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## Vermittlungen - musically speaking

*Zum Improvisationsunterricht im Musiktherapiestudium*

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## **Eckhard Weymann, Hamburg**

### **Improvisation Instruction in The Studies of Music Therapy:**

About The Interrelationship of Art And Psychology

### **Improvisationsunterricht im Musiktherapiestudium:**

Zur Vermittlung von Kunst und Psychologie

**Zusammenfassung.** *Mit Hilfe von Beispielen aus der Unterrichtspraxis beschreibt der Autor den Improvisationsunterricht im Musiktherapiestudium als eine Art Vermittlungsstelle zwischen Kunst und Psychologie. Neben der Förderung der „handwerklichen“ und der intuitiven Kompetenzen beim Improvisieren geht es um die Fähigkeit der sprachlichen Reflexion vor dem Hintergrund sowohl musikologischer wie psychologischer Konzepte. Diese Übersetzungsarbeit wird als exemplarisch für die Musiktherapie-Praxis angesehen.*

**Summary.** *Accompanied by some examples from his teaching the author describes the improvisation instruction within the music therapy training as an interface between art and psychology. Besides the training of musical skills and creative-intuitive competences students learn to reflect on the improvisations also within concepts of psychology and musicology. This work of translation and interpretation seems to be an example for the everyday-work of musictherapists.*

### **Improvisation instruction in the postgraduate diploma course of music therapy at the Hamburg University of Music and Performing Arts**

The postgraduate diploma course of music therapy is designed as a continuing vocational study course and takes three years. With regard to the methodology of therapy there is a pluralism of methods according to the various teachers' respective individual orientation; the common factor however is a certain perspective towards depth psychology. The students come to the university once a month for several days to study within a study group those subjects that are being offered there. Preconditions for this course are a.o. a completed university course, several years of professional experience in an „interactional profession“ (e.g. as a teacher, psychologist, social worker), and well-established musical abilities. Applicants have to take an entrance examination over two days, where they are tested about their musical and psychological competence.

The subject „improvisation“ is offered in two possible orientations: in one there is a stronger emphasis on the methodological aspects of therapy („therapeutic improvisation“), the other one focuses more on the artistic-aesthetic aspects (music workshop, artistic improvisation in a group) without however intending to create a contrast between the artistic and the therapeutic situation.

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#### **A. Therapeutic Improvisation**

*In small groups (5-6 students) we attempt to develop improvisation as a prominent tool within the framework of music therapeutic treatment technique. On the one hand the musical/practical side of this „craft“ (=being able to play), on the other hand the training of listening and evaluating is dealt with. Aside from formation exercises with regard to basic parameters of music (such as e.g. single note, melodics, rhythmic, harmonics, form, process, variation) forms of duet playing as well as ensemble playing are dealt with. As a result for instance basic relationships of being together (e.g. supporting, following, disturbing one another, feeling big or small...) are being tested, and their possibilities of further development are being investigated. With the help of taped examples these general abilities and knowledge (that just as well could partly be categorised under the heading of „artistic improvisation“) are related to music therapeutic practice and corresponding topical experiences of the students, and are expanded in certain specific aspects.*

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## **B. Artistic improvisation in the ensemble, Music workshop**

*The teaching goal here is an active confrontation with „free improvisation“ or „intuitive music“ (STOCKHAUSEN) as a form of art, as it has developed almost simultaneously in Jazz and New Music (and in between) since about the sixties.*

*This „tradition“, with which an entirely new attitude towards the musical production process (instantaneous composition) was tested, represents an important cultural background for the practice of improvisational music therapy. Side by side with the aspect of practising this form of playing (which for musically trained people has a lot to do at the beginning with a liberation from conventional attitudes), the ability for differentiated listening, describing and evaluating of improvised music is being trained. In order to give some stimulation and orientation, „historical“ sound models and texts about free improvisation and new music are studied as well.*

*By experimenting, the students have the opportunity to deal with their own attitude towards listening and music. Composition experiments, improvisation ideas, tape studies etc. may be presented, tested and discussed. And also preliminary studies for the concert which constitutes part of the final practical exams are done here.*

*In addition to that, musical improvisation appears as an integral element of other offered subjects. Of course improvisation in particular holds an essential place within the music therapeutic self-experience of the student (individual teaching analysis, group music therapy), but is however related to something else: while during improvisation instruction technical/artistic aspects and the aspects of treatment methodology are emphasised, there the individual biographical background of playing, playing inhibitions, as well as those sensations and meanings coming up during ensemble playing, are being examined more closely. A clear separation and a different focus in each of these fields (which do however belong together) has proved to be helpful.*

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## **Improvisation in music therapy is not without prerequisites**

Improvisation is no matter-of-course, rather a provocation. Our patients demonstrate this over and over again. They are oftentimes surprised, relieved and interested, sometimes also dismayed, perplexed, but almost never indifferent when we ask them to play.

