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A Mini-Handbook: Version 2009f

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Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen:
Improvisation Exercises and Didactics

An article commenting the exercise collection
Intuitive Music - A Mini-Handbook

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Improvisation Exercises and Didactics

von Carl Bergström-Nielsen, Kopenhagen/Dänemark



This article will be a commentary on my exercise collection *Intuitive Music – A Mini-Handbook* based on my experience of teaching group improvisation in a class called “*Intuitive Music*”, which was a mandatory part of the *Music Therapy* curriculum at Aalborg University, Denmark – from its start in 1983 to 2014. In the nineties, I began continuously compiling exercises, grouping them into categories, and writing commentary on them, which culminated in said handbook.

The *Intuitive Music* classes were part of the bachelor curriculum – even before this type of programme was called a “bachelor’s degree” – and teaching usually started shortly after students embarked on their course. The predominant methodological foundation of the music therapy procedures taught in this course was *free improvisation*. *Free improvisation* is used within *active music therapy*, a form of therapy in which client and therapist play together, rather than clients listening to music with the therapist’s guidance as in *receptive music therapy*. *Intuitive Music* contributed to laying the foundation for other improvisation classes in our curriculum including *Group Music Therapy* and *Individual Music Therapy* (practical self-experience training), as well as an advanced class, in which role play was used in combination with case studies to study clinical issues. Rather than providing knowledge and experience concerning therapy methods, my *Intuitive Music* classes focused on the practical issue of how to play freely improvised music.

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The number of lessons taught in my class has varied, but my most recent teaching series included 10 to 12 lessons, usually taught within a single week respectively in semester one and four, earning students 5 ECTS points each. While I was formally employed as a visiting lecturer, the responsibility for planning and exams in this class lay solely with me, and the strong sense of community, solidarity, and equality among our staff made it possible for me to visit valuable conferences just like my colleagues with tenured posts.

The study regulations from 2009 state the following study goals concerning competencies: „to take part in improvised playing with focused attention, flexibility and creativity”, and “to draw

on a broad selection of musical parameters in order to attain different musical expressions and structures”. After I taught *Intuitive Music* for 31 years starting in 1983, the subject was phased out with the new curriculum in 2014, which reduced the number of teachers and subjects taught.

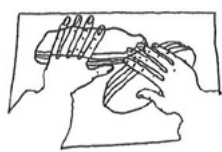
We practise *music therapy* as a form of therapy accessible to everyone: No music skills are required, clients are free to explore any instruments available, all sounds are acceptable just like in experimental music including improvised formats, and therapists provide musical and verbal support and challenges. Some readers may notice that *music therapy* bears close parallels to other forms of art therapy.



It has been my goal as an experienced improviser to convey know-how and theory, present relevant exercises, and point out musical issues to groups and individuals that could be fruitful to work with. This is the *craft aspect* of music making – as opposed to the *psychological aspect* cultivated in the other classes mentioned above. This approach inspired me to teach a simple form of open composition¹ to improvising musicians, aimed at cultivating their personal musicianship and ability to think in structures, while also setting up frameworks for playing with clients.² A long time ago, when the ministry in charge made a certain percentage of graded subjects compulsory, we introduced a type of exam in which students’ compositions were evaluated and graded. Facing the dilemma of maintaining an environment to create free art versus affording students the prestige of grades and exams for the craft they were cultivating, I chose the latter, considering that, while, within our university community, experimental music-making enjoys a relatively high prestige, outside of it, it does not occupy such a high status.

1 See Bergström-Nielsen (2006) which contains a comprehensive anthology of students’ compositions.

2 Mary Priestly, a pioneer of *active music therapy* and a leading role model of Aalborg education, advocated combining musical practice with verbal therapy, and giving individual improvisations titles related to personal issues or moods like “my feeling right now”, or more specific titles addressing feelings or situations they struggled with. The compositions (not the improvisations) in my class also had titles but these stayed clear of personal therapeutic issues (see examples in Bergström-Nielsen 2006).



Music therapy music is different from *concert music*, especially concerning the requirements pertaining to technical skills and dealing with concert situations. In *music therapy* as we understand it, the only requirement is to accept the freedom of the situation. There is, however, an overlap between the two, which originates in the musicians' experience: Students make progress by successfully participating in meaningful and enjoyable music-making, while clients are encouraged to embark on an inner exploration by becoming absorbed in the activity. Both can result in "good music" comparable to the aesthetically fascinating music we normally experience outside the therapy context. While usually, *music therapy* and *concert music* are separate scenes, it is not unheard of that therapists occasionally feel inspired by their work to play concerts.³

Categories of Exercises

Arising from experience, but also informed by acoustically inspired parametric views of music, and psychological considerations pertinent to improvising, my system consists of *four categories*. Some exercises are my own inventions, others are borrowed from colleagues. All of them have been tried and tested – many of them numerous times – in real music-making situations including classes taught as part of the curriculum and musicians' workshops elsewhere. As I have only included a small number of exercises in this article, the reader is invited to download my *Mini Handbook*⁴ for a more comprehensive selection.

