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Author(s)	Dairianathan, Eugene and Stead, Peter
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Improvisation as real-time thinking and rehearsing: an exploratory study in Singapore
Dairianathan, Eugene and Stead, Peter
Nanyang Technological University, National Institute of Education, Singapore

Abstract

The skill of improvisation is seen to be important in the development of any musician, although its relative importance varies according to period and genre. Christopher Azarra (2002, 171) asserts that as *an essential component of music throughout history...improvisation involves an ability to make music spontaneously within specified musical parameters*. Improvisation is then dependent on the condition that performers are able, first of all, to be '*proficient in the language they speak*'. Musical improvisation, therefore, seems comfortably positioned in the training of those who are well-versed "in this language". As language differs from culture to culture, so do expectations of musical improvisation. John Blacking (1973, 100) argues what is ultimately of most importance in music cannot be learned like other cultural skills: it is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed, like the basic principles of language formation.

Much of the discussion in the literature on improvisation is addressed to those who are already facile in instrumental (including vocal) skills as well as those who will be trained to be. What we have chosen to explore is the impact of improvisation on the non-music specialist; defined here as one who possesses little or no prior formal or certified musical training. Such an exploratory study has implications first for the teaching and learning of improvisation for non-music specialist, and secondly how such a skill acquired through learning to improvise is seen within a larger context.

Improvisation and Music; a working definition

In this study, 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.

It is clear that the ability to improvise is far more than high-level quality of performance and ‘fidelity’ of performance. R. Anderson Sutton draws on two areas of musical performance in which such strategies amounting to improvisation take place in Javanese gamelan practices. Since musicians often perform for many hours at a stretch, Sutton points out that **one** of the measures of a good musician is the ability to execute a quick recovery, via improvisation, to get back on track after loss of concentration, slips and errors of various kinds. Another instance of improvisation happens with a musician who is insufficiently familiar with the piece being played, makes false starts towards certain erroneous goal tones, all the while striving to reveal as little of his confusion as possible; identified as **ngawur**. **Ngawur** may not be particularly complimentary for a performer in such a situation, but it is acknowledged in practice.

Improvisation as an epistemological problem

Improvisational ability needs to consider at least two dimensions. The first concerns the extent to which we should pay *homage* to the material, in the sense of respecting norms and retaining aspects of what is “given” to improvise upon; the second comprises ways in which improvisation departs from such material. The ability to improvise has represented a balancing act between imitation and non-imitation whilst beginning from something which is a *given*. 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. Consider performers whose musical instruments include hand-clapping, scraping, woks, chopsticks and even basketballs.

Theoretical positions on improvisation

Michel Foucault (1988, 36-37) recalls how in the philosophical tradition dominated by Stoicism, principle features of askesis included exercises characterized by two terms **meletē** and **gymnasia**. Meletē (meditation) referred to work undertaken in thought in order to prepare a discourse or an **improvisation** to anticipate the real situation by memorizing responses and reactivating those memories by placing oneself in a situation where one can imagine how one would react. **Gymnasia** involved training in a real situation despite having been artificially induced.

Foucault's distinction between **meletē** and **gymnasia**, which serve a different purpose in his late essay **Technologies of the Self**, is instructive in this context. Much of its spirit, of mental and performance preparation, contradicts meanings attached to improvisation as *creation without much preparation*. Berliner (1994, 241) prefers *reworking precomposed 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*. Gilbert Ryle (1979, 123) expresses an interest in improvisation in the general notion or notions of thinking. As he points out *that impromptu but well-timed joke, that swift, pertinent and unrehearsed reply to a question, that on-the-spur-of-the-moment twist of the steering wheel...to the request for a chronicle of its*

component steps we have nothing to say, except, "Oh, it just came to me". Ryle (1979, 129) discusses improvisation as one means to convert knowledge and doubt into adaptive action. He argued that virtually all behaviour has an ad hoc adroitness akin to improvisation, because it mixes together a partly fresh contingency with general lessons previously learned. Ryle describes this mixture as "paying heed". If Blacking (1973, 101) informs us that musical ability is a biological predisposition, we argue that an ability to improvise – to mix partly fresh contingency with lessons previously learned – is therefore not reliant on site or technique-specific skills but open to a much larger community who can be enable through music-making.

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:

1. 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 a prerequisite.
2. 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 those who do 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.

Evaluation of Study

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. This study then attempts to evaluate the way/s musical improvisation by a mature beginner correlates with what Ryle (1979) describes as a *behaviour with an ad hoc adroitness*

akin to improvisation, because it mixes together a partly fresh contingency with general lessons previously learned.

The issues 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. These are not new concerns. Campbell and Scott-Kassner (1985) 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 in the Singapore school system upon graduation.

