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Improvisation and Music: Issues of Assessment

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Abstract

Much of the discussion in the literature on improvisation is addressed to those who are already trained and facile in its practice. At the Music department of the Visual and Performing Arts Academic group, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, *Improvisation* is offered as an elective to all students in the undergraduate programmes, including non-music students. An exploratory study has been carried out at the Music Department of VPA, NIE, NTU (Dairianathan, 2003) on the impact of improvisation for the mature beginner in music; defined here as one who possesses little or no prior formal or certified musical training. What does it mean to have participants in a twelve-week module who are mature beginners to such processes with little or no formal training? What can be delivered to the “adult beginner” to make improvisation an engaging, yet informed and interest sustainable experience? What sort of curriculum needs to be developed to serve such purposes? If these mature beginners area enabled, how are they assessed and what is the role of assessment in their learning experiences? By reviewing processes of assessment of these non-music majors during three runs of the module (July 2002, January 2003, January 2004), this study seeks to examine the nature, role and significance of assessment, first in the students’ creative activities and projects; secondly in evaluating the impact of improvisation; and thirdly, whether musical improvisation activities have any bearing on thinking, learning or activity not related to music. The eventual objective is to critically assess the correlation of assessment in this context to the learning outcomes in the module and offer some helpful suggestions towards assessing free improvisation in the classroom.

Improvisation within the Western canon of art music

Most studies explore the correlation of the skill of improvisation with requisite or certifiable musical skills. Traditional forms of assessment of improvisation in music examinations or international systems of benchmarking usually specify a melodic or melodic/harmonic fragment to test improvisational ability for continuing such a fragment as if one were composing in real time based on such a fragment.

This has historical precedence although in the following case, the outcome is not marks or grades, but employment. Auditions for the post of second organist at St. Marks, Venice, in 1541 consisted of the following:

Opening a choirbook and finding at random the beginning of a Kyrie or a motet, one copies this and gives it to the competing organist. The latter must, at the organ, improvise a piece in a regular fashion, without mixing up the parts, just as if four singers were performing.

Opening a book of plainchant equally at random, one copies a cantus firmus from an introit or another chant, and sends it to the said organist. He must improvise on it deriving the three other parts [from it]; he must put the cantus firmus now in the bass, now in the tenor, now in the alto and soprano, deriving imitative counterpoint from it, not simple accompaniments.

(Atlas, 1998, 495)

One wonders what was expected of the first organist!

Much keyboard accompaniment in Baroque practice required skillful additions and embellishments of skeletal bass lines and suggested harmonies via numbers (*basso continuo*). In later years, cadenzas in concertos in the Classic period became opportunities for skillful display (until Beethoven began to defend the spiritual integrity of his works by writing down the parts because of overindulgence in improvisation by some performers). Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies are remembered and performed differently by his former students when compared to published versions that document their existence. Stockhausen's Klavierstück suggests ways in which the performer creates the work anew, knowing that difference has already been set in the instructions. In the nineteenth and twentieth century though, improvisation has held a lesser place in the canon of Western art music, but has retained its importance and status within other musical genres. It is evident that improvisation has held a significant role even within Western art music.

Howard Becker (1982, 10-11) takes the view that in jazz, for instance, performance (*re-creation* through re-interpretation including improvisation) is accorded greater consideration than composition. The *Standards* (a name given to popular songs which have become "standard" in the repertoire) merely furnish a framework for the real creation. Musicians use the raw materials of the song as the basis for their re-creation or re-composition or re-interpretation of the original to the extent that listeners may not know exactly who composed *Sunny Side of West Street* or *Exactly like you*. Additionally, some of the most important improvisatory structures, like the blues, being part of an oral, (or maybe an *aural*) tradition have no named authors. Becker (1982, 11) suggests that in jazz, *the composer is the player*, and considers the *improvisation* as the *composition*.

