Book Review

Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom

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When I consider the *zeitgeist* of contemporary music education in North America, I can't help but feel that the tendency to prioritize the creative object over the creative act remains the approach of most music teachers. This leads all too often to discussions that seldom take into account the collaborative and social practices, the belief systems, and the historical contexts that shape music making. Music teachers teaching improvisation can often lean heavily on stagnant pedagogies that suffer from their failure to incorporate consideration of music's social dimensions.

Improvisation, when it appears in academic environments, appears too often as part of a compartmentalized curricula emerging from a government-delegated neoliberal compliance that often overlooks the crucial and historical socio-political turmoil and socio-cultural norms that originally gave rise to many improvisational practices. Students get funnelled into programs constructed exclusively to fill ready-made niches—curricula and pedagogy created by upper management bureaucracy that promotes the sustainability of the university's best interests. Ultimately, the result is an educational gap that destabilizes students' critical engagement with social issues and epistemologies. Pedagogies that fail to encourage critical engagement contribute to students who may never find the passion necessary to succeed in attaining improvisational fluency, to retention rates for schools that remain low, and to teachers at the mercy of government cutbacks as a result of their program's stagnant performance.

Thankfully, the editors of *Improvisation and Music Education: Beyond the Classroom* (2016), Ajay Heble and Mark Laver, along with a host of other contributors, have not overlooked these issues. In this publication, various authors, scholars, and musicians have laid out their vision for what it means to teach improvisation, and how those skills, once acquired, may enable musicians to engage in real-time creative decision-making, risk-taking, interaction, adaptation, surprise, and responsiveness. Heble and Laver's offering is replete with suggestions and methodologies that go 'beyond the classroom,' elucidating the multidimensional aspect of improvisation, not just an act of musical expression, but also a means of community-building. By offering non-conventional approaches that can be used in academia to demystify improvisation, and by offering new perspectives on improvisation's potential within the classroom, Heble and Laver's work offers freedom from the constraints of typical improvisation curricula found within neoliberal paradigms.

Improvisation and Music Education strays from conventional improvisation pedagogy—offering its readers access to effective teaching paradigms along a variety of trajectories. In chapter three, "Improvisation Pedagogy in Theory and Practice," percussionist and educator Jesse Stewart examines musical improvisation's capacity to foster a sense of community both inside and outside of the classroom by describing his facilitation of a university music ensemble that is inclusive of non-musicians, and his offering of courses that have no pressures of written assignments (32-45). Stewart reports that the end result of these practices was higher student engagement and overall interest than would be likely with a more conventional pedagogy (42).

In the fifth chapter, "Analysis, Improvisation, and Openness," Chris Stover supports an "open, no wrong answers, interactive environment" that he feels (and I agree) contributes to the creation of trust, acceptance, attentive listening, spontaneity, storytelling, and nonverbal communication between musicians. At the same time, Stover emphasises that in such an environment it is important for musicians to have confidence that their own contributions are valid. Stover reiterates a point originally made by Hans-Georg Gadamer, stating that we cannot discount "our understanding from our own experience, including the ways in which our experiences are historically and culturally situated" (61). Stover asserts that instructors must help students recognize that when they improvise in styles associated with previous eras and canonized creators that the frame of reference they bring to the music is just as valid as those of the individuals who were the original creators. Stover insists, for example, that when students attempt to solo over a piece of New Orleans style jazz, they should not be discouraged if their improvisations do not follow the kinds of structures likely to have been chosen by the players who originated the genre.

