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Vermittlungen - musically speaking

Zum Improvisationsunterricht im Musiktherapiestudium

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Clinical Improvisation And The Universe of Musical Idioms

Klinische Improvisation und das Universum musikalischer Idiome

Zusammenfassung: *Die Musiktherapieausbildung an der Universität Aalborg, Dänemark dauert fünf Jahre Vollzeitstudium und enthält viele Spezialdisziplinen. Eine davon ist die intuitive Musik, die sich sowohl mit Übung von Improvisation beschäftigt als mit dem Schaffen von offenen Kompositionen, die mit Improvisation realisiert werden. Der Autor diskutiert die Relativität musikalischer Idiome und weist auf die Bestrebung in der neuen Musik hin, die Ästhetik wieder mit dem Alltag und mit allgemeiner Zugänglichkeit zu verbinden. Parameterbegriffe, wie sie in praktischen Übungen einzeln thematisiert sowie für das Analysieren von Improvisationen eingesetzt werden können, werden erörtert. Zitataspunkte werden gesondert betrachtet als Ausdruck eines immanenten Pluralismus in der Musiksprache. Durch das Akzeptieren dessen und durch bewusste Arbeit mit diesem Aspekt lässt sich nach Ansicht des Autors das Relativitätsproblem bewältigen. Zum Schluß wird die Parameterbetrachtung an einem klinischen Beispiel erläutert.*

Summary: *The music therapy education at Aalborg University, Denmark, takes five years of full-time study to accomplish and contains many special disciplines. One of these is called intuitive music. It deals with improvisation training and with the creation of open compositions as well, which allow for improvisation in the playing process. The author discusses the relativity of musical idioms and points to the endeavours in new and experimental music to again connect music to everyday life and make it accessible for everybody. Parameter concepts, which are focused upon one after another in practical exercises, and which can be used in analysing improvisations, are explained. Quotation aspects receive special attention and are seen as resulting from an inherent pluralism in the musical language. Through accepting this situation and through conscious working with this aspect the author believes that the problem of relativity can be mastered. At the end of the article, the parameter view is illustrated with a clinical example.*

This article proposes a view of music and of improvisation teaching inspired by new music aesthetics. It allows for all kinds of sound to be used in musical improvisation and provides a systematic parameter analysis of the sound. This parameter analysis also extends into dealing with the plurality of musical idioms and the „patchwork“-aspect being to a greater or lesser degree present within all music-making.

Improvisation Teaching at the Music Therapy Education at Aalborg University

Our music therapy education takes five years full-time study. The therapy method is psychodynamically oriented, and self-experience plays an important role. A previous music degree is not required, but those who wish to study must pass an entrance examination.

Apart from improvised music being practised as a natural part of group and individual self-experience, improvisation is taught in several disciplines. It is taught by piano and vocal teachers, in a special subject practising clinical situations by role-playing, it is touched upon in ensemble playing, and it is taught in a subject taught by me called intuitive music. Intuitive music deals with free ensemble playing, with training of playing and analysis of improvisations according to parameter concepts as well as with composing frameworks for improvisation.

Which improvisation skills are important for music therapy students? I think it is important that they come to feeling at home dealing and experimenting with many instruments and their voice in the ever changing context of playing together. A point of special importance to me is the ability to

analyze complex music processes and put it into practical use. - A range of traditional instrumental/vocal and music theory skills are of course also useful, for instance when clients bring melodies forward they like.

Improvisation teaching in a special subject apart from self-experience and maybe also from therapy training has in my opinion the important advantage of facilitating concentration on musical issues.

Relativity of Musical Idioms

It need hardly be said that music therapists are keen to communicate and will accept the client's musical expression to a high degree. However, we all have limitations, some of which may be boundaries that can be pushed further ahead. Try to do the following exercise...

This is a psychological view dealing with us as musicians. Consider your personal definition of music. Is it organised sound, or sound produced with the aim of expressing emotions, or sound organised in a beautiful way, or...

Now consider what is NOT within your definition, for instance that which is chaotic, or does not express emotions, or which is ugly. Try to „look around corners“. Might it be possible that some others' view include things which your definition excludes? Might it not be possible that your client's ideas differ from yours? We extend our personal bias to the very medium of music itself - all humans have „blind spots“ in their perception.

Insights from this exercise can be similar to some of those coming from practise: that all of us have personal boundaries, but we do learn and gather inspiration from meeting different music approaches.