Theoretical positions on improvisation

The New Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians defines Improvisation as *the creation of a musical work, or final form of a musical work; as it is being performed*. Bruno Nettl's definition of improvisation, in the New Harvard Dictionary of Music, is *the creation of music in the course of performance, (paraphrased in his 1998 publication)* which virtually translates the definition offered by Ernst Ferand's original in 1957. These examples of improvisation in practice are generally poised between polarities of end-product and process. If improvisation is viewed as a product, a musical work must be the result. Would the same be true if it were a process? Clearly, there are concomitant problems of author-work relationships if only the process is considered. Secondly if the process counted *towards* a work, or a kind of performance of an emergent work, how would one validate these processes as amounting to an emergent work? What would be the criteria used to distinguish one instance of a performance from another?

An even more daunting question would be to define music. Yet Canadian composer and music educator Murray Schafer wrote to composer John Cage to seek his definition of music and received this reply:

Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we are in or out of concert halls.....Today all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities **lying within the comprehensive dominion of music** (emphasis in original). Behold the new orchestra: the sonic universe! And the new musicians: anyone and anything that sounds. There is a shattering corollary to this for all music educators. For music educators are the custodians of the theory and practice of music.

(Cage, J. in Schafer, M. 1986 pp.94-5).

The ethnomusicologist John Blacking believed:

Although every known human society has what trained musicologists might recognise as music, there are some that have no word for music or whose concept of music has a significance quite different from that generally associated with the word music...observation of musical structures may reveal some of the structural principles on which human life is based.

(Blacking 1973 p115)

If music is, at root level, a human *activity*, context dependent and practice-specific, (Elliott 1995, 41-42) then improvisation is dependent on situating either observable processes or products of such human behaviour. For Blacking, *musical ability [is] a general characteristic of the human species rather than a rare talent*. (Blacking 1995, p236) Accordingly, a cross-cultural perspective on music involves a multiplicity of references and meanings; a piece or performance, therefore, is simultaneously capable of bearing many different meanings. (Cross, 2003, 23) Being appropriately informed via a cross-cultural understanding of musical improvisation in music education is crucial in coming to terms with the situated context of teaching and learning. John Blacking argues, *you cannot really learn to improvise, but that does not mean that improvisation is random...all aspects of his behaviour are subject to a series of interrelated, structured systems, and when he improvises, he is expressing these systems in relation to the reactions he picks up from his audience*. (Blacking, 1973, 100)

Our working definition of musical improvisation consists of an amalgamation of **Music** (Blacking, 1995, pp.224-225) and **Improvisation** (Ferand, 1957, vol.6, pp.1093—1135), as **an observable human intentional mode of thought and action in the course of performance**. This study views the ability to improvise as an important identifier of musical ability and, by extension, as an identifier of a broader ability to “improvise” in the sense of to think creatively, fluently and originally.

Context of Study

At the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Improvisation is found in the Music curriculum and its programmes in the following ways:

Improvisation is part of a musicianship programme intended for future music classroom teachers. The students selected for these modules usually are expected to possess certification of practical instrumental facility as prerequisites.

An elective module called *Improvisation*, which is open to all students in the undergraduate programmes at NIE and NTU (the main university). Prerequisites for this module do not require students to possess prior musical facility (although they are not turned away if they decide to register for it). It is this module that has generated interest, particularly in the processes and outcomes of this module together with student responses, on acquiring skills of improvisation, almost as it were, from scratch. This

module has drawn substantial numbers of students and student-teachers from other programmes. Very few have formal practical music qualifications or training, but not an absence of prior musical experience.

