and development of a person's creative abilities. Such an activity underlines the point that knowledge need not necessarily be stored in individual heads or in libraries, but can be activated and negotiated as complex, responsive processes in relations between people.

Being involved in improvisation in one or another context should lead to a type of meta learning, a *meta doing* that transfers across styles and forms.[39] This assertion is supported by the research undertaken by psychologist, R.Keith Sawyer, who writes: "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."[40]

TRUST, FREEDOM, COLEMAN AND DERRIDA

At the risk of stretching my rather positive attitude to this form of interaction too far, I would briefly like to draw attention to some of the observations of the renowned and controversial French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In one radio programme[41] he surprisingly talked about his fascination for jazz saying that he loved to drive on the American highways while listening to local jazz radio channels, especially when it came to Ornette Coleman; one of the most influential and controversial jazz musicians in the history of jazz.[42] Derrida told the listeners: "I know him personally and I have worked

with him. He (Ornette Coleman) invited me to be on stage with him. I wrote a text and we improvised…"

My own curiosity for the Coleman/Derrida-connection was strengthened after attending a concert with Ornette Coleman Quintet at the Kongsberg International Jazz-festival.[43] Without entering a discussion on the possible links between jazz, in this case Coleman's music and his "harmolodic concept,"[44] and aspects of Derrida's philosophy, for example his 'concept' of *Différance*, these links are however significant.[45] Ornette Coleman's attempts to describe his musical philosophy and aesthetics, under the title, The Harmolodic Theory, has been discussed among musicians and musicologists for years and despite the several essays[46] on the topic it is difficult to find consistent accounts of his "concept of harmolodics." The liner notes to the LP *Dancing In Your Head* (1975) included Coleman's own abstruse explanation of *harmolodics*:

> This means the rhythms, harmonics and tempos are all equal in relationship and independent melodies at the same time." In an essay on harmolodics Coleman wrote that he "realized harmolodics can be used in almost any kind of expression. You can think harmolodically, you can write fiction and poetry in harmolodic. Harmolodics allows a person to use a multiplicity of elements to express more than one direction. The greatest freedom in harmolodics is human instinct.[47]

Also commenting on harmolodics, the Danish guitarist Pierre Dørge has said: "I think his system is not really a system or theory, it's more a collection of ideas that you can work on and use in your music. It's not so precise – the idea of the equality of melody, harmony, and rhythm, and that every instrument should play all of these things…the theory is more a kind of feeling, something you think about before you play."[48]

Derrida maintains that words are incapable of communicating ambiguous meanings which are present in the individual's mind, and that meaning is essentially unstable and indeterminate and cannot be grasped in its entirety. And his belief that speech more authentically communicates meaning than writing is of interest and relevance for an interdisciplinary investigation and understanding of Ornette Coleman's musical universe. In an interview Derrida advocated a new type of politics that might be linked to ways of thinking that concerned dialogic meetings and improvisational activity:

> I do not advocate a new humanism, but a new foundation in order to think the living creatures into a freer political space: antagonistic, but also open and exciting; with the excitement that lies in every relation to the other, to what is otherwise and different from me […]Trust is what guarantees for sociality, and a social dimension altogether. It is however just the same we can see in economics, in the imagination about credibil-

> ity: reliability and confidence are what makes our society in its many facets to cohere. [49]

THE ETHICS AND POETICS OF HOSPITALITY

Lately, Derrida has been engrossed in what he calls "the ethics and poetics of hospitality," which is connected to the xenophobia that has emerged after September 11. He distinguishes between a conditional and an unconditional hospitality. A conditional and political hospitality implies the legislated, in other words, the arrangements of rules, laws and institutions.

> One may open the frontiers of a country, a town or the doors to your own home under the conditions that the visitor does not destroy the town, the language, destroys the furniture, rapes one's wife or empties the fridge. These are matters that are regulated by the state or by the law: One is accepted on certain conditions. The unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, does not obey laws, norms and rules: It is without conditions, without reservation, without restrictions. The unconditional, hospitable host does not ask for the name or intentions of the other. As such he takes a big risk. This is a highly risky strategy and perhaps not recommendable. There is always a chance of meeting the hostile trespasser that destroys everything. At the same time, it is perhaps this pure, unqualified hospitality we dream about, also because it is unattainable.

Upon describing the poetics of hospitality as an unconditional openness and friendliness,[50] Derrida has been asked: "Would the world be a better place if we were more fearless, more trustful both on a personal and on a political level?" His answer is revealing:

> Like anybody I try – in my own life – to control the risky. One tries to protect oneself against the frightening and the incalculable. Yet we do not always have a choice: Just think of phenomena like love and passion, which are impossible to control. If we attempt at controlling love, we lose the love that cannot be computed or calculated. It is not up to us to freely adjust the relationship between the politics and poetics of hospitality, the conditional and the unconditional hospitality. This is something that happens to us, and it is this that opens up for an experience of the other – as such. This is of concern for both our private lives and in other contexts.