At our Symposium, HANNAH VIETH-FLEISCHHAUER posed the interesting question (quoting from the programme): „In the boundless musical and cultural plurality of our time one can ask, how many languages, how much artistic equipment therapists must be able to control in order to understand the expressive messages of the improvisation and to meet them in an adequate way - or whether this exercise of skills is contrary to the essential therapeutic goals“.

It could seem that the number of musical idioms is by far greater than we could ever hope to learn and control! However, I believe there is a way out of this dilemma in employing a meta-stylistic view of musical idioms on the basis of experimental music aesthetics. Also I believe that an adequate exercise of improvisation skills can indeed be helpful for the music therapist in order to achieve the therapeutic goals faster and more safely. This could be the result of more effective interventions during playing and when formulating playing rules. Also, improvisation skills can be useful tools to the end of ensuring an ever ongoing development as an improvising musician.

Liberating Music and our Clients

A new cultural climate allowed for a more democratic attitude towards art after the second world war. Creativity was to a higher degree seen as a common human ability, not just to be found with especially gifted geniuses. New sounds and new ways of playing together were introduced by

experimental musicians and composers in an especially radical way. In the USA, JOHN CAGE introduced his philosophy of liberating the sounds. CHRISTIAN WOLFF wrote compositions which were games for the musicians, thus strongly stressing the aspect of communication. In Europe, KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN, GYÖRGY LIGETI and other composers created new musical structures and processes in both electronic, instrumental and vocal music, pushing limits of musical expression to new extremes, both dramatic and meditative ones. Improvisation in various degrees, later also free improvisation, became part of performance practice. Such tendencies encouraged the use of free improvisation in active music therapy and its coming into its own educational institutions from the beginning of the seventies and on.

Composer HENRI POUSSEUR, who was a part of the European scene from the early days in the fifties, presented an interesting philosophical view of the new music, stating that traditional music certainly can give great personal satisfaction, but it can unfortunately be at the expense of immediate contact with daily life. The tools of cognition and experience have to too far an extent been borrowed from the formalized language of the tradition having its origins elsewhere back in history, and a splitting results between the beautiful illusion and reality:

„The joy...is an illusory one while one momentarily thinks having a divine consciousness...Getting back to daily life, after such a paradisaal escape, cannot help to leave a wake of longings, an acute nostalgia after the lost perfection. ...The new music...offers to the common human being, by no longer rejecting parts of the sounding reality, the possibility of not being ...dominated and kept as a slave...Art is no longer separated from reality, poetry no longer separated from prose, and it is again possible to go from an aesthetic activity to a daily life without regret.“ (Footnote 01)

The cultural climate of the post-war years, with its optimism about breaking up from the old world is reflected in these manifesto-like statements. But the idea that art should inspire our daily lives rather than being an escape from reality remains as valid as ever. POUSSEUR vividly describes the situation of art enjoyment suffering from being separated from our daily life and from our own creative powers. Even if there was an intense experience, it can find no natural continuation as an inspiration to ongoing daily life. Just like a ship leaves a wake of movements in the water, there is turbulence in the soul after the art experience is over. There is a longing back to the „divine“ and „paradisaal“ feeling, a reaching out for something which all of a sudden has become impossible to reach, even if it seemed so near, like a fata morgana. There is acute nostalgia and sadness, even „regret“ about encountering daily life again where prose seemingly has no extension into poetry. Areas of what we sense in our daily life are kept away from being illuminated by the aesthetic experience and are repressed into something more unconscious.

However, new music offers an expanded universe that can reach a greater part of our daily life as well as our cultural context - inclusive of the feelings and notions we attach to them. Take a look at the following quotation by the composer CHRISTIAN WOLFF:

„Society is so much geared now to consumption, rather than production in the arts, and most people have got the notion I think that music is there just to be listened to on CDs...whereas it is clearly something they could also be doing...and then the next problem is how to achieve that technically, because obviously not everybody has been trained that much or even has that many skills...but my notion is that one could make kinds of music in which a variety of backgrounds and a variety of skills or lack of it even could be combined in very interesting and beautiful ways“ (Footnote 02).

Note how special emphasis is placed not just on having a common activity, but on aesthetic goals in creating music structures as interesting and beautiful as possible. As music therapists, we also work with music as a common, accessible activity. New music was a decisive historical encouragement for active music therapy and its institutions to come into being in the beginning of the seventies. We can still have a lot of both inspiration and technical insight from new music - and, as is beginning to happen ever so slightly, we can also make contributions to concert life too,

showing to the public music from a new side (Footnote 03).

How, then, about possible dialectical relations to existing styles? I will deal with that later in the section „The Importance of Pluralism“ after first having taken a look at the universe of new sounds and how to take possession of it.