Basic Exercises suitable for Beginners

These exercises have been included at the beginning of my collection because in my experience, they are the ones most suitable to getting started.

Example: Instrument Storm

based on an exercise by Inge Nygaard Pedersen

Choose an instrument and, rather than focusing outward on the group, focus on the instrument, exploring ways to connect with it like touching, manipulating, and moving it in different ways. Explore the variety of sounds it can produce. After everybody has been engaged in this process for a while, continue but start turning your attention towards all sounds in the room, and become aware of being part of the group producing them. If time allows, let your attention shift freely between an inward and an outward focus.

Variations: 1) Choose an instrument you are not familiar with. 2) Choose an instrument you know well but use it in a new way. 3) While playing, be active with your body and aware of working hard and becoming tired (precautions may be taken, like warnings to prevent damage from applying too much strength, or earplugs to protect participants from noise). After this, play in a completely relaxed manner. 4) Choose a material you normally do not use (e.g. metal, skin, wood, etc.). 5) Sit or stand without moving (in a relaxed state, without stiffening). 6) Try to dance. 7a) Play nice. 7b) Whatever you do, do not play nice. 8) Combine this exercise with directions you know from other exercises.

For a long time, I have been using this exercise in the very beginning of teaching a particular group of students, during their first weeks or months of embarking on the Music Therapy programme. While they may have no prior experience with free improvisation, they are highly motivated at this point. In a nutshell, the exercise combines several forms of exploration: attention to the instrument including possible extended uses and making clear the importance of shifting between inward and outward attention. When the group is given a signal to start listening to what the others are doing while continuing to play, a spectacular change takes place – the sound becomes more transparent, as individual parts and the communication between them are brought to the fore.

This shift between inward and outward attention happens all the time, in other contexts, too, as a basic mechanism of our inner stream of consciousness. It is a great art to find the right balance between following one's own impulses and listening to others – in other words, finding the right balance between a heuristic approach (meaning the immediate exploration of sounds) and relating to others.⁵ The following categories *group-dynamic exercises* and *awareness exercises* delve deeper into this subject.



Fig.1 Group-dynamic exercises: cycle of expressiveness and listening

⁵ The words "heuristic" and "social intelligence" were coined by Prévost (2016): "The twin propositions for the workshop are for the musicians to focus on searching for sounds and to listen attentively to what else they hear, especially from other musicians (...) However, the natural tendency seems to reveal that exploring the material for sounds (the heuristic) is often at the expense of attentive listening, responding and adapting to others – the dialogical. And, vice versa. There are strong indications that a combination of the empathic cognitive facility (i.e. social intelligence) and the technical means of making sound prefigures the development of music (perhaps all music). Putting these two things together is probably what makes the best of improvised music", p.103

³ Improvising ensembles are of course free to place the emphasis of their practice on concert activity, personal enjoyment, or health, however they see fit.

⁴ See Bergström-Nielsen (2009f).

Group-dynamic Exercises

Example: Charlotte's Relay Race

Imagine standing in a circle and throwing a ball to each other. If you have the ball, throw it for another person to catch. Alternatively, somebody may simply come and take it from you.

Now transfer this idea to music: One at a time, play very briefly, then "throw the ball" for someone else to catch (stop playing). Alternatively, somebody may simply "take the ball from you" (start playing), and you have to stop.

Variation that allows several people to "take the ball" at the same time (play simultaneously): Imagine the ball can temporarily be split up into several balls. Agree on how many, and for how long. With this variation, the exercise approaches free improvisation, while retaining the process of different people rapidly taking turns to contribute.



As stated above, an important communication skill in improvisation is the ability to react very promptly, while you keep listening at the same time. As in an interesting conversation, participants should feel inspired to both listen and contribute. The non-verbal aspects of a conversation, like expressive sounds and interjections, may only last split-seconds. Similarly, for the collaborative process in music improvisation to unfold, it is vital to understand the importance of pauses. Short statements may be more impactful than long ones. This can be an essential insight to maintain the flow of the improvisation and keep it from turning into a stagnant swamp [German readers may appreciate the unique descriptive term "Einheitsbrei"].

An exercise with an even stronger focus on the importance of the overall musical dynamics in improvising groups is *Cutting Down on the Material*. This exercise requires players to make extremely short contributions and can be a real eye-opener, helping them understand the value of making pauses, and the nature of the material experimental music is made of (also see: *Parameter Exercises*.)