This module has been run on a framework using a variety of keywords and media. Each week for instance, students work towards performances, which are responses to: Sonic States; Situations; Text/s; Images; Patterns; Responses and Free Improvisation. Cross-cultural and historical perspectives on improvisation are introduced via listening excerpts. Much of the module was based on experiential learning—students work in groups (some work with those they know while others work with new group members); try out their strategies and are required to respond via performance based on whatever stimulus has been given to them to work. They have at their disposal free choice of musical instrument/s, voice, and are allowed to bring along their own musical instruments. Module assessment involves a journal which documents their experiences during the module; an essay chosen from a list of questions given; and a final performance, which occupied the bulk of the assessment weighing. Group performances were video recorded for two reasons; a resource for assessment; and documentary evidence of the journey taken in improvisational ability. A study was conducted on respondents to evaluate the impact of free improvisation in their learning in one *Improvisation* module. (Dairianathan, 2003) The respondents were serving teachers on the accelerated degree programme at NIE. Although none of them possessed certifiable musical skills, they were effectively engaged and enabled in free improvisation.

Questions associated with free improvisation

What does it mean to be enabled in musical improvisation? Who do we engage with in musical improvisation? How does one decide who can be allowed to engage in the processes of musical improvisation? What should the teaching and learning of musical improvisation consist of? What should the teaching and learning of musical improvisation prepare a participant for? Studies in the diverse musical practices in and around the world suggest that the skill of improvisation is more than a skill of instrumental facility. It is one which is also culturally specific and embodies human thought and action. Performances from three runs of the module have been recorded and assessed to gain feedback on studying assessment procedures and parameters to triangulate it against their learning experiences. In this way, this study attempts to evaluate the impact of assessment in improvisation, the way musical improvisation informs a mature beginner, and whether or not means of assessing them might have any bearing on their musical learning as well as ways of thinking and learning in other non-musical domains.

However, when musical improvisation encompasses and incorporates a whole variety of tactics and strategies in performing and music-making, instruments for making music and possibilities for emergent structures, how should it be assessed? How should we identify improvisational ability in a way to include a range of evident skills, from the musically facile to the creatively facile? How should we recognize good improvisational ability in systems of assessment and means of measuring, recording and reporting?

Our study involves a critical evaluation of assessment of improvisation at two levels. At the first level, we ask what form of assessment would be more appropriate to

improvisation. Given that the rubrics applied in other areas of the curriculum may be inappropriate in this context, what rubrics could be applied to ascertain marks and grades for ability in improvising?

At the second level, what are the objectives for improvisation? Should they be regarded as merely the technical facility of varying that which is given? Should they be regarded as ways in which the ability to improvise is measured? How do we assess the effectiveness of the ability to improvise? Given no set fragment or melodic line to improvise, what criteria can we establish and apply? In re-creative work like performing pieces of music, variations from set instructions as given in the musical score are interpreted as errors – either of commission and omission. Yet there are clearly musical compositions (such as Stockhausen's Klavierstück) where such 'differences' are invited as a result of instructions from the composer to take a proactive interest in re-creating a work.

If improvisational ability is to be assessed by set criteria and rubrics of assessment, there are at least two dimensions to consider. The first concerns homage to the material while the second comprises ways in which improvisation departs from such material. An effective resolution must then demand that these rubrics are to be applied at a quantitative as well as qualitative level. How does one assess accuracy of imitation as well as variability against accuracy? How does one distinguish between improvisational ability that acts between homage and departure and someone who manages to continue performing a piece till the end despite committing errors of commission or omission? Indeed, how might one *define* an error in this context, since improvisational ability arguably consists of varying the given in any or all musical dimensions? For all these problems, the ability to improvise has represented a balancing act between imitation and non-imitation whilst beginning from something which is a 'given'.

Problems associated with free improvisation in the classroom

Assessing improvisational ability in music poses epistemological challenges as well. Consider a situation in free improvisation where melodies, harmonies, rhythms, textures, timbres appear as gestural fragments in narrative strategies, images, patterns and texts - among a host of other possibilities. A situation, in fact where the norms and conventions associated with a particular "genre" or "style" (jazz, baroque etc.) do not exist. This is precisely the dilemma encountered with a group of participants in this module who include in their repertoire of musical instruments hand-clapping, scraping, woks, chopsticks. Given the absence of a firm fragment to imitate or vary from, what criteria can we bring to bear in the assessment of their work? If we take traditional measures of improvisation, what might constitute a melodic/harmonic/rhythmic/textural/timbral fragment in this context? If there are not widely agreed upon conventions, how should improvisation be assessed? It is clear that some boundaries will have to be set. If other forms of improvisation are evaluated against accepted sets of criteria – norms and conventions of style – how may we establish criteria, norms and conventions to assess this type of free improvisation in the classroom?