Parameter Concepts

According to classic concepts within new music, a musical parameter is one single, continually variable dimension. For instance, pitch can be varied gradually like in a voice glissando. Often in practice, a selection is made. Thus the piano employs discrete steps of the tempered scale. But one advantage of the parameter view is that it takes attention to how much is really possible within the limits of the sound universe while still offering a unified view. Comparable to viewing the weather in parameters like temperature, wind intensity, air humidity etc. Likewise, the sound has at the same time

Pitch (low---high)

Duration (long---short)

Timbre (dark---light (meaning faint---strong formants) as well as soft---sharp (meaning regular---irregular formant patterns))

Pulse (regular ---no discernable pulse)

Tempo (slow---fast - in case there is a discernable pulse)

Density (thin --- dense)

Degree of Contrast between elements (small---big)

- and even more parameters. In my intuitive music teaching, we make group exercises in varying these parameters independently and thus we get to know them in practise. Results from such work may be:
- better memorizing of what happened
- the improvisation feels less chaotic during playing
- one learns to react fast in the situation during playing
- one can discern what has not yet been tried and thus becomes conscious about one's own habits.
- the music can become dramatically more intuitive, varied and appealing. It seems a „collective ear“ can really be at work!

Parameter exercises is not the only category in my training method, but an important one. They open up and train awareness and imagination. A favourite saying of mine is that „the musician is the most important instrument“. By this I mean that so much depends on our awareness and imagination, and a good musician can make much out of even very primitive instrument selections. Whereas a poor musician will encounter problems regardless of which instruments

etc. that are available.

Before playing we should be well ready. During playing there should be a minimum of thinking and planning - afterwards we might listen to the improvisation and analyze it. Thus fantasy and intellect work together: thinking hard from time to time, being aware and intuitive as much as possible! (Footnote 04)

Another subject also having to do with analyzing improvisations is Graphic Notation, also taught by me at Aalborg (Footnote 05) . Here we employ signs and graphic drawings to account for what is going on in an improvisation. To do this, one is forced to listen well and grasp the details. Here, parameter analysis is also useful. Additionally, this subject also teaches how to give these aural scores an interpretative aspect, making them suitable for research purposes and for sharing one's perception of the music with others - this could be for publication or for supervision. Or they could be used in a simple form just for memorizing oneself, as an alternative to describing the music with words.

The Importance of Pluralism

One more important parameter is to be mentioned:

Original material---quotations

Like many of the other parameters mentioned, this can be complicated to define. But we can in practise distinguish between what is „simply“ sound and musical elements we create ourselves when improvising - and that which is clearly a reference taken from „outside“. Degrees in between could for instance include a Dorian melody in a contrasting context - something known is suggested, but the melody may be new. Or the quotation could be so short that it is hardly discernable.

In practise, improvising according to an instruction like „play only short quotations of max. a few seconds“ will often produce humorous clashes and playful reactions. Departing from the „correct“ way to deal with the musical material releases hidden energies. Humour opens up for a wider musical universe and touches upon the unconscious.

Also sometimes in concert music, musicians may make jokes quoting known melodies. Over time, different styles may come and go in a client's improvisations. When known melodies are sung, it can be done in many ways, conveying quite different messages. There is an important patchwork aspect to music just like to language which is always in the process of borrowing elements and processing them and passing them on again. A „pure“ musical style is really an illusion, even if relatively fixed reference elements and preferences of course exist (Footnote 06). Music, as we therapists know, does not only affirm feelings but can also by its playful nature pose questions and invite answers. It can provoke, attach and detach itself to other people's musical expressions. Any musical expression is part of such a process. (Footnote 07)

And music aesthetics and collage works of composers like CHARLES IVES, JOHN CAGE, KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN and others take this into account. For IVES, the spiritual connections between all things were central to this, for CAGE the avoidance of dualisms (cf. POUSSEUR above), and for STOCKHAUSEN the vision of different co-existing communities (Footnote 08) . To take just one example... in Telemusik by STOCKHAUSEN (Footnote 09),

shorter and longer fragments of various ethnic music come and go, intermingled with electronic sounds many of which are quivering high-pitched, the fragments appearing and disappearing at shifting places in the sound. Sometimes almost only the pulsating rhythm of the original music comes through and determines the character of the electronic sound. Sometimes vocal sounds become almost purely electronic and come up as separate gestures. Everything can be connected to everything, and this dream-like musical universe is highly alive with dynamic changes and progressions. - I am of course not thinking of directly imitating this piece in practical music therapy. It serves here as an example of an advanced musical structure using a plurality of styles. And many more different formulas of a comparable nature is possible.

