

The Discipline of Improvisation

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Improvisation is the oldest and most pervasive form of music-making. Every human being improvises. We all have dozens of conversations per day – we don't write down what we're going to say before we say it, yet we are able to have coherent, meaningful interchanges of information, feeling and imagination. For people who are able to express themselves on a musical instrument, improvisation can be both the easiest and most profound way to communicate. We read about the fantastic keyboard improvisations of Bach, Beethoven, or Chopin, who wrote things down as the only way to record and communicate their work. We wonder what might have happened if cultural evolution had proceeded a little differently, if recording technology had evolved prior to the technology of writing.

In the conservatory world, some people equate improvisation with jazz. Improvisation is not jazz. Jazz is one of the world's beautiful semi-improvised forms of music-making, structurally very similar to Indian raga-playing. In both traditions, the musician sticks to a rough template or framework derived from tradition and defined by a scale, a rhythm, a mood, and then threads a personal path within the boundaries of that framework. In free improvisation, there is no template or prior agreement. We listen to each other very intensely and support each other, and from that atmosphere of listening and support, the structure and character of each piece emerges.

Improv brings equality for the human beings who are playing, and a closer feeling with the audience. When I have been coaching a chamber group and they play a totally improvised piece for an audience for the first time, something magical and startling happens. Suddenly, there is no music stand (or the virtual music stand of a memorized score or chart), no barrier between you and the audience, between you and your fellow players. You communicate directly. There is that wonderful moment when you realize that you can communicate in this way, and produce interesting, coherent music without relying on any external sources.

Those of you who play viola or bassoon know that the written repertoire for your instrument is not as large as the repertoire for violin or piano. You have developed a personal love for the sound-world of your instrument, but the possibilities seem fewer than for some other musicians. But with improvisation, the repertoire of every instrument is equal, and infinite.

A common emotion that students feel when they are about to walk into a session labeled "improvisation" is fear that they are not creative, that they will not come up with

ideas, and so forth. We begin to toss sound around the room, in a safe environment. A little bit into the session, when I feel that it is OK to make comments on the pieces, almost the only thing I have to say is “play less.” Just as in chamber music, we learn to step back, support the other players – the less each of us plays, the more refined and clearly the structure emerges out of our interaction. What does this tell us? We suddenly realize that every one of us is bubbling with infinitely many ideas. Creativity is simply a non-issue. The issue is learning to let our ideas out of the gate at a controlled rate so they can be heard clearly.

My favorite statement about musical improvisation is from Del Close, one of the gurus of improvisational theater. He said, “Your job as an improviser is not to come up with clever lines. Your job as an improviser is to make your partner’s sh**ty lines sound good.” For me, improvisation is all about human relationship. It is about listening, responding, connecting, and about generosity. When a group of free improvisers gets together and plays a coherent and interesting piece of music without a prior plan or template, it is like watching separate beings become integrated into a single nervous system and become, for a time, whole. It is a partnership, with each other and with the audience, in the deepest sense of the word. Mysteriously, I even get this feeling when I am playing or hearing a solo improvisation.

If you are going to teach, you will plunge into encounters with people who come from different cultural backgrounds, with different tastes, different personalities, different priorities. Your capacity to improvise is one way into these encounters: the art of listening and responding to other human beings.

Each tone and gesture can be seen as an invitation to deepen the information and feelings that are unfolding. The discipline of improvisation is to learn to accept these invitations, to say yes, and to support each other. This is not only a recipe for making wonderful music, it makes for a happier life.



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