Improvisation and the paradox of rehearsal: An exploratory study in Singapore - Eugene Dairianathan, Nanyang Technological University National Institute of Education, Singapore

Abstract

Tullia Magrini explains that the term improvisation connotes unpredictability and suggests two reasons: the aleatory and unsystematic character of the event, and, a lack of knowledge and information for those who experience it (1998, 169). Essentially, Improvisation appears historically in western art musical theory and practice as system and rules and with it the notion of instrumental, musical and improvisational skill situated in a context-dependent and practice specific system. However, 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. This suggests that the unpredictability of both event and human activity precipitate improvisatory tactics and strategies, irrespective of system and specific practice, which underscore an anthropological dimension of improvisation. Studies in improvisatory practice suggest a symbiotic relationship between the musical- instrumental-systematic and anthropological dimensions. Understanding improvisational ability from this dual perspective has significant ramifications for a multi-dimensional perspective and secondly, membership which is possible with those with certified or certifiable musical skills. Blacking’s assertion raises the question – are those without certifiable skills in improvisation capable of responding as the certified? What lessons could we learn in enabling these ‘excluded musicians’ in improvisation?
Introduction

Paradoxically, discussions on improvisation assume training into the skill of improvising particularly in the areas of instrumental proficiency and a system or convention for one to display such skills. Tullia Magrini explains that the term improvisation connotes unpredictability and suggests two reasons: the aleatory and unsystematic character of the event, and, a lack of knowledge and information for those who experience it (1998, 169). Magrini cites one of the earliest treatises, an anonymous 13th century art of “componere et proferre discantum ex improviso” (Ferand, 1938, 133; 1957, 1102), where rules provide for composing a discantum extemporarily. Magrini adds further that the Renaissance distinction between the practices of singing a counterpoint super librum (precomposed) or alla mente (improvised) emphasizes the role of notation, not a difference of system of musical creation (1998, 169).

The outcome of Magrini’s postulation implies that in the event something is improvised, it is contingent on the unpredictability of event, situation or predicament. An improvisational act acknowledges homage to as well as departure from an original intention. Whatever an original intention may have been is no longer important or relevant since departure from it has become the result of destabilizing the moment or event and improvisation must now be seen as the re-stabilising tactic to overcome the ‘aleatory and unsystematic character of the event’. The impact of Magrini’s suggestion leaves the unpredictability issue aside to concentrate more on the ‘cure’ for improvisation’s potentially destabilizing nature – that of a system of training and regulation.

It is possible to propose that Improvisation appears historically in western art musical theory and practice as system and rules. We should not be surprised to be inundated with curricula for
improvisatory techniques at developmental and tertiary level tend to concentrate on tonal repertoire of the Euro-American tradition between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, even in musics of popular culture and jazz. Although definitions of improvisation have become much broader and more sensitised to context, Bruno Nettl (1998, 12) believes that reference remains largely within western art music traditions. An understanding, therefore, of an ability to improvise is weighted more by considerations of enabling musical and instrumental skills first and interpreting them within systematic approaches. Following Christopher Azarra’s (2002, 171) assertion 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’.

Language and culture notwithstanding, the skill of improvisation is an important component of the development of a musician although its relative importance varies according to period and genre. As language differs from culture to culture, so do expectations of musical improvisation. The skills of musical improvisation cannot be fully accounted for if the only measure of this ability is to be comfortably positioned in the training of those who are well-versed “in this language”.

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. Blacking (1973, 101-102) notes the shared experience between accomplished and beginning participants (children) in the Venda tradition of
**tshikona.** The children’s songs, as less sophisticated versions of the community’s experience and expression of it, are, nevertheless, observed to be identical in substance. There is little to suggest systematic or comprehensive or drill-style training for the Venda children other than watching and attending to **tshikona** as practised by the adult community, yet they are enabled in ways that are immediate, engaging and which are communicated to them non-verbally. The responses of the children in Venda society represent a personal and unique expression no less substantial than those of older more experienced members of the community.

Magrini’s dual explanation for the unpredictability of improvisation therefore depreciates its value both in training and practice as well as currency. To consign improvisation to ‘recovery’ in an event is to suggest improvisers are more likely to respond to circumstances beyond their control rather than chart the course of their responses. At best it suggests good reflexive skills to respond to the aleatory moment while at worst such skills question credit-worthiness, let alone credibility, of such currency.

In the second instance, 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. Such an understanding of improvisational ability in music is a rarely challenged assumption – that an understanding of music does not pose epistemological challenges.
Murray Schafer argues that the teaching and learning of music is dependent first on what is regarded as music. Writing to composer John Cage to seek his definition of music, he got this reply: *Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we are in or out of concert halls* (1986, 94).

For Schafer, *all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music*. 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.* (1986: 95, bold emphasis in original).

