

---

Title	Enforced spontaneity : Perspectives from non music-specialist tertiary students learning free improvisation in Singapore
Author(s)	Eugene Dairianathan and Peter Stead
Source	<i>3<sup>rd</sup> Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference, Singapore, 1 - 3 June 2009</i>

---

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

**ENFORCED SPONTANEITY—PERSPECTIVES FROM NON MUSIC-SPECIALIST  
TERTIARY STUDENTS LEARNING FREE IMPROVISATION IN SINGAPORE.**

Eugene Dairianathan

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Peter Stead

National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University

Paper presented at the 3rd Redesigning Pedagogy International Conference

June 2009, Singapore

## Abstract

Improvisation is a free elective course offered by the Music Department to students from all disciplines at the main University. Our earlier studies on the non music-specialist students enabled through improvisation have articulated in/formal processes in both reflexive and reflective thinking processes (Dairianathan & Stead 2006, 2008) which we argue are based on the concept of *askesis*, notably *meletē* and *gymnasia*, in the Stoic tradition (Foucault, 1988).

Although improvising is based on prior experience, an area not yet critically examined is the way in which that experience is brought together with the immediate requirement to improvise *in the moment*. In this paper, we study one group of participants whose discussions brought about a consensus that, in their final performance: *we would improvise on-the-spot on the performance day itself*. In so doing, this group intentionally gave themselves minimal prior rehearsal; what these participants refer to as the *in-the-moment (ITM) factor*. This study is reliant on an analysis of participants' performances and excerpts from their journal reflections which critically examine what it means for learners to be engaged *in the moment* when improvising.

**ENFORCED SPONTANEITY – PERSPECTIVES FROM NON MUSIC-SPECIALIST  
TERTIARY STUDENTS LEARNING FREE IMPROVISATION IN SINGAPORE.**

*Introduction*

In the sleeve notes of Miles Davis' *A Kind of Blue* (1959), Bill Evans wrote a celebrated essay which he entitled *Improvisation in Jazz*. Evans compared the creation of music through group improvisation to the discipline of creation found in a Japanese visual art form:

*There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous...Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere. This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflection, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique disciplines of the jazz or improvising musician. Group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result. As the painter needs his framework in time, the improvising musical group needs its framework in time. (Evans, 1959).*

Evans' CD sleeve note refers to a style of Japanese ink painting called *suibokuga*. For Kahn (2001), Evans' descriptions represent an infatuation with Eastern art and mysticism, current within artistic circles in New York at the time. But his familiarity with the subject as well as the emphasis on spontaneity current in progressive jazz practices like bebop and the beat generation enabled him to find appropriate parallels between *suibokuga* and jazz. Evans' essay remains an often quoted piece of writing about improvisation in modern jazz.

*Enforced spontaneity*

Evans makes the point about *A Kind of Blue* as one where:

*Miles conceived these settings only hours before the recording dates and arrived with sketches which indicated to the group what was to be played. Therefore, you will hear something close to pure spontaneity in these performances. The group had never played these pieces prior to the recordings and I think without exception the first complete performance of each was a 'take' (Evans, 1959).*

While much of this has historical significance in the promulgation of bebop (Belgrad, 1998), what is significant here is that all participants in *A Kind of Blue* would only know what they would be playing when they got to the recording. Such an environment and the pressure of recording (not to mention pressure from Columbia producers for a result) would have entailed enforced spontaneity.

Evans' suggestion of a directness of response in which *deliberation cannot interfere* suggests tension between spontaneity and deliberation. Two interpretations are possible: that one is left to whatever responses are at hand to deal with acting on events as they unfold *in the moment*; or there is a form of action that deliberation, which is possible and present, is restrained or refrained from. These dual interpretations recall Tullia Magrini's explanation 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 (Magrini, 1998). Magrini's explanation implies improvisation is contingent on unpredictability since 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 destabilises the moment or event and improvisation is seen as the restabilising tactic to overcome the *aleatory and unsystematic character of the event*. (Magrini, 1998, p.169).