One way to evaluate what the students themselves were able to get out of these experiences. When asked to describe the impact of learning *of* and *about* improvisation during the module, respondents were able to provide considerable information. For the purposes of this paper, only some aspects are given attention:

- ◆ *This module has squashed my notion of “Improvisation requires no practice as it is totally impromptu”. I guess this is my biggest misconception about improvisation.... Although improvisation is (to me) an “experimental action the outcome in which is not foreseen”, we still need to rehearse aspects of these experiments so that the outcomes, although not foreseen, still remain within our scope of expectations.... At the same time improvisation is also important to my music-making explorations because it taught me that although “practice makes perfect” sometimes it is better to be imperfect and just have fun creating music!*

This view resonates strongly with an account by Berliner (1994, 492) on improvisation...*popular definitions of improvisation that emphasise only its spontaneous, intuitive nature—characterising it as the making something out of nothing—are astonishingly incomplete.* The respondent's understanding of it as an experimental action of which the outcome is not foreseen, impinges on the issue of imperfection, which implies two possibilities. The first deals with deviation from pre-rehearsed decisions; commonly referred to as errors, either of commission or omission. At another level, imperfection could refer to a tension. Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990, 143) refers to this tension as splitting *ourselves into controller and controlled*. However, little mention is made of such imperfection posing a threat. Richard Orton argues that despite the demands of total involvement made of the improviser/s, its *ephemerality of performance may suggest it does not matter too much, it may encourage greater adventurousness and risk-taking in exploratory venture....the immediate failure in improvisation can be turned around; an accident, an error, can be made musically meaningful; a 'wrong note' can become a new impetus for expression.* At one level, it could suggest a process of recovery or one which the unexpected does take place to avert the instance of a breakdown during performance. Alternatively, the fun part is in realising, that there is a surrender, varying from musical and human levels, to a process which makes creating music fun rather than making it sound controlled and could well refer to an intuitive or informed awareness of how much more important it is to the respondent to succumb to the fun and creating music part.

- ◆ *Improvisation has shown me the importance on being creative 'on cue'...our creative juices will only flow when we are given the cue to do so...from our own team members who are*

performing with us, or from audience response. Importance of teamwork. The performances that we put up for this module are never single-handedly choreographed.(emphasis in original)

The conviction that improvisation is arrived at by being put ‘*on cue*’ implies a process not just of problem solving but problem finding; a common trait in composing processes. There is also an indication of how improvisation involves “others” and the awareness of the importance of improvisation in social bonding, social cohesion and negotiation, being task oriented and an understanding of how that is effected in teamwork.

The respondent here seems to echo remarks by John Blacking (1973, 100):

What is ultimately of most importance in music cannot be learned like other cultural skills: it is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed, like the basic principles of language formation. 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.

The perception of being creative *on cue*, suggests another dimension; of being put ‘on the spot’ to deliver. Stephen Blum offers a pertinent example of the motivation for improvisation from a historical perspective. The translations and commentaries of Near Eastern and European writers on Aristotle’s (Blum 1998, 35) view as *the initial, improvised activities as directed toward the perfected form of tragedy invites commentators to elaborate on what missing from the improvised activities, or what is ‘natural’ according to their own conceptions. Ibn Rushd (12th*

century AD), *echoing the earlier commentary of Ibn Sina, finds evidence of natural inclinations in what his own contemporaries do in response to one type of challenge: “He said: a sign that these kinds are the first to occur to souls, is that in disputes people **improvise** these kinds of hemistichs for their arguments **when hard pressed**”* (emphasis mine).

- ◆ *The greatest improvisers do not make everything up “out of thin air” everytime they play. They are constantly recycling materials they have used many times before.... they have their own personal vocabulary.... so familiar...that they are able to let themselves respond freely...letting all those “prefab” ideas flow out spontaneously.*

This perception by the respondent is explained in more detail by Neil Sorrell that in order to be able to improvise one needs *a through training in the models* (emphasis mine) *and the ability to add something of one’s own. This may prove to be only a very small part, but the balance is crucial...The factors that guide the expert...are intuition and imagination, which help produce that indefinable prerequisite: inspiration.*

Paynter and Aston advise that the listening of musical excerpts by the professionals, of the activities set for the students, should take place after the experiment. Doing it before potentially threatens to turn the experimental activity into a model of the example. All the listening excerpts took place after the activity and experimentation. The listening excerpts on free improvisation made the class comment that what they shared with the “professionals” (in the CD listening excerpts) was the fundamental processes of thinking leading to the performance. The respondent thought that the only difference between him/her self and the “professionals” would have been

more character and form. The comparison however, did not dampen self-assessment. John Blacking made a similar comment in relating the *tshikona* in the Venda adult community to fledgling attempts by the Venda children, which as he suggested appeared *contrasting on the surface but identical in substance*.

- ◆ *The module made me realised that improvisers, including myself, are not much different from the professional musicians. We are similar, in our ability to think the way we make music and the way we absorb sounds and claim ownership and them refer to it as music.... In my case, done by way of improvisation.*

Paynter and Aston make a similar point: *we allow our pupils the kind of freedom in music that we allow them in other creative work, not surprisingly we find obvious parallels between the music they make and the music of professional composers, especially 20th century composers...all art, at any level, is the product of its own times*. Paynter and Aston note in the later half of the 20th century, *composers have been finding the traditional notation inadequate: they are evolving new systems, many of which use graphic symbols. Notation is not music. The sound comes first. It might be better to let them invent their own notation or to adapt the conventions in some way*.