In chapter seven, "From Jazz Pedagogy to Improvisation Pedagogy: Solving the Problem of Genre in Beginning Improvisation Training," African-American Studies scholar and Musicologist Gabriel Solis makes a case for how "improvisation offers a 'way out'" of the ossified logocentric canons and hierarchies that have long structured music education" (xiv; 96-106). He constructs a compelling argument for "free" jazz as a means for students to become "socially connected" and experience "musical intimacy"—a paradigm that is also echoed by Stewart, Heble, Bunnett, and Laver (106; 33-34; 213-258). Solis accomplishes this through the use of examples of his classroom implementation of two "free" improvisation exercises that intertwine the philosophies of educationalists Patricia Shehan, David Dewey, and John Dewey. The first exercise consists of two people sitting at the piano. The first player plays a C major scale ascending in half notes while the second player plays a two-octave ascending major scale in any rhythmic configuration, provided that this part ends in time with the first part. After completing that, the players trade parts; this time around, the player who is playing two octaves is encouraged to add material to the two octave sequence in a step-wise movement in any direction—up or down. Again, both players trade parts and melodic leaps are added into the equation. This exercise tests if the players will be thrown off by the rhythmic sequences and harmonic dissonances that arise (101). Thus, the object of this exercise is to not only focus on playing with another individual and maintain homeostasis, but rather to "focus on the social, interpersonal lessons of the activity" that provokes its participants to feel intimacy, vulnerability, anxiety, and satisfaction (101). The next exercise Solis has his students perform is geared towards what he calls an exercise in "collective 'free' improvisation" (102). In this exercise, Solis has his students read David Borgo's article "Free Jazz in the Classroom" the night before and then asks them to come into the classroom the next day and just play while reflecting on all the readings they have done in class. The purpose of this exercise, according to Solis, is to give students a perspective on their own musical language by playing responsively and by knowing that others are listening to them as a collective (102). In this respect, Solis' improvisational exercises are a reflection of Dewey's early work *Democracy and Education* (1916)—elucidating Dewey's perspective that "not only is social life identical with communication, but all communication (and hence all genuine social life) is educative" (103).

Howard Spring's chapter "Embodied Action Frameworks: Teaching Multicultural Ear Training" offers strategies for musicians to inhabit the music they are listening to with the "experiences" of the original artists. Although this may sound like a lofty ambition, Spring insists that *emic* and *etic* are not dichotomous but rather mutually influencing and complimentary, meaning that one can change their own perspective over time through personal experience and choice (83). For example, Spring states that in an introductory ethnomusicology class, inexperienced students are asked to engage with the underlying frameworks that inform musicians' improvisations—providing a vessel for them to inhabit the music to which they are listening that is closer to the professional musician's experience (82). Thus, the blending of both *emic* and *etic* lenses becomes a symbiotic union of personal, social, and cultural factors that is first perceived and subsequently shaped by the students (83). There are, however, limits to this approach, Spring admits. For example, many musicians tried to follow in Charlie Parker's footsteps—attending the clubs he frequented, listening to the same music he did, and taking the same hard drugs he did—but they still never attained his fluency in the bebop idiom ("Addiction"). A possible reason why these individuals never attained Parker's effortless mastery was because they didn't share in the same frameworks of personal, social, and cultural factors created by Parker's own experiences or musical trajectory. Nonetheless, Springer purports that students will deepen their aural and conceptual understanding of improvisation by shadowing the underlying performative knowledge created by professionals—a knowledge that is avoided in typical textbook pedagogy (84).

In section two, "Histories, Institutions, and Practices," chapter nine, "Back Into the Classroom: Learning Music Through Historical Improvisation," Peter Schubert and Massimiliano Guido adopt a philosophy of constructivism in education in a manner influenced by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, offering three tenets: "knowledge arises from active engagement with the world," "knowledge is built on previous understanding," and "learning is largely a social activity" (131). Constructivism can be viewed as a theory based on scientific observation about how people learn—individuals 'construct' their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflection on those experiences (Doyle). When we encounter something new, we must first ask questions, explore, and assess what we know—reconciling it with our previous ideas, experiences, and constructs, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant (Doyle). In Schubert and Guido's classroom, a constructivist view of learning places the teacher as the facilitator, not the director, asking open-ended questions and allowing students to repeat things in their own words that are not parroted reflections of the teacher (130). In this sense, the students create knowledge for themselves.