Fig.2 Awareness exercises: new ideas pop up during the breaks between miniatures

Awareness Exercises

Example: Miniatures

Miniatures seems to be a classic exercise among improvisers. Play many short "pieces" lasting one minute each. This will help you become aware of opportunities before it is too late, and of how endings come about.

When players start an improvisation, there is a strong focus on what is about to begin. When they resume improvising after a pause, this sense of focus returns, and "something new" tends to happen. Playing miniatures gives participants a chance to go through this process repeatedly, while also raising awareness of form related issues. In short, it helps improvisers learn how to make the most of their playing time.

Other awareness exercises zoom in on individual issues. *Psychogram*, an open piece by Max Keller also included in the *Mini Handbook*, challenges students to play outside their comfort zone, an exercise aimed at developing their expressive skills beyond what feels nice and musically polite. A productive side effect is that it inadvertently draws attention and provokes reactions. *Listen to your Surroundings*, on the other hand, like *Miniatures* a classic improvisation exercise, is aimed at helping improvisers turn their attention outward.

The exercise *Charlotte's Relay Race* described earlier creates a pointillistic or polyphonic texture – a web of sound radically different from traditional music – and is aimed at learning how to handle sound material, making it more transparent and easing communication greatly. *Play for a Long Time* is designed to make players more open-minded about what music can sound like. What happens when you have all the time in the world? How does it change the way you play, and the form the music takes?

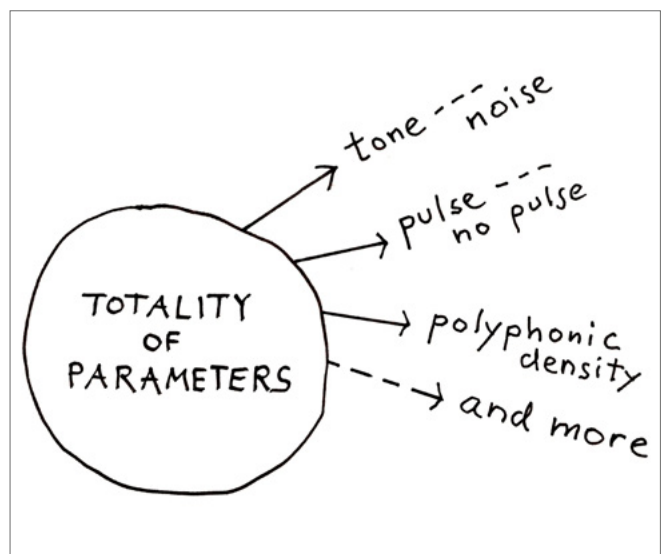


Fig.3 Parameter exercises: the number is not finite

Parameter Exercises⁶

If the music we make is simply “an artistic handling of sound” beyond discernible tonal or metric structures (comparable to abstract painting), then we need a new way of perceiving this as musical material. Think of the weather: there are various degrees of temperature, wind intensity, humidity, and yet we perceive all these components as a single phenomenon referred to as “the weather”. In the same way, music consists of pitches, durations, timbre, and many other elements. My definition of a *music parameter* is that it must be a discernable dimension, which is variable continuously rather than in a *step-by-step* or *either-or* manner. A glissando between poles, so to speak, should be imaginable. We can focus on one parameter and intuitively explore its range of variation, regarding all possible points along the scale as having equal value, and aiming for maximum variation, individually and collectively. In this context, focusing on basic acoustic parameters like pitches, durations, and timbre is doubtlessly vital, but it is no less important to work extensively with composite parameters like *pulse-no pulse*, *tone-noise*, and *polyphonic density*, a term I use to refer to how many improvisers play simultaneously at any one time (an operational definition of *density*). This is an effective way of making participants discover alternatives to traditional material and metre.⁷



Thinking in terms of parameters and working with them often results in more transparent, flexible types of music. Practising variation between the poles of *pulse-no pulse*, for example, can resolve or alleviate the notorious conflict between those who make improvisations resemble popular or classical music characterised by an even flow, repetitions, a dense overall sound, and constant dynamics – and those who think one should only play if one has something to say, while prioritising the openness of the moment, the openness towards interaction, and the importance of pauses in the creative process.⁸

⁶ See Bergström-Nielsen (2006) for a comprehensive investigation of parameter concepts and their use.

⁷ Perceptual qualities of timbre like “sharpness” and “roughness” can also be trained. They can even be measured and defined in an exact operational way, as explained by Mallock (1999-2000) who states that sharpness is related to the “loudness centroid” in the sounds’ spectrum, while roughness accounts for the amount of beating between partials. – For more on individual parameters and a large number of students’ compositions illustrating them, see Bergström-Nielsen (2006).

⁸ Admittedly, these are not the only possibilities. Another approach comparable to building sculptures involves supplementing each other. See Bergström-Nielsen (2005).