Even in re-creative work, when errors of commission and omission are made, performers more often than not find a way around the 'error', a strategy or a tactic commonly practiced in improvisational work. Should we then assess errors in performance by the ways in which fidelity is compromised or should we include in our

assessment the ability to recover from error, or in more dangerous parlance, forgive a lack of fidelity by assessing the ability to make amends? What should be the criteria for establishing the context or pretext for *text* for musical practice?

From the above, it is clear that the assessment of free improvisation presents us with considerable difficulties. Yet, if we are to assess meaningfully in any educational context, we must have a clear idea of the learning outcomes we wish to achieve. We must have a clear set of objectives and, it is suggested, it is in the setting of those objectives that the key to producing useful assessments of the students' work may be found. The nature of free improvisation and the consequence of enabling participants in a creative process engender uncomfortable questions. Can these learners be assessed? How can these learners be assessed? What are they assessed for? What are the parameters for assessment? What forms the rationale for assessment in their learning experiences?

The issues of assessment here are worth a reminder. These are students with little or no formal training, playing instruments either for the first time or using objects to make purposeful activity which we identify (for better or worse) as music. Should they be assessed based on their ability (or inability) to play an instrument, pattern, chord, melody? Are they to be assessed on their ability to perform on a musical instrument or for their ability to make use of the sound of an object much like a musical instrument? What about the forms and structures known in musical compositions? Should we assess their ability to realise known musical forms or their ability to let structures emerge from their sound exploration? Should we assess musical as well as extra-musical resources and processes?

These are not new concerns. Explorations by Campbell and Scott-Kassner (1995) and Paynter and Aston (1970) tend to focus on pre-school as well as adolescent groups respectively. The NIE group of mature beginners are tertiary level students, some of whom are student teachers bonded to teach, upon graduation, in the Singapore school system. How is assessment situated in these circumstances? Are the rubrics for assessment congruent with learning outcomes of the module? How are assessment modes implemented and deployed so that the rubrics reinforce and validate learning processes and outcomes?

It is clear that there has been little work done in this area. Hallam and Welsh (2004) write: "*By comparison with the literature on performance, we know much less about improvisation although research is in progress.*" However, we suggest that the following may be taken into account in pointing the way towards devising effective assessment and evaluation procedures for free improvisation in an educational context.

On the nature of the type of assessment and its functions

Asmus (1999) makes three substantive points about assessment in music which are germane to our argument. First, assessment is more than mere grading. From a teaching perspective, assessment involves not only objectively measuring acquired knowledge and skill over time in order to assign a fair grade, but also identifying appropriate future learning experiences that the teacher may offer to enhance student learning. Good assessment should provide information to both student and teacher and help the teacher evaluate instructional strategies of the past and select appropriate strategies for the future. Is it helpful to know or say that you are the tenth best in your class at musical improvisation or that you achieved 62% on an improvisation test? Does the knowledge

that nine people in your class are better than you and 30 are worse than you help you identify your own personal strengths and weaknesses or help you to improve or do better next time? Objectively assessing acquired knowledge is certainly a part of assessment, but assessment should also help to sum up a student's ability and give feedback to both pupil and teacher as to how they may improve.

Second, assessment should not be an add-on to instruction. Rather, it should be an integral part of the instructional process, and it can inform both the teacher and the learner. The teacher gleans information for selecting appropriate materials, experiences, and methods. The teacher gleans information about what has been learned and what strategies foster learning, as well as the motivation to further improve in the art of music. The implication here is that assessment should be seen as part of the process of learning and creating and will take place throughout the period of instruction to inform both student and teacher. Effective assessment of what is essentially a creative process will, itself, be a part of that process.