What is striking is how Jacques Derrida, Desmond Tutu, and Thad Jones turn to metaphors like "hospitality." "rainbow" and "erotic" in order to explain complex human relations, communication, and the unpredictable. Obviously, there is a need for new ways and perspectives to get a deeper understanding of this vital force in all kinds of human activity. As suggested before, I would propose a more fruitful starting point that acknowledges that the traditional Euro-logic does not seem to be the best foundation for understanding the complexity of improvisational activity. An even better point of departure might be a deeper knowledge and insight into how folk cultures around the world approach the world in combination with process and complexity thinking.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Ten years ago I introduced improvisation as a discipline for music students at the University of Trondheim, most of whom had little previous training in improvising. Musical practice and improvisational interaction have, of course, been the most important activities in this improvisational discipline. But it is the reflections through dialogues, as well as rather provoking and open questions about the students' everyday experience, that have been of vital significance.

Throughout the years, students' evaluation of improvisational practice have been unambiguous when it comes to the following question: "Do you think the improvisation practice may have some effects on your way of acting in everyday life, like feeling more secure and being more self-confident when talking in front of an audience?" Almost all answers to this question have been positive; through improvisation practice, students have felt a better mastering of their own tensions, insecurity and fear, and the fear of making mistakes have decreased radically. To me this implies a strengthened belief in improvisation as a kind of meta-learning; a pedagogical strategy that has been strongly underestimated in all kinds of organised learning, from kindergarten to academia. Even if this cannot be regarded as valid research, the interaction with the students and their responses have been of great inspiration to me and thus served as an encouragement to continue this work. Furthermore, it has served to reinforce the processes which had a creative beginning through musical interaction.

Teaching improvisation eventually led to a research project *"Interdisciplinary perspectives on Improvisation,"* which was started in 1999 and is still in operation. An important goal in this project is to bring forth the underlying differences between improvising in a creative community and in the current economic and commercial globalisation processes. The latter involves a worldwide standardisation and pyramidal rule-making structure, which is in opposition to improvisation, a personal/social, creative rule-breaking activity. Not only in music, but in all walks of life improvisation also has an important political function with its focus on participation, solidarity, and responsibility for the individual in a collective. This means that the project's social relevance has

been important.[51] As part of the social aspect, an essential and overall point in the project is to focus on the importance of bringing the intellectual and the emotional (the body) to interaction in different social contexts. In this way a fundamental and varied development of the individual's potentials early in life is made possible.

In this context, improvisation becomes 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 her/ his potentials and sees these in relation to the relationships and contexts she/ he takes part in. These studies are intended to bring new angles to the understanding of dialogic aspects of human communication, not least with regard to introspection, alertness, and social competence. Finally, such studies should lead to research and production of pedagogical material on different levels in the education system – to find new ways of learning and perceiving.

The essence of the project is 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 an issue of highest priority in a time when solutions to conflicts often are sought through violence; a time in which unchecked economic globalisation and standardisation seem a threat to democracy ("improvising local societies") and vulnerable non-Western cultures.

One question that often arises when dealing with improvisation is: to what extent can one learn improvisation? To me, the answer is easy. As human beings, we already are part of a great improvisation and we are all more or less unconsciously improvising most of the day. We must simply become aware of this fact and then find the open spaces and the creative atmospheres to release our hidden, inborn improvisational capacities in different contexts, for the best for ourselves and the world we are part of.

I started with a quote from Bateson, so why not end this improvisation with the following reflection by him:

> We social scientists would do well to hold back our eagerness to control that world which we so imperfectly understand. The fact of our imperfect understanding should not be allowed to feed our anxiety and so increase the need to control. Rather, our studies could be inspired by a more ancient, but today less honoured motive: a curiosity about the world of which we are part. The rewards of such work are not power but beauty. [52]