If for Blacking (1995, 236), *musical ability [is] a general characteristic of the human species rather than a rare talent; it is a cultural skill which embodies human thought and action* and for Schafer, *all sounds belong to a continuous field of possibilities lying within the comprehensive dominion of music* (1986, 95), then a consideration of improvisation is dependent on situating either observable processes or products of such human behaviour (Blacking 1995, 224-225). Moreover, if an ability to improvise impinges on identifying with musical ability, Blacking suggests that…*what is ultimately of most importance in music…is there in the body, waiting to be brought out and developed…all aspects of his/her behaviour are subject to a series of interrelated, structured systems, and when s/he improvises, s/he is expressing these systems in relation to the reactions s/he picks up from his/her audience* (1973, 100).

Secondly, the ability to improvise 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, and also consider ways in which we *depart* from the same material. The ability to
improvise needs to be seen to represent a balancing act between imitation and non-imitation whilst beginning from something which is a given.

Even if we assume training and system and regulation in the development of improvisational ability, we cannot assume such an ability to fulfil expectations of instrumental virtuosity and fidelity to conventions in performance alone. R. Anderson Sutton (1998: 86) 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. For a performer in this predicament, ngawur may not be particularly complimentary, but its appearance in practice is acknowledged.

Sutton’s observations are instructive for us. Improvisational ability not only requires training in system and regulation as well as the conventions of performance and practice but also the ability to think in the moment, in a concentration lapse to be in consort with his/her fellow musicians. It is also clear from Sutton’s accounts first, that both skills cannot be mutually exclusive, and that both skills are only two among the other skill sets in the performing present.
In summary, Improvisation involves at least two dimensions. The first is the notion of instrumental, musical and improvisational skill situated in a context-dependent and practice specific system. The second is the way in which the unpredictability of both event and human activity precipitate improvisatory tactics and strategies, irrespective of system and specific practice, which underscore an anthropological dimension of improvisation. Both dimensions correlate favourably with what I refer to as reflexive and reflective behaviour.

The relationships between the musical-instrumental-systematic and anthropological dimension as well as reflexive and reflective behaviours are essentially symbiotic; both dimensions merit serious consideration and training. The ability to improvise cannot deny the primacy of the immediate moment and by extension reflexive behaviour. On the other hand, not all reflexive behaviour comprises, as might in Sutton’s observations, recovery from lapses of concentration. Professional musicians wax lyrical about improvising a musical piece together – the same piece they felt frustrated improvising only the previous night with the very same musicians!

Reflexive behaviour in these circumstances, however, is at not quite consonant with the prior preparation, through systematic training and regulation, which would have engendered reflective behaviour and practice. Can this reflective behaviour predict the specific details of improvising in its immediacy of the moment – the homage to and departure from the given? Can this same reflective behaviour account for or predict the lapses in concentration which would result in recovery? How much of reflexive behaviour bears positive correlation to reflective habits engaged in rehearsal?
Understanding music in Schafer’s and Blacking’s terms has significant ramifications for understanding improvisational ability multi-dimensionally and secondly, membership which is possible with those with certified or certifiable musical skills. Studies of improvisation which privilege system and training to regulate improvisation within the domains of musical technique are essentially flawed.

Jeff Pressing 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.** (1998, 51-52)

An understanding of improvisation has to address the dynamics of these multiplicity of demands and constraints in real time. Focussing on the immediacy of the moment does little to shed light on the processes required to arrive at an assuredness of presence, of human and musical behaviour.

In an earlier exploration (Dairianathan, 2003), I explored the enabling, through improvisation of the non-music specialist; defined here as one who possesses little or no prior formal or certified musical training. In this paper, I focus attention on respondents’ understanding of rehearsal in the practice of improvisation.
**Context of Study**

At the National Institute of Education (NIE), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Improvisation is available as a free elective to all students in the undergraduate programmes at NIE (teacher-education) and NTU (the main university). Many of them possess little or no formal practical music qualifications or training, but not an absence of prior informal musical experience. Selection of students in this module is not based on prior musical training and expertise. For twelve weeks in the module, they are introduced to stimuli, usually keywords like Rainforest, Images, Text, Patterns (to name a few), which they are required to respond to in a performance. In the weekly sessions, they are given about twenty minutes to prepare themselves for performance. Modes of assessment come largely in three forms – a final performance, journals detailing their weekly work and final performance and a written assignment which offers them opportunity to reflect on issues of improvisation.

Non-music specialist teachers formed a significant presence of two types; student teachers at NIE and qualified teachers on professional development to pursue the degree programme at NIE. It is this group of non-music specialist teachers, as module participants, that I would like to focus on since they will be working as classroom teachers in the school system once they graduate.

The sources of information collected are taken from the following with their permission:

1. Journal reflections which cover every week of activity.
2. Excerpts from the option of their essay assignment, which deals directly with their experiences of the module—**What do you understand by Improvisation? How important has improvisation been to our music-making explorations in this module?**
Respondents’ Views and Commentary

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 they identify as music and claim ownership. 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 comprise two groups. One group comprises student teachers bonded to teach in the Singapore school system upon graduation. The second comprises serving teachers who have taken leave of absence for professional development; in this case to pursue their undergraduate studies at NIE. In order to evaluate what the students themselves were able to get out of these experiences, they were asked to describe the impact of learning of and about improvisation during the module. For the purposes of this paper have obtained permission from these students to use reflections from their journal and essays, of which, selected excerpts 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…

*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 improvisation 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. 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.
♦ The greatest improvisers do not make everything up “out of thin air” every time 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. 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 (1992: 784).