Third, well-specified learning targets inform the teacher and the student about what is to be learned and point toward specific means for assessing the learning. The key to effective assessment is setting clear objectives at the outset and making those objectives overt to the students through clear instruction and/or rubrics.

There has been much writing over the last decade or so about "authentic assessment". In essence, "authentic assessment" simply means assessment which is true to the nature of the subject under instruction. Clearly, if you want to know how many beans make ten, a paper and pencil test would be satisfactory. In the assessment of musical improvisation, however, we are more concerned with other issues for which such assessments are clearly inadequate. We now turn our attention to identifying some of the criteria which we may bring to bear in the assessment of musical improvisation of this type, and some strategies of "authentic assessment" which we may use to assess our students and evaluate our courses.

In an attempt to describe the evaluation of the creative process in music, Green (2000) identifies three evaluative axes which may be of help in answering the above questions. The first axis is concerned with the organisation of the sounds of the music themselves – the parameters of tonality, modality, harmony, metre, rhythm, texture, form etc, together with the social context in which the music is created. The second axis of evaluation concerns the extent to which music may be assessed according to criteria which are appropriate solely to the music under evaluation (limited criteria) and criteria which may be applied to all and any kind of music (universal criteria). The third axis, with which we shall not be concerned here, concerns criteria which may be applied to the evaluation of styles – the extent to which we may be able to say, for example, that classical music is "better" than folk music.

Christopher Azarra (2002) cites Nardone's (1997) phenomenological and psychological analysis in an attempt to understand the meaning of improvisation as a distinct form of artistic activity in the life-world of musicians. Nardone reported the findings of his analysis as 'lived meanings' that constitute the experience of improvisation and the musical context in which it takes place, which appear as follows:

1. Ensuring spontaneity while yielding to it
2. Being present and not present to musical processes
3. Exploring familiar and unfamiliar musical terrain
4. Drawing from a corporeal and incorporeal source of musical inspirations
5. Having trust and confidence in oneself and musical others in musical risk taking
6. Extending toward the listening other in musical risk taking
7. Perceived temporality as altered
8. Attending moment to moment to temporality

(Nardone 1997, in Azarra, 2002, pp.171-187, p. 172)

In a study of organizational practices in the corporate world, Karl Weick (2001) relied on Paul Berliner's (1994) *Thinking in Jazz*. He analyzed concepts in jazz improvisation practices, and offered what he regarded as some possible characteristics of groups with a high propensity for improvisation. Thirteen were identified:

1. willingness to forego planning and rehearsing in favour of acting in real time
2. well-developed understanding of internal resources and the materials that are at hand
3. proficient without blueprint and diagnosis
4. able to identify or agree on minimal structures for embellishing
5. open to reassembly of and departures from routine
6. rich and meaningful set of themes, fragments, or phrases on which to draw for ongoing lines of action
7. predisposed to recognise partial relevance of previous experience to present novelty
8. high confidence in skill to deal with non-routine events
9. presence of associates similarly committed to and competent at impromptu making do
10. skillful at paying attention to performance of others and building on it in order to keep the interaction going and to set up interesting possibilities for one another
11. able to maintain the pace and tempo at which others are extemporising
12. focused on coordination here and now and not distracted by memories or anticipation; and,
13. Preference for and comfort with process rather than structure, which makes it easier to work with ongoing development, restructuring and realisation of outcomes, and easier to postpone the question, what will it have amounted to?