Notes

1 Bateson 1972.
2 Especially when inventing new tools and adopting new approaches and perspectives. (Polanyi, 1966)
3 Conversation with Professor Gunhild Vidén, Department of History and Classical Studies, Norwegian University of Science and Technology.
4 Andersen, 1995 p. 110.
5 Andersen, 1995 p.121.
6 Treitler, 1991 p.67.
7 Nettl, 1998 p 4.
8 Christopher Small makes this distinction between composed and improvised music: "In short, composed music is the account of the journey of exploration, which might well have been momentous, but it is over before we learn of it, while improvisation is the journey itself, which is likely to make small discoveries rather than large, or even no discoveries at all, but in which everything that is found can be of interest or value." (Small, 1996.p 176–177)
9 Shipton, 2001 p. 1.
10 Shipton, 2001 p. 1.
11 DeVeaux, p. 421.
12 Keil, p 15.
13 Tutu, 1999 p. 31.
14 Nobel Prize Speech, Trondheim Katedralskole, 12 Dec, 1984.
15 The risk of a romanticisation of "African ways" is clearly present in such pompous pronouncements, but as an alternative to over 200 years of Western rationality, time has come to develop conceptual frameworks grounded on alternatives: interaction, emotions, social creativity and internalised, tacit knowledge, and Africa is a rich source for such a framework.
16 Kvaløy Setreng, 2001.
17 Indeed one also finds hierarchical structures in strictly organised jazz big bands with 18–20 members and more.
18 Setreng, 2002.
19 Montuori, 2003.
20 See, for example, an interesting statement in the *Encyclopaedia of Psychology*, Volume 2, 2000 p 339, "The musical idea has to be written down and orchestrated…"
21 Ganokar, 2001.
22 Barrett, Hatch, Weick 2002.
23 Bailey 1980, p. 5.
24 Treitler, 1991 p. 66.
25 Aschehoug og Gyldendals Store Norske leksikon, Oslo, 1989.
26 Csikscentmihalyi, 1975 p. 43.
27 Oversand, 1987 p. 74.
28 Nachmanovitch, 1990 p. 1.
29 Berliner 1994, p. 241.
30 For a further discussion on the concept of improvisation, see Jørgensen 2004, p.79–114.
31 In socialist countries, for the underground resistance jazz was regarded as a symbol and a metaphor for freedom and personal expression, therefore jazz was often suppressed by the authorities.
32 Setreng, 2002 p. 161.
33 See Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Article in *Dagbladet* 8 juli 2003 (Oslo): "Flexibility: the key to an understanding of a complex world."
34 Discussion at a conference in Trondheim, Norway 19 June, 2003 arranged by Sintef Industrial Management, Safety and Reliability, where saxophonist John Pål Inderberg and I presented a paper: "Improvisation and interaction in jazz groups."
35 Hatch, 2002.
36 Alterhaug, Jørgensen, Setreng, 2002 p. 72.
37 Molander, 1993 p. 97.
38 The complex responsive processes perspective is a transformative process view, where human phenomena in organisations are a result of people interacting with each other and the environment. By the responding processes they create, they transform the reality of both themselves and their environment. (Stacey, 2001)
39 Nachmanovitch, 1990.
40 Sawyer, 1999.
41 NRK, Norwegian Broadcasting, "Ordfront", 22 August 2002.
42 Litweiler, 1992.
43 Kongsberg, Norway, 30 juni 2004.
44 Litweiler, p 147–155.
45 Wood, David and Bernasconi, Robert, 1988.
46 See for example: Ornette Coleman, " Prime Time for Harmolodics," Down Beat, July 1983 and Ornette Coleman, "Harmolodic – Highest Instinct: Something to Think About, "in Paul Buhle et al., eds., *Free Spirits: The Insurgent Imagination* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982)
47 Litweiler, p 148.

48 Litweiler, p168.

49 Klassekampen, 21 September 2002 (Norwegian newspaper, my translation).

50 This philosophy is closely connected to thinkers such as Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy and the Dalai Lama.

51 These perspectives seem related to Christopher Small's concept of music: music is not a thing, but rather an activity. Small outlines a theory of what he terms «musicking,» a verb that encompasses all musical activity from composing to performing to listening to a Walkman to singing in the shower. Small demonstrates how musicking forms a ritual through which all the participants explore and celebrate the relationships that constitute their social identity. (Small, 1999)

52 Bateson, 1972 p. 269.

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Sammendrag

Med bakgrunn i sin praksis som utøvende jazzmusiker gjennom mange år, ønsker Bjørn Alterhaug i denne artikkelen å løfte fram ulike perspektiver rundt improvisasjon. I denne introduksjonen til et relativt lite utforsket felt, argumenteres det for en økt tverrfaglig forskning rundt fenomenet improvisasjon og at det «dialogiske nærvær» i improvisasjon synes å representere interaksjonsformer og pedagogiske strategier som er viktige i vår globale virkelighet.

Summary

Set against a background of many years of experience as a jazz performer, the author seeks to raise different questions and perspectives on improvisation. In this introduction to a relatively unexplored field, he argues for increased interdisciplinary research into the phenomenon of improvisation, and that the "dialogic presence" in improvisation seems to represent forms of interaction and pedagogic strategies that are important concerning communicational aspects in a global reality.

Key Words

Complexity, Creativity, Improvisation, Interdisciplinary research, Pedagogy, Philosophy

Biography

Bjørn Alterhaug is a jazz bass player, arranger, composer and professor at the Department of Music, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, (NTNU) Trondheim. He has performed with international jazz artists, played on a large number of LPs and CDs and his compositions number about 200 for different instrumental combinations and styles.

Since 1999 he has been leading a research project entitled: "Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Improvisation" at NTNU.