Taking in the pluralistic aspect of experimental music aesthetics, I find it yields a credible solution to the problem of relativity. We are allowed to be individual musicians, to rejoice in staying at one local place in the musical universe as well as to change our place in it. And we can comment on what we hear in our own way.

A Clinical Example

The following example deals with a case from therapy music in which parameter analysis has been useful to me.

One of my first clients was an autistic woman. She used her voice with a quiet humming, and I felt the need of developing ways of accompanying her without dominating. At the same time this accompaniment should not be passive either, but I would also like to stimulate and provoke her to get out of her monotony. My practical solution to this could be the use of varying tempi, changing sounds and a varied use of pauses - all of this within a quiet range of dynamics which might occasionally make exceptions with stronger sounds. The example below deals with an excerpt of approx. one minute.

DYNAMICS			-		+
SOUND/PAUSE			-		+
TONE DIFFERENTIATION				+	
.....					
CLIENT	A		C		E
THERAPIST		B		D	
.....					
DYNAMICS		+		-	
TEMPO				+	

The „plus-minus“ notation of STOCKHAUSEN for greater and lesser activity in single parameters is employed here. We sing alternately.

A: Anne sings repeated tones, portamento.

B: I imitate the pitch and sing more loudly.

C: Loudness of her singing decreases and tones are left out.

D: I sing repeated tones, but faster, as 3 against 2, and quieter.

E: She resumes singing with more energy, more tones, and the pitch range begins gradually to expand to several tones and to approach the beginning of a melody.

It could seem that in B, I become dominating with my loud statement, causing her to decrease her activity for a while. Whereas my behaviour in D seems to have a stimulating effect on her singing through the apparently more subtle working of the tempo parameter while keeping the dynamic level low.

A Final Remark

I would like to describe the relation between therapeutic and musical goals like this: the therapist has a compass and knows the general direction where to aim at. Inside the therapist, however, there is a musician who has an intimate local knowledge of the territory and can show the exact way. Without the therapeutic knowledge, one might go interesting places without knowing where it would lead. And without the musical knowledge, one might choose difficult ways instead of direct ones, encounter blockings of the road etc. But if both two work together, they will produce a successful music therapy.

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(please see also the notes)

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- 1) "La Nuova Sensibilità musicale", Incontri Musicali 2, 1958.
- 2) Interview with CHRISTIAN WOLFF, London 19/11 1994.
- 3) ROSEMARIE TÜPKER has an interesting list of ideas and suggestions for "concert improvisation", viewing this practise as a good supplement to therapy-related training. "Reflexion seelischer Verhältnisse in der musikalischen Improvisation" in: LENZ, MARTIN/TÜPKER, ROSEMARIE (1998): Wege zur musiktherapeutischen Improvisation, Münster (LIT Verlag) (Materialien zur Musiktherapie; 4).
- 4) C.G. JUNG remarked that "the unconscious only functions satisfactorily when consciousness fulfills its tasks to the limit of what is possible", JUNG, C.G.: Den psykiske energetik og drømmenes væsen (1969), Copenhagen (Gyldendal) p.164 (transl. by author). Text from 1948.
- 5) Please see my writings about this in the literature list.
- 6) Even a relatively "pure" and stable style of music originally comes into being in a context of different styles to which it responds. Much music-making remains to a greater or lesser degree faithful to an established idiom, like for instance "jazz" or "prelude and fugue" in organ improvisations. But the act of creating music anew leaves open the possibility to search for and find the right thing to do in the moment, responding to all other music in the universe. It seems to be in this sense that EDWIN PRÉVOST (1995) speaks of the freely improvising musician as a "meta-musician" in his book "No Sound is Innocent", (Chippenham, Wiltshire (Copula/Matchless)), even if the music of his group AMM is rather one of pure cultivation than of collage. See for instance p. 103: "The meta-musician must put music aside or else be consumed by music. All meta-music's aesthetic priorities arise from the direct relationship of player with materials, player with player and player with audience".
- 7) Elaborations on this theme to be found in KELLER, MAX E.(1973): "Improvisation und Engagement", Melos 4 and NIEDECKEN, DIETMUT (1986): Einsätze. Material und Beziehungsfigur im musikalischen Produzieren. Hamburg (VSA-Verlag).
- 8) Some important texts are CAGE, JOHN: Silence (1973). London (Calder and Boyars) and STOCKHAUSEN, KARLHEINZ (1971): Texte III. Köln (DuMont), (see especially the article "Weltmusik").
- 9) CD Stockhausen-Edition 9, 1995. With a large text heft (German or English).