Magrini's second explanation, however, deals with unpredictability as an outcome of lack of knowledge and skill, hence a system of training and regulating improvisation to be able to prevent or overcome potential unpredictability. The dual character of unpredictability and lack of knowledge in improvising are reasonable but insufficient explanations. Magrini's explanation does not fully account for the fact that consummate jazz practitioners like Bill Evans and Miles Davis are not only capable of recovering from unpredictability, preventing or overcoming unpredictability but also able to prevent deliberation from interfering with improvising *in the moment* – suggesting 'enforced spontaneity'.

These processes of taking control of the complex activity of improvising have also been pursued in studies in neural processes. In a study involving six subjects who were highly trained jazz musicians (Limb & Braun, 2008), data recorded indicated that improvisation (compared to production of over-learned musical sequences) was consistently characterized by a dissociated pattern of activity in the prefrontal cortex. Changes in prefrontal activity during improvisation were accompanied by widespread activation of neocortical sensorimotor areas (that mediate the organization and execution of musical performance) as well as deactivation of limbic structures (that regulate motivation and emotional tone). Limb and Braun suggest that such a pattern may reflect a combination of psychological processes required for spontaneous improvisation, in which internally motivated, stimulus-independent behaviours unfold in the absence of central processes that typically mediate self-monitoring and conscious volitional control of ongoing performance. This is clarified as innovative, internally motivated production of novel material (at once rule based and highly structured) that can apparently occur **outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control** (emphasis mine).

While Limb and Braun's study seems to support Evans' notion of spontaneous improvising such that *deliberation cannot interfere*, the notion that this activity can

*apparently occur outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control* seems less convincing in the light of improvising activity as a combination of reflexive and reflective thinking processes (Dairianathan & Stead, 2006). Evans' assertion of communication in improvising such that *deliberation cannot interfere*, might suggest deviation or restraint from pre-rehearsed decisions. This is commonly referred to as errors, either of commission or omission, which entails a process of recovery to avert breakdown during performance when the unexpected does take place. Directness of action requires reflexive behavior, and by extension, thinking which is a quality highly desired by practitioners of improvisation. But directness of action in Evans' essay also entails compelling improvising activity *in the moment* in terms of decision-making *in the moment*. These views moreover resonate strongly with Berliner's (1994) lament that popular definitions of improvisation are astonishingly incomplete because it is characterised as making something out of nothing; emphasising its spontaneity and intuitive natures but not explaining them.

In our view, appropriateness of response *in the moment* of improvising cannot avoid its function of past experience and opportunities to reflect on and re-enact prior moments. Directness of action not only suggests reflexive and reflective thinking but also a symbiotic relationship between them. If decisions are to be made, *in* or *out* of the improvising present, they are decisions involving both processes of thinking and decision-making. Secondly, the activity of improvising is contingent on both reflexive and reflective thinking and acting processes. Reflexive thinking and doing is not possible without reflective thinking and doing.

Thus far, we have outlined processes involving professionals whose musical decisions are based partly on musical, partly on extra-musical decisions. Might such improvising activities be the purview of non music-specialists? Would they be capable of enforced spontaneity? In this paper, we focus on a group of non music-specialist students, possessing varying levels of training and ability, who decided for their final performance, to improvise *in*

*the moment*. This has been made possible with permission from the group to make available video recordings of their rehearsal just ahead of their final performance.

### *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 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 participants comprised two types; student and returning (certified) teachers on professional development to pursue the degree programme at NIE; and undergraduates in the main University campus. It is the latter group of non music-specialist participants that I would like to focus on. Sources of information, with their permission, have been taken from journal reflections which cover weekly activity, and excerpts from their essay assignment, which deals directly with their experiences of the course.

The issues here are worth a reminder. The students in this group are undergraduates at the main university not pursuing a music degree but possess an uneven spread of ability and skill. Training in music for them varies from art-music, electone-organ and popular music practices through to those with little or no formal training, which meant playing instruments

either for the first time or using objects to make purposeful activity which they identify as music and claim ownership. For the purposes of this paper, permission has been obtained to use reflections from their journal and essays, of which, selected excerpts are given attention.