Respondents in the study at NIE identified six areas that emerged from participation in the module:

1. creative and musicianship skills
2. cross discipline and subject learning
3. organisational and management skills
4. social and interpersonal relationships
5. cognitive skills
6. cultural perspectives

(Dairianathan 2003, 58)

The study reveals that improvisation is arguably a mindset and a mode of operation with meaning not only in the way it allows for the discovery of potential innate ability, but also with ramifications for these persons; first their musical development; and second the impact of thinking, creating, responding, performing in non-musical domains. Although “music” was the general consensus of the end-result of considerable exploration, learning through improvisation yielded processes beyond those which are usually learned through music.

Conclusions

It is clear that under Green’s “First Axis” – that of the organization of the sounds themselves, we would have to apply “limited criteria”. We assess improvisation in familiar musical forms (jazz, rock, classical etc) against known and accepted “limited criteria” for the each type or style of performance. Where no such clear criteria are available, as in the case of the free improvisation under discussion, for the purposes of assessment, the criteria would have to be “user-defined”. The limited criteria would have to be relevant to the particular sounds and improvisational strategies chosen by the group and it is suggested that these “limited criteria” would have to be made explicit in the rubrics of assessment formulated by the group, together with the teacher, *before and during* the process. In this sense, the assessment is itself a process of a process. In Weick’s analysis, limited criteria would apply to: (2) a well developed understanding of resources and materials, (4) the ability to identify structures and (6) meaningful sets of themes. For all these parameters, clear, limited criteria would have to be agreed.

Nardone’s phenomenological analysis, Dairianathan’s “six areas of impact”, and the remaining categories in Weick’s analysis all meet Green’s “universal criteria” – that is to say, criteria which may be applied to any kind of music. It should be noted that these are not specifically “musical” criteria but are more concerned with fluency and flexibility of thought, and awareness of social environment.

One criticism of any analysis of assessment of improvisation as a process would be that the process would have to be, to an extent, rehearsed. It is difficult to draw clear lines between performance, improvisation and composition. If we are to take Weick’s thirteen characteristics as the criteria for improvisation, then almost any form of rehearsal or preparation potentially invalidates the piece as an “improvisation”. However, it needs to be reiterated and understood that even a “spontaneous” improvisation relies on conventions which have been rehearsed and internalized. Drawing the line between the conventions (which may be practiced) and the improvisation (generally regarded as spontaneous) is something, in an educational context, that will have to be made clear by the teacher.

Our observations may be summarised as follows:

- Valid, reliable and useful assessments may be made of students’ work in free musical improvisation. However, in the context of free improvisation, pencil and paper tests, written exams, oral exams and other traditional forms of *post hoc* assessments will have limited value.
- We must turn to forms of recording which track the creative process rather than testing the final product. These are likely to take the form of journals, portfolios and log-books, but, in the case of a subject which deals essentially with the

organization of sound, audio and/or video recordings may also play a valuable part.

- If we are to assess meaningfully in any educational context, we must have a clear idea of the desired learning outcomes and triangulate them against the way we teach. We must also have a clear set of objectives and, it is suggested, it is in the setting of those objectives that the key to producing useful assessments of the students' work may be found.

In sum:

- We must avoid the notion that assessment is simply grading or an act of measurement. In the case of the "limited criteria", the conventions against which we assess must be clearly articulated via clear objective setting. These conventions are not mere rubrics to determine the weighting in assessment but should be more broadly based to allow for student-centred participation in choice of materials and modes of assessment. Both objectives and assessment criteria must be communicated clearly to the students through conventions and rubrics.
- The most effective mode of assessment we must practice is one which is "authentic"; that is to say, true to the nature of the subject under scrutiny. The assessment itself will be a process and an integral part of the creative process.
- Such assessment will constantly feed back into giving the student more information about their own work, as well as offering the facilitator more information about the effectiveness of learning outcomes in the course; and into the setting of the objectives for the next lesson or course. This has the dual effect of the course as a learning environment for the student and facilitator as learners as well as creating an environment for the facilitator to deepen and/or re-assess his/her own knowledge of the subject. The modes of assessment in improvisational ability reflect commensurate ability and competence on the part of the assessor/s.

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