Chapter sixteen is titled "Things That You Hope a Human Being Will Be." It is a conversation between Heble and saxophonist, flutist, and bandleader Jane Bunnett that addresses the gendered politics of listening and support within improvised music. Bunnett maintains that musicians, when engaged in a "free" improvisational scenario, should always be "listening" and "supportive," but recognizes that misogynistic attitudes from male players sometimes yield less than attentive and supportive spaces. For example, at the North Sea Jazz festival during a jam session, a male player from Wynton Marsalis' band came over to Bunnett and told her to get off the stage and that that she should go home and practice (225). Here, Bunnett was the victim of what contributor Jesse Stewart sees as a consistent pattern

in “free” improvisation—male band members silencing female members (32-4). Both Bunnett and Stewart remind the reader that musical decisions that individuals make in an improvisatory context have a dire impact with repercussions that transcend beyond the music (34; 225-6). Though this chapter breaks from the general emphasis on new pedagogical approaches, it is an essential contribution to the volume, highlighting how teachers can recognize and address the power imbalances that can manifest in improvisational encounters in and beyond the classroom.

In chapter seventeen, “The Share: Improvisation and Community in the Neoliberal University,” Mark Laver illuminates perhaps two of the most troubling issues that post-secondary schools are encountering—bureaucracy and neoliberalism. Laver argues that neoliberal attitudes have been responsible for polarization within post-secondary curricula—that is, government cutbacks and corporate dictatorship have been the instigators for music curricula that have fallen to pedagogical lacunae. *The Share* was conceived by Susanna Hood and Scott Thompson, the 2012 Artists-in-Residence with the Musagetes Foundation and ICASP, as a response to these current structural and pedagogical setbacks. *The Share* was a community-based, family-friendly event of music and dance that was held at Exhibition Park in Guelph, Ontario on October 13, 2012. The purpose of *The Share* was to disrupt boundaries between the professional and amateur, between private and public, between performance and play, and between the presentational and participatory—providing what Laver purports to be a processual, pedagogical, and aesthetic model that can serve as a critique of the encroaching neoliberal trends surfacing in universities and institutions around the world (233). Laver has outlined to the reader the crucial need for individuals to seek out alternative means of funding to avoid the hand of undue corporate influence—pooling resources that cannot be subjected to the neoliberal hand. Ultimately, Laver makes for the compelling argument that we cannot sit back and hope for change—we must work together and eschew the toxic and cataclysmic ideologies of neoliberal agencies (251).

Improvisation and Music Education also addresses the challenges and rewards of introducing improvisation-oriented performance classes connected to Western art music practices. Contributing authors Attariwala, Schubert, Guido, Benitez, Currie, Kalmanovitch, and Parker focus on how improvisation can be used to train students to compose. Schubert and Guido suggest that compositional techniques such as counterpoint and theory taught in present-day curricula should be taught as it once was in the Renaissance and Baroque periods—musicians were introduced to the art of improvisation by learning how to recombine pre-existing materials directly on the spot, internalizing the rules of improvisation also known as counterpoint (137). Answering contributor Tanya Kalmanovitch’s question, whether one can really teach improvisation, *Improvisation and Music Education* offers a rich variety of different angles, vantage points, and non-conventional pedagogies. By cohering around reciprocal exchanges of interdependency between teaching and learning, Heble and Laver have succeeded in destabilizing old unquestioned archetypes whilst offering their readers a vital capacity for critical thought, creative agency, empathy, and justice.

With the aid of musicians, scholars, and educators who have worked outside of the ‘traditional’ academic milieu—establishing and collaborating with underserved communities and breaking boundaries between pedagogy and performance, classroom and community—the contributors to this volume have ultimately offered students a valuable collection of theoretical concepts and outward-looking approaches that guide the “experience” beyond stale academic norms towards an essential dialogical engagement that I feel is seldom seen at any collegiate level.

Works Cited

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