With specific reference to enforced spontaneity, we focus on one group of five participants from a cohort who participated in the January 2007 semester. They comprised Alphonsus with classical/pop keyboard skills, Eugene with military music (percussion) training, Jun Hoong with acoustic guitar skills acquired informally, Liang Zhong with very little formal skill, and Jared, a freelance dance (Salsa) instructor. The cohort as a whole had been discussing what to do for their final performance in the two weeks leading up to the final performance. Yet, despite the complete freedom and autonomy given, not to mention two weeks to come up with their final improvisation performance, this group of five met physically for a rehearsal on the actual day of performance and assessment:

*Today was our final class together, and also the day of our improvisation performance...from the start till the performance deadline, we had about one hour and fifteen minutes to rehearse.*

Since Jared was a freelance salsa instructor, the performance involved a combination of improvised music and movement:

*I visualized the type of emotion, mainly with dance, not choreographed, although I had certain things I intended to do. The movements were generally Afro-Cuban and Afro-Caribbean because I felt the earthy beats of the drums which gave a sense of grounded-ness to me.*

This idea resonated with other group members:

*[We] quickly centred on Jared's idea [to] improvise a dance. It was rather uncertain as to whether the dance was improvised over the music or the other way around. Because it*

*was not explicitly decided upon...we more or less decided that it would be working both ways.*

With consensus on a performance involving music and dance improvisation, instrumental resources were selected:

*We each picked instruments that we were comfortable with: drum set, various metal [soft drink] cans, glockenspiel, bongo, two guitars and a piano. To make the performance revolve around a dance, each instrument was to be used in a manner that could be called unconventional...we were going to put ourselves 'on the edge'. Since Jared was the solo dancer, he indicated a preference for a tribal feel, so Eugene and I worked out a set of rhythms which could serve as the theme. This was not easy...Eugene had a background in military tattoos...I was a classical/pop pianist. We settled for a syncopated, chordal rhythm.*

With the conceptual framework and instrumental re/sources selected they attempted to map out a framework to house their soundscape:

*Our group attempted to structure the piece into three sections, with the pattern of A-B-A. For the A section, we decided on a sinister theme in free form, utilizing unconventional harmonies on the piano, plucking of the chopsticks stuck into the guitar, and use of a suspended cymbal to produce various timbres. In the B section each of us would take turns to perform a solo, utilizing the instruments on hand. The third section would be a recapitulation of the first section, though with minor modifications as we saw fit during the actual performance.*

With the various component parts of the performance put in place, they began work on a rehearsal. Throughout the first 35 minutes (out of the seventy five minutes), according to Liang Zhong:

*We 'fooled' around to get some musical ideas or patterns. Of course throughout the subsequent rehearsal, these patterns either evolved into variations or were finally discarded*

*if it was not suitable (that depended on the performer himself). The details, of what we were to play, were slowly being filled up as the rehearsal progressed. The details included who would signal (visual or performance cues) the start of the sections, the end and the order in which each performer should move in, which consisted of trying out the beginning of the A section. We explored the various sound possibilities that could bring about a sinister feel. It took a few tries to finally get what we wanted. The end result was a rather free interaction of various timbres. The introduction was given by the piano, with perfect fifths in a flat key. Jun Hoong on the guitar then took inspiration from a video [youtube] he watched where the guitarist vibrated the strings using a rod. The rhythmic motive on the conga was modified to something less regular...bass note on the offbeat instead of onbeat. The sound, in our opinion, went well with the 'raw' mood we were going to portray in the performance. We already tied down the first section, so we now discussed how the second section would be like. Because of the freestyle nature of the performance, we settled on taking turns to play a solo run in the second section. Another reason for this was that we found it rather difficult to play a different theme in a different section using all the instruments again. The B section was vaguely run through, with us just getting just an approximate feel of what we wanted to play in our solo. This idea worked out, and the piano would then, because of its power of persuasion and wide tonal range, bring the performance back into the original theme also called the ending. The second A section was also vaguely run through.*

Most notably, Liang Zhong observed:

*The dancer did not rehearse his movement for the performance. It was perhaps that he had already in mind the general schematic outline of what he wanted to perform. I believe as a seasoned dancer he had a wide bank of ideas and experiences to draw from. This could give him the confidence, and thus he did not feel the need to rehearse something that he was*

*familiar with. He had integrated quite well with the improvised performance (with the rest of us).*

With the planning and rehearsal exiguously enacted, the group presented their performance on the understanding that *we used mainly eye contact to give each other the cue to move on to the next segment. With the chords that would open the performance Alphonse recalled how the drum rhythm began, and I launched myself into it with syncopated chords, accenting odd and even beats, creating tension for Jared to ride upon in his dance. The first bout of tension arose when the section had gone on long enough before it was time to move on to Part Two. It seemed like everyone emerged from their intoxication in the rhythm and searched each other for a cue, a nod, any visible sign that we were about to end Part One [with] Eugene – as planned – whose change in rhythm brought [it] to a close. [Then] entered Part Two, where each performer was to go solo in turns; drums, guitar, percussion and piano. Each was very different from the other, which lent a sense of diversity, even disunity within the section...and then [we] managed a smooth transition to a reprise of Part One.*

Their full performance may be found at

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp\\_BiZj8c6E&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp_BiZj8c6E&feature=channel_page)

### *Reflections*

Evans' (1959) celebrated essay yields a number of key ideas from which we articulate four, and correlate them to accounts from the improvisers for further consideration.

1. A situation or context *in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous – enforced spontaneity.*

Accounts by the performers also point to two forms of deviations from the exiguously planned script. Participants waited till the last two hours *before* the final performance which

would have significant bearing on the assessment of their performance. As Jared noted in his journals, *since we usually played with something structured and safe in the previous weeks, we decided to break the trend and do something similar to what the professionals do. We used mainly eye contact to give each other the cue to move on to the next segment.*

Alphonsus corroborated this apparent procrastination:

*We discussed the various possibilities of improvisation over the last two weeks and were divided. One group wanted to prepare a little more beforehand [while] the other group wanted to prepare 'on the spot'. The discussion was taken online, and we talked about various themes for the performance.*

By consensus or exhausted options, the group of five turned up on the day of the performance and gave themselves one and a quarter hours to put together a performance. Even during rehearsal, the participants' reflections suggested unanimity, first about their choice of engaging in a final performance with exiguous preparation, and secondly cognisant and acceptance of the risks involved in enacting the content and form of their performance in real time:

*We decided not to put a fixed mould on what we were to play, as it might severely limit the eventual outcomes. We were confident that we would pull it off for a number of reasons – there was no set music where we could make a mistake with, the leeway of free expression would allow us to act **in the moment**...missed cues would be easily smoothed out via embellishments and the judicious use of rubato (emphasis in original).*

The second form of enforced spontaneity took place *during* the performance. According to Eugene the percussionist, *something that was not planned did appear. Between the B section and the second A section, we spontaneously added in another sub-section in free form. More spontaneous playing came from the other group members. Somewhere along this spontaneous section Alphonsus did play a pattern on the piano that seemed to have a*

*somewhat regular rhythm. I then responded by improvising a rhythmic pattern on the suspended cymbal made up of approximately 4 different timbres.*

Alphonsus echoed another instance which was towards the end of the piece:

*There were awkward moments where the transition did not go over as smoothly as we would have hoped for...a lack of experience, perhaps – the inability to react quickly enough “in the moment”, leaving a space in the flow, a blank note, so to speak. But in practice, this was a good thing because through my experience, one learns very fast after missing such a moment. [When] it was time to close the piece, I was going to play, as discussed earlier, a series of loud, falling diminished chords to describe the end. However, everyone else just kept going, so I followed suit. Again, I tried, and found that the only way to conclusively bring our momentum to a halt was not by gestures, but by forcibly slowing down the tempo. It worked, and at last I was able to sound out the final few chords that depicted Jared’s dance writhing in slow agony, finally collapsing on the floor and lying still, ending the drawn out coda in a major key.*