In setting activities for the students, Paynter and Aston (1970: 12) advise that the listening of musical excerpts by the professionals 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. 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(1973: 101-102).
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 then refer to it as music…. In my case, done by way of improvisation.

Paynter and Aston (1970: 11-12) 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 (1970: 14).

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 (1992: 767).
As mentioned earlier, Jeff Pressing (1998, 51-52) provides a detailed account of human information processing and action demanded of the improviser. 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.

• Throughout our course, we improved in our performance or expression of a particular idea because we had grown to understand the importance of improvisation as we discussed our performances within our small groups. Secondly, improvisation became important to me through this module because I came to realize that to put up a good performance required me to successfully incorporate all the minor roles we were playing as well as the instruments chosen into one beautiful whole. Much consideration had to be placed into harmonizing the sounds and making sure they ended up sounding what we would like them to...or think of alternative sounds, sound making methods, or instruments. I learnt that an improvised piece cannot be perfectly repeated...even when we practiced before the performance there would still be differing instances between those rehearsals and the final display.

Despite Pressing’s (1998, 51-52) detailing of the challenges of improvising, the respondent perceives an improvement in performance or expression of a particular idea; attributed to discussions within the small groups. These discussions form part of the weekly improvisation...
activities. After each group performance, comments are invited from the rest of the class: for their views of that group’s performance, the thought processes, details of performance, details of structures as may be observed during performance (the group performing is asked to remain silent). The performing group is then asked for an account of their performance and the processes involved leading to the performance as the actual performance. In this way, the levels of exchange and disclosure become an integral part of their activity. The most telling sentence by the respondent was how much consideration was involved from planning to execution of improvisation.

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- Another definition of improvisation…is “a creation spoken or written or composed without any prior preparation”. In our performances during our module, we can be considered assembling elements of sounds or music spontaneously and without much prior preparation…to ‘create’ a performance according to the theme. In improvisation, there is…the freedom to have impromptu responses…in real time…for instance, in our performance on the theme images, I forgot the rhythm I was supposed to play on the conga…I made a spontaneous response in less than a fraction of a second. I believe these spontaneous responses or reflex actions are based on our wealth of experiences and culture…it is difficult to define deviation in the performance.
The respondent here distinguishes between a dictionary definition and a definition in practice: composed without any prior preparation as opposed to without much prior preparation to ‘create’ a performance” respectively (emphases mine). Berliner (1994, 492) laments the fact that popular definitions of improvisation that emphasise only its spontaneous, intuitive nature…are astonishingly incomplete. Later, the respondent, in reflecting on his/her spontaneous response echoes Berliner’s reference to improvisation as 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 (1994, 241). The respondent’s reflection on spontaneously compensating on a memory lapse in performance here is instructive, recalling R. Anderson Sutton’s (1998, 86) observation in Javanese gamelan practices, of such behaviour as one measure of a good musician (emphasis mine).

Reflections

Respondents’ reflections in this study indicate how their experience of improvisation was characterised by reflective and reflexive behaviour in real-time. One of them considered improvisation as composing in real time. If improvisational behaviour in music is rooted in thinking, how is this thinking enabled or facilitated? Respondents recall how ‘much consideration was involved from planning to execution of improvisation’. Gilbert Ryle observes that the only explanation for 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…is that…we have nothing to say, except, “Oh, it just came to me”(1979, 123).
By suggesting that improvising (1979, 121) is shared in very different degrees in very different forms...by all...human beings...which, just qua thinking beings, we all essay everyday...indeed in every hour, Ryle argues that improvisation involves the general notion or notions of thinking. If improvisational behaviour in music by non-musicians is comparable in substance to that of trained musicians, I suggest this behaviour is rooted in ways of thinking; which is a fundamental human ability.

Reflexive and reflective behaviours are important considerations in musical improvisation for at least two reasons. First, Gilbert Ryle (1979, 129) discusses improvisation as one means to convert knowledge and doubt into adaptive action. He argues 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”. Secondly, meditation and actual practice (or rehearsal) of concepts developed in the meditation form continuous loops; learning to improvise and improvising to learn; leading to improvisation in an emergent performance.

Respondents’ views affirm the importance of discussions, rehearsals, reflections after performances, towards more assured final performances. An evaluation of the impact of improvisation in music, as mental and performance preparation, musicians and non-musicians notwithstanding, must take cognizance of reflexive and reflective behaviour not only in the emergent performance but in the rehearsals leading up to it. Such behaviour enforce the belief that improvisation must consider rehearsals, preparatory exercises before performance, as valid indicators of improvisational ability, albeit levels of proficiency.
Conclusions

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
5. Rehearsal as preparatory thinking in relation to resources and resourcefulness

Respondents 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. 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. Speed of activity via reflexive behaviour in improvisation should not be misunderstood as ‘creation with little preparation’ let alone no prior preparation. 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.
John Blacking (1973:7) discusses the view that music-making is an inherited biological predisposition, which is unique to the human species. I suggest that improvisation is a 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. One 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!*

**References:**


