

Understanding in Musical Improvisation

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Theoretical approach

Successful musical improvisation in a group requires the ability to communicate, from which in turn the will to understand each other can be derived. Improvised music is often compared to a conversation or a talk, thus it is not uncommon to find analogies to language in descriptions of improvisation (e.g., oppose something, repeat, agree, remain silent).

Cultural and art scholar Lara Frisch researches the role of dialogue in the creative process of improvising ensembles. She distinguishes three different levels of communication in the context of improvised music: the musical, the physical, and the verbal.¹

Musical interactions occur when there is a common understanding related to the designing elements. This can be, for example, a common *crescendo*, the settling into a unified pulse, or even a principle such as mutual interruption.

The second level refers to all physical actions during improvisation such as putting on or taking off the instrument, facial expressions, body language, and movements that occur during playing and underscore its expression.

Verbal communication usually takes place before or/and after the improvisation. Before to narrow down the sound or sound material, to sketch out a course of the improvisation or to determine other structural elements. Afterwards, to reflect on what has happened. In the process, a common classification into jointly defined frames of reference often takes place, which promotes mutual understanding on the musical level.

Practical approach

Three examples for practicing each level.

1. Musical

Levels of energy: same – more – less

Instruments: person A starts with a motif or material. The next one decides whether to play with less, more or the same energy. After playing together for a while, A stops. B continues and C decides whether to play with less, more or the same energy, and so on.

It is not a matter of imitating the other person's material with a stronger or lower volume, it is about finding a defined relationship with own opportunities.

¹ Lara Frisch: *Improvised Music and the Improbability of Communication* in: Gagel, R. & Schwabe, M. (2016): *Researching Improvisation – Researching by Improvisation*. Bielefeld: Transcript, p. 205-221

Improvisation in half group: go in and out. Determine one of the three relationships to the current level of energy and stay with it as long as you play.

2. Physical

Practice the same task, but without producing a sound. Don't exaggerate your movements too much, but have a clear idea of what you are playing and at what dynamic level.

In a second round, combine playing/singing and not playing/singing: stop in between, but keep the energetic level with your body tension.

3. Verbal

Afterwards: Discuss with your partner how low, medium and high energy shows up in each musical parameter. Include the respective contexts, one and the same musical material can be perceived as stronger at one time and lower or at the same energetic level at another time.

Before: Reflect for yourself whether you have an inclination towards one of the three energetic references and make a resolution to use the others more strongly. In a familiar group, participants can give each other guidelines for dynamic references.

Further reading

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