2. That the artists must practise *allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere.* (Evans 1959).

Two instances of such a deviation as homage to and departure from Evans’ directness of engagement was experienced by Alphonsus. The first of these was his awareness right at the beginning where, *reading deeply into each performer’s expression, I hung on to every note, every sound and every nuanced movement.* The second instance concerned his role to anchor the end of the second section into the reprise of the first section:

*As the last performer of Part Two, I launched into a miniature piano cadenza of sorts. Even though it was meant to be so, I held back. Too much harmony – or disharmony – would cause incongruity in the theme. I somehow brought my fantasy to a close and managed a smooth transition into a reprise of Part One. I could feel the intensity as everyone played*

*with abandon. Jared was getting carried away in his “freedom of expression”, and the rest of us were suitably infected. Unfortunately, I did not feel the connectedness that might have been present if we were a much tighter group, but I felt that the performance was still going well, simply because we weren’t afraid or abashed to “go the whole hog”.*

But the clearest example of Evans’ postulation of directness of improvising in a way that *deliberation cannot interfere* was evident in Jared’s perspectives on having to respond to musical improvisation during the performance with his own movements:

*I was dancing to the music and what it made me feel. When the piece began with the piano, it felt sedated, hence my portraying through slower, more relaxed movements. Other movements were mainly drawn from the main instruments, which were the piano and drums. I tried to portray what the instrument players were trying to voice out, together with my own interpretation of it, sometimes focusing on the violent drums and sometimes on the more melodic piano. The solos however depended greatly on which instrument was being played...the drumroll provoked a kind of feeling which I felt would be complemented by the shoulder 'shimmy' (violent shoulder shaking/vibration movement). I did not do a dance to the harmonics of the guitar because it would overshadow the 'timidness'. The piano and drums were easier to interpret though. My movements basically came from what I had seen and learnt before, and merely tried to reproduce them in this context. What was running through my mind was to not do something which I had already done before. Though I had known other dance movements, I was pressured, and hence felt constricted with the number of 'moves' I could do. In that instance I wanted to explore and show more; that is why I decided to include the chair. I had intended to use the chair in my dance but I did not know exactly what I was going to do with the chair. I did check that it wasn't dangerous for me to stand on it, but other than that, I did no further experimentation, so as to keep the improvisation raw. I didn't know or set any boundaries for the improvisation. But I wanted to stay close to the*

*group so they know what I was doing and would like me to do, in the event that I go do something which they might object strongly against. I guess there was the boundary of trying to stay with the group also because I wanted the attention to be on the group's improvisation as well, not just the dance. The crashing of the cymbals was deliberate, as it was a cue for the group to end the movement, especially when everyone is busy with their instruments.*

3. The challenge posed by group improvisation. *Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result.* (Evans, 1959).

This group of five comprised undergraduates possessing an uneven spread of skill and ability. Some possessed instrumental performance skills with ABRSM certification, some had skills acquired through playing in a symphonic band as part of the school co-curricular activity programme (CCA). One is a dance instructor. This coming together of uneven abilities would have, understandably, evoked the same sentiments as Evans in group improvisation; considering *the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking*, and *the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result*. One student, Eugene, possessed background and experience playing percussion instruments through co-curricular activity in the wind ensemble while at school. This made his ability to engage in spontaneous musical performance, in Jared's words, *difficult to learn and adapt to... simply because we are not used to it, yet*. However, Eugene took stock of the challenges positively:

*With this performance, I have come to realize that ability to script a performance less and be more improvisational on the spot. It is only a start, and I feel that I have yet to reach the level of being able to truly improvise an entire performance without planning for it at all...I have merely scratched the surface. I feel it would take a lot more skill, musical experience and thinking about how I want to condition my state of mind to be able to truly*

*improvise. However, looking at the starting point that I was at during the beginning of the course (when I still had to “write out” the score in my mind), I have become aware of the need to really be “in the moment” and react to it to produce music if I were to claim that I am improvising.*