- ◆ *Improvisation involves real time activity. In reality, we have been composing. The difference is that in composition, it is deliberated and taken out the context of real time activities. In improvisation, we experience success and failure firsthand. There is no time to be embarrassed. The series of successes may just be considered as failures and vice versa.*

The respondents perception match what all writers have said about Improvisation. Richard Orton offers a viewpoint from the opposite direction: *The evident immediacy of the creation-feedback cycle in the improvised performance* (what Orton refers to as Action, Evaluation, Preparation and Decision or **A-E-D** for short), *is however, surely embodied to a considerable extent in the compositional process too....composition, then may be viewed in terms of an extended series of improvisations in which certain short-circuiting takes place.*

Jeff Pressing (1998, 51-52) provides a detailed account of human information processing and action demanded of the improviser, who *must effect real-time sensory and perceptual coding, optimal attention allocation, even interpretation, decision-making, prediction (of actions of others), memory, storage and recall, error correction and movement control, and further must integrate these processes into an optimally seamless set of musical statements that reflect both a personal perspective on musical organisation and a capacity to affect listeners. Both speed and capacity constraints apply.* Given such demands and expectations, it should not be surprising that failure should predominate, particularly since the respondent with the others would be considered novices in this respect. However, the writings reveal greater occurrences of a sense of success rather than failure. It must be qualified that the success in the effort was largely due to their own perceptions as participants (there were no invited guests or concerts of their performances) rather than what their audience would have thought or received the work.

Christopher Azarra (2002) cites Nardone's 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.

Dairianathan (2003) makes the observation that reflections by non-music respondents in his study of their learning experience in free improvisation compare favourably with ‘lived meanings’ for trained professional musicians from a musical and socio-cultural perspective. It needs to be articulated that respondents in this study do not possess certifiable musical skills nor formal training in music.

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 in their future endeavour either in music or beyond it. 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.

Final Words

The selected excerpts by the respondents inform us that improvisation is characterised by:

1. Real time composing
2. Real-time music-making activity
3. Reflexive behaviour- being creative 'on cue' and speed of activity
4. Reflective behaviour- involving rehearsal

Speed of activity notwithstanding, reflexive behaviour in improvisation should not be misunderstood as 'creation with little preparation'. In the NIE study, the respondents are non-music students. Their reflections bear out their experiences in musical improvisation as musical **outsiders**. Yet their heightened sensitivity made them acutely aware of details of perceptual and receptive experiences. These mature beginners knew from listening to professional improvising musicians that they were not comparing aspects of technique or virtuosity or levels of instrumental sophistication. They were, however, able to aurally track and trace, in the CD recordings, gestural and motivic patterns the professionals were engaging in and interacting with one another. It was in realising that they were capable of understanding, applying and attending to similar substantial thinking processes that gave them the confidence to articulate their heightened awareness, vindicate their self-esteem, not to mention have fun and enjoy themselves.

Although the efforts and experiences of the respondents in the NIE study are in stark contrast to what professional musicians are trained to do and capable of doing, the **basic substantial** processes remain the same. Gilbert Ryle (1979, 121) makes the point here when he suggests *improvising is not something that is peculiar to a few distinguished persons but something that is*

shared in very different degrees in very different forms, and with very variable frequencies by all non-infantile, non-retarded, non-comatose human beings...which, just qua thinking beings, we all essay everyday of the week, indeed in every hour of the waking day.

For Ryle (1979, 129) *to be thinking what he is here and now up against, he must both be trying to adjust himself to just this present once-only situation and in doing this to be applying lessons already learned. There must be in his response a union of some Ad-Hockery with some know-how. If he is not at once improvising and improvising warily, he is not engaging his somewhat trained wits in some momentarily live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinkable habit. So thinking, is at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle or hazard. It is a bit like putting some new wine into old bottles.*

What does the thinking serve? Schön, 1990 informs us that *Improvisation is making something out of previous experience, practice and knowledge during those moments when one surfaces and tests intuitive understandings of experience phenomena – while the ongoing action can make a difference.* Michel Foucault's (1988, 36-37) recollection of the concept of *askesis* is understood as the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, and has as its final aim not preparation for another reality but *access* to the reality of this world. It is a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. Principle features of *askesis* include exercises in which the subject puts himself in a situation in which he can verify whether he can confront events and use the discourses with which he is armed. It is a question of testing the preparation.

Respondents' reflections reveal ways of *thinking in* and *knowing of* music. This has ramifications for the way in which a larger more inclusive meaning of improvisation is identified. John Blacking (1973:7) discusses the view that *music-making is an inherited biological predisposition, which is unique to the human species*. We would like to suggest that improvisation is an inherited biological predisposition, common to all living organisms capable of converting knowledge and doubt into adaptive action, to mix together a partly fresh contingency with general lessons previously learned. Perhaps the respondent's words are apposite in this context and worth the repeat:

Improvisation...taught me that although "practice makes perfect" sometimes it is better to be imperfect and just have fun creating music!

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