The following exercise was designed for advanced students.

Example: Build-up Parameter Exercise

This may be used as an alternative to the parameter exercises focusing on one parameter at a time, or to supplement them.

It is advisable to introduce this exercise with a discussion on the concept of “here and now” in music. Participants are instructed to improvise with as much variation as possible within a given time, e.g. one minute. The immensely varied group sound that ensues will force members to collectively take responsibility for the outcome. After listening to a recording of the improvisation, the teacher points out parts and parameters that lacked variation. With input on the group’s work behaviour and dynamic, the process is repeated. When the students seem ready for it, the teacher asks what parameters and dimensions are suitable for variation (a dimension is something that has one variable characteristic). While long discussions immediately before an improvisation should be avoided, the teacher may offer a brief explanation of pitch, timbre, intensity, and durations as the fundamental properties of music. It has proved useful to make a list of parameters on the blackboard and have students copy it. For a list of parameters and ideas on how to work with them, see: *Parameter Exercises*.

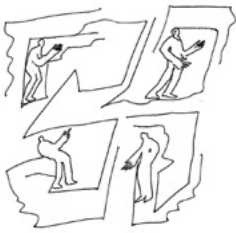
The exercise detailed above should only be taken as far as seems reasonable according to the situation. After wrapping it up, the teacher may transition into other activities or give students time to process the experience. After playing five improvisations lasting no longer than a minute each, one of my students said: “So much has happened in this class!” This illustrates how intense the experience can be. A good way to finish this type of class is listening to recordings of the preceding improvisations and focusing on the development in them.

Let me add an anecdote from the history of this exercise:

As the Danish Group for Intuitive Music was rehearsing before an *Intuitive Music* concert at a festival in Gent in 1977, I asked the stage lighting technician to vary the lighting as much as possible during the next set. He proceeded to make several stage lights fade in and out at regular intervals. “No,” I said. “I meant variation in all parameters.” As he was trained in new music and improvisation, he had no trouble putting this into practice.

Navigating within the Training Prozess

Things take time. The initial first semester class was usually taught on three days within a single week during the first month of the course. A standard third day comment from students was: “Now I’m finally beginning to see what this is all about.” I believe part of the reason for this typical third day breakthrough was that by this point, students had created short pieces in parameter exercises that had helped them make the improvised music their own. Another significant factor was the relatively long span of time and focus dedicated to improvisation in our three-day class.



Naturally, different groups learn in different ways. Teachers or workshop leaders have to adapt their approach based on the teaching context and the characteristics of each group. Groups of adult learners may be shy or noisy, intellectually or emotionally oriented, politely cooperative but weakly motivated, etc. My *Mini Hand-*

book features exercise sequences tailored to the needs of different types of groups, allowing group leaders to adopt various teaching strategies. After having participants play and engage in discussions, it is crucial for leaders to use this input and choose the right exercises to help the group advance to the next level. In addition, regular sessions should be dedicated to giving participants space for “the real thing” and let them engage in (rule-) free improvisation. This will reveal to what extent the preceding exercises have inspired them as improvisers.

Outlook

There are many parallels between my own work and the two studies Mäder et al published in 2013 and 2019 in Switzerland based on their experiences in their MA programme of *Free Improvisation* based in Hochschule Luzern. Their studies contain elaborate exercises focusing on interaction and music parameters. I find it reassuring that we have arrived at similar results independently. Their excellent studies written in German are available for free download.

A dominant exercise format in the Swiss compendium is *Short Suggestions* (German: *Ansa-*
gen), in which short verbal instructions or inputs are given by the teacher before students start playing, to influence their subsequent play. Another special feature of the Swiss MA programme detailed in the studies is a strong emphasis on group discussions. A chapter on *The Importance of Reflection* is also included. One notable difference between our teaching systems is that, while in Switzerland, group sessions in free improvisation are repeatedly scheduled over multiple semesters, the Aalborg curriculum only included intense one-week classes in this category during certain semesters of the bachelor’s degree. In



addition to my classes, however, students also practised improvisation in some of the therapy-oriented subjects mentioned in the beginning of this article, and sometimes outside the curriculum on their own initiative, so improvisation training could continue, and experiences consolidate.



For more extensive reading on improvisation exercises, see category F1.1 in Bergström-Nielsen (2019) and (2022), which lists a large number of items. Among the many ideas on teaching improvisation, one thought-provoking article that takes a very different approach from both the Swiss and the Danish teachings, was written by Lewis (2000) and, describing his pioneering teaching practices at UCSD (University of California San Diego), puts a marked emphasis on solo work in addition to group work. It may be worth reflecting on how differing cultural and musically influenced conceptions seem to lie behind this.

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For an English version of the *Short Suggestions* list, see: www.intuitivemusic.dk/iima/malt.htm

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