Evans would have taken comfort in knowing that Eugene would at least have had enough musical skill and understanding to be able to engage in improvisation if and when called upon. Given the unevenness of ability, skill and untested propensity for improvising ‘in the moment’ of the group, failure looked the most likely outcome. But as Alphonsus reflected, *I came into this class with the impression that it would be all about musical improvisation, but learned otherwise. In a world where non-musicians are asked to improvise, any object that can produce a sound can be used to produce music and rhythm. And strangely, musician or not, each performer ‘conforms’ to certain patterns. Performances were not entirely haphazard but well-structured and ordered. The extent to which improvisation holds, in all aspects of living, was for me an amazing eye-opener.*

4. The tension of form or framework as it is shaped by content and time. (Evans, 1959).

Jun Hoong tabulated the deviations from the ‘scripted’ performance as unexpected hiccups:

- i. Stark contrast in loudness of our instruments especially between Liang Zhong’s and mine because ours were on the low [soft] side;*
- ii. Forgot what was within arm’s reach that could be played, for example, shakers, keys, leather strap (slapping sound) etc.*
- iii. Forgot to add in the fills of familiar themes like “super Mario” and the typical upbeat bongo rhythm [used by Stomp to add flavour to the piece].*
- iv. The cold affected the agility of my fingers to properly get the clean harmonic sound I wanted on the 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> frets.*
- v. Whether to break out of the normal flow; whether to overwhelm or to complement*

- vi. *Did not entertain the possibility of swapping instruments in the duration of the piece.*
- vii. *Forgot about the poor dancer for a few moments, and was insensitive to the intensity of which he needed the music to be, instead of fluctuating between the extremes of the spectrum.*

That is not to suggest he was or even came to the final performance unprepared:

*I brought paperclips, toothpicks, chopsticks, drumsticks, a 50-cent coin, an acoustic guitar, a capo, a cloth strap, a leather strap, shakers, metal binder rings and keys. I used a pair of chopsticks pivoted on the A and B string of the classical guitar, facing opposite directions to create a different sound (metallic vs. nylon hitting against the fret board) which was used to start the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> sections. As for the acoustic guitar, I felt that using harmonics would be a good change, since it would create an airy feel in the guitar's natural key of E. The rest of the items were meant for percussive fills to build up the piece into a cacophony of chaotic music.*

Despite the challenges, Jun Hoong had no qualms about the risk of such engagement, considering these hiccups as details in the overall schema. Whether it worked for this group as a whole performance or if the hiccups were seen as an analogy of the differences between different instances of improvisation, they were, in his own words, lessons of *deconstruction or reverse engineering; sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't*.

For Liang Zhong:

*Although the schematic order was maintained, during the performance the contents (the musical patterns) were quite different from what was being created during the rehearsal. Some of these 'in-the-moment' patterns were in fact new materials, which had its origin from a particular pattern that was generated from the rehearsal. Towards the end of the performance, although there was a cue to end, there was a prolongation of the end. This was*

*unexpected and I felt that in order to respond to the unexpected moment, it was necessary to be constantly vigilant throughout the performance.*

### *Being “In-the-Moment”*

Accounts from the five performers making exiguous preparations and deliberately opting to engage in a final performance by improvising ‘in-the-moment’ seem not only to correlate with the salient points out of Evans’ essay but to suggest far more perceptive views about improvising than Evans. Details these five participants offered indicate a concerted engagement in an improvised performance through *enforced spontaneity* or what Jared calls the ‘*in the moment*’ (ITM) factor:

*The crucial part of improvisation is to have a wide repertoire of previous experiences to tap from, so as to make improvisation seem instantaneous and spontaneous. Having previously been exposed to a rather wide variety of music, I find improvisation easier because I like experimenting by mixing the different genres together. Since we know that improvisation comes mainly from past experiences and the improviser’s exposure to music, why would his improvisation always be different since he taps from the same resources? Why and how do people improvise ‘in the moment’ when they draw their improvisation from their limited past experiences? Let us call this ‘in the moment’ factor the ITM factor.*

Jared also refers to the importance of the affective component, the emotional investment made by the musician while improvising:

*The ITM factor is contributed by past experiences, but it is also derived from the emotion of the improviser and his interpretation of the music at that moment. Excluding accidents, feelings and emotions are what allows an improviser to improvise and constantly change his improvisatory works; without emotions, an improviser would not be able to improvise. Since emotions and interpretations can vary a lot more, the limited pool of past experiences, combined with instantaneous spontaneous emotion and interpretation, has now*

*gone beyond its boundaries to offer an unlimited variety of improvisations. Venturing deeper into the ITM factor, we find that the interpretation of the music is just as crucial as the emotional element. In saying this, I mean that interpretations can be learned more than emotions. For example, I can learn that the interpretation of the drum as a heartbeat can also be interpreted as heavy feet, by interacting with other artistes. But I cannot learn more emotions and can only vary the degree of certain emotions, and this is not as easy compared to learning different interpretations. These interpretations can be learned through interplay [of] experiences with another person. Improvisation through learning different interpretations is not confined to music making, but also to dancing...because of this different mental image that makes the improviser emphasize in the different elements in that song.*

Jared seems to be echoing observations by John Blacking:

*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... 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. (Blacking, 1973, p.100).*

Jun Hoong and Alphonsus qualify Jared's *in the moment* factor more carefully. Jun Hoong for instance separated what it meant to be "in" the moment (instead of "at"); and to get something special out of it, there has to be many "out of moment" situations. Jun Hoong's choice of prepositions, *at the moment* instead of *in the moment* as well as *out of moment*, reads as a subtext; of an individual's embodied engagement in the activity of improvising much like Blacking's observation. Being *at the moment* and being *in the moment* reads as the difference between levels of the improviser's individual investment in the activity of improvising. Being *at the moment* would probably suggest a perfunctory, 'safe'

*modus operandi* translatable as predictable improvisatory tactics and strategies to keep the music going. This connotation was coincidentally reflected in Alphonsus' musings where he distinguished between Jun Hoong's *at the moment* and *in the moment* as *mere attendance* and *actual participation* respectively. Being *in the moment* for Jun Hoong represented a great deal of risk; the price of improvising 'in the moment' could well have been many 'out of moment' situations, not to mention great small moments but a less than convincing overall performance. This reflection would suggest the great risks undertaken by many jazz musicians who might be tempted in terms of their career to decide to engage in an *at the moment* form of improvisation.

Reflections by these five performers echo Evans' celebrated essay in terms of quality of perception. In a parallel account of *suibokuga* by Evans, Alphonsus mused on the concept of failure in the act of improvisation but not as a severe restriction and cause for censure. In fact to learn from such failure, to paraphrase Alphonsus' view, would constitute a disciplining of oneself:

*The failure to act quickly enough precipitates the feeling of "ah, I missed a beat", which is regretful enough that the performer would steel himself against a recurrence, and is a wonderful part of improvisatory instruction. This also brings me back to the concept of rehearsal. Each performance, however unrehearsed, is a rehearsal unto itself, where improvisatory techniques and the reading of each other is learned and then refined.*

#### *Askēsis*

The reflections by the five improvisers, in our view, recall an exercise of *thinking about* as well as *engaging in* improvisation. This has considerable resonance with the concept of askēsis as one of three techniques in the Stoic philosophical tradition discussed in *Technologies of the Self* by Michel Foucault. Principle features of askēsis 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* (“to train oneself”) involved training in a real situation despite having been artificially induced. *Meletē* and *gymnasia*, elaborated in Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self*, (Foucault, 1988), are important considerations in musical improvisation for at least two reasons. First, improvisation is seen as one means to convert knowledge and doubt into adaptive action based on virtually all behaviour which has an ad hoc adroitness akin to improvisation. This is because improvisation mixes together a partly fresh contingency with general lessons previously learned; *paying heed* (Ryle, 1979). Citing Liang Zhong’s observations, *in order to respond to the unexpected moment, it was necessary to be constantly vigilant throughout the performance*. 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. Musical and instrumental skills notwithstanding, *meletē* and *gymnasia* leave us with little doubt that the ability to improvise *in the moment* must consider *at the moment* and *out of moment* situations as well as Liang Zhong’s recounting of the need to be vigilant. Secondly, these considerations of *in-the-*, *at-the-*, and *out-of-moment* responses from these five non music-specialist improvisers suggest the importance of rehearsal, preparatory exercises not only *before* but *during* performance, as appropriate indicators of improvisational ability, albeit levels of proficiency.

Although the efforts and experiences of these undergraduate performers are in stark contrast to what the ensemble Miles Davis brought together to produce *A Kind of Blue*, the basic substantial processes remain the same in that they are sensitised to the importance of musical, extra-musical and anthropological skills. In fact, these improvisers make substantive

points about the symbiotic relationship between individual emotional investment – as the directness of engagement in improvising – and vigilance. It is vigilance which not only challenges Evans’ postulation about directness of engagement in which *deliberation cannot interfere* but also qualifies Limb & Braun’s (2008) suggestion that improvisational activity can *apparently occur outside of conscious awareness and beyond volitional control*. We would like to suggest everyone is capable of converting knowledge and doubt into adaptive action as a function of time, experience and individual engagement, and is therefore capable of improvising.

#### *Final words*

Michel Foucault’s recollection of the concept of *askesis* (Foucault, 1988) is understood as the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself. There is no better way to savour the essence of this mastery than in the words of Alphonsus:

*For the first time, I felt like we were really **on-the-edge** improvisers. I was happy, riding on every moment of the piece. It would never be the same again, and that for me was the essence of improvising. This would only happen once in a lifetime (emphasis in original).*

In Jun Hoong’s musings, *at the end of the day, what have you got to lose?*

*References*

- Berliner, P. F. (1994). *Thinking in jazz: The infinite art of improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bengtsson, S.L., Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Ullen, F. (2007). Cortical regions involved in the generation of musical structures during improvisation in pianists. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 19, 830–842.
- Berkowitz, A.L., & Ansari, D. (2008, June). Generation of novel motor sequences: The neural correlates of musical improvisation. *Neuroimage*, 41 (2), 535-43.
- Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- (1995). *Music, Culture & Experience: Selected Papers* (R. Byron, Ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Dairianathan, E., & Stead, E.P., (2006). Improvisation as real-time thinking and rehearsal: An exploratory study in Singapore. In Sims, W.L. and Tahir, R. (Eds.), *Sentuhan ISME 2006 proceedings* (pp. 316-333). Kuala Lumpur: ISME.
- Dairianathan, E., & Stead, E.P., (2008). Improvisation and issues of formal and informal learning: A perspective from Singapore. In Sims, W. L., et.al, (Eds.), *ISME World Conference 2008 proceedings* (pp.79-84). Bologna: ISME.
- Davis, M. (1959). *A Kind of Blue*. Sound recording. (Columbia Legacy 064935 9).
- Evans, W. (1959). Sleeve notes for sound recording of Miles Davis' *A Kind of Blue* (Columbia Legacy 064935 9).
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L.H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P.H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self* (pp.16-49). Cambridge, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Improvisation (AAI 280) group performance (January 2007).
- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp\\_BiZj8c6E&feature=channel\\_page](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp_BiZj8c6E&feature=channel_page)

- Kahn, A. (2001). *Kind of Blue: The making of the Miles Davis masterpiece*. London: Granta.
- Limb, C.J. & Braun, A.R. (2008, February). Neural substrates of spontaneous musical performance: An fMRI Study of Jazz Improvisation. *PLoS ONE*. 2008; 3(2): e1679, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0001679. Retrieved 10 May, 2009, from <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2244806>.
- Magrini, T. (1998), Improvisation and group interaction in Italian lyrical singing. In Nettl, B. (Ed.), *In The course of performance: Studies in the world of musical improvisation* (pp.169-198). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nettl, B. (1998). An Art Neglected in Scholarship. In Nettl, B. (Ed.), *In The course of performance: Studies in the world of musical improvisation* (pp.1-26). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ryle, G. (1979). *On thinking*. K. Kolenda (Ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.