Working with musical improvisation in music therapy, is a relatively recent development. Up until a few decades ago improvisation was hardly a subject in the context of music therapy. Mostly great European art music (e.g. by J.S. BACH or MOZART) or the prevailing folk music was used for therapeutic purposes, music was either played to the patients, or one sang together (see WEYMANN, 1996).

With the emergence of new forms within the practice of music during the sixties and seventies, also e.g. including parts of collective improvisation, improvisational playing according to graphic notation or verbal instructions within the framework of certain compositions, also new possibilities of the therapeutic use of music emerged. (See the article by CARL BERGSTRØM-NIELSEN in this book!) It seems to be no coincidence that today's forms of music therapy were not developed half a century or a century earlier. (Without doubt also the discoveries of psychoanalysis - in particular the procedure of free association as a doorway to the subconscious - are of great significance. The attempts of „écriture automatique“ and „action painting“ in the sixties are on the same level.) In how far is the specific practice of music therapy, i.e. for instance the use of improvisation in therapy, based less on considerations and results of therapeutic theory (e.g. psychological or medical), but rather on particular current forms of cultural practice? My thesis is this: cultural practice, as unconscious and unknown it may be to the individual patient, serves as a hotbed for that which might be expressed within the refuge of therapy.

Today's improvisational approaches in music therapy, seen in a cultural-historical way, are also a.o. based on the musical practice of New Music and the Jazz of the sixties and seventies with their dismantling of traditional forms of composition, material, and ensemble playing. As CARL BERGSTRØM-NIELSEN has said in the symposium programme, these forms „hibernate“ in therapy as it were. So we could ask ourselves what it means for music therapy when the

improvisation movement loses some of its topicality, when therapeutic playing practice is not covered any more by cultural forms? Do we then have to expect a gradual shifting of emphasis of the methodology of music therapy as well - for instance towards a more intensified application of receptive procedures?

By including music improvisation (and other creative „media" in the catalogue of artistic forms of therapy, psychodrama etc.) new dimensions have been added to therapeutics in general (see also SUSANNE METZNER's contribution to this book!). But on the other hand, therapy also functions as a „different habitat" for the varieties of music as a cultural phenomenon: here, on the edges of cultural practice, deepened insights about the connection between Man and music may be gained. The creation of music in (psycho-)therapy may be regarded as some kind of experimenting which serves to investigate as well as to further develop (evolution) cultural practice - and this with regard both to the individual patient and the collective (see for this BRYNJULF STIGE's contribution to in this book).

At this point let us briefly think of some of the pioneers of our profession, who during the sixties and seventies played an especially important role in creating the conditions for establishing improvisation as a therapeutic procedure in music therapy. As a few examples I would like to mention: LILLI FRIEDEMANN who worked in Hamburg; PAUL NORDOFF who from England taught all over Europe and North America; ALFRED NIEMAN, composer at the Guildhall School in London who a.o. was a teacher to MARY PRIESTLEY; ALFRED SCHMÖLZ, the first director of the music therapy course in Vienna (see the contribution by ELENA FITZTHUM). Every one of these artist and/or therapist personalities had their very specific own opinions about improvisation, every one of them was located at a different place on the scale of musical culture. Thus extremely diverse positions of music aesthetics and stylistics were brought into play, for example concerning the handling of harmonics or rhythmic arrangement in music. The scale included the cultivation of single-note improvisation, the manner of the musical practice of Free Jazz determined by spontaneity and an immediacy without any prerequisites, the integration of ethnic stylistics as well as jazzy „swinging" playing elements. It would probably be interesting to do a follow-up in a kind of „archaeological" research about how these „styles" or „therapeutic idioms" of the founders and teachers are reflected and how they have changed within the respective „schools" of music therapy.

### **Improvisation instruction within the field of tension between art, therapy and the development of personality**

In our profession as improvisation teachers in music therapy studies, we have to observe and connect at least three different „skills" or ways of professional competence: apart from the teacher's competence they are those of the musician and the (music) therapist. Probably my colleagues' individual viewpoints differ widely according to their respective professional background and focus, and thus also the various mixing ratios of these three fields of competence. Wherever one's own position in this triangle may be assumed: the complexity connected with our work is significant. We are working within the *tension between these three worlds*.

The students of music therapy studies also find themselves confronted with similar interrelation and integration tasks when they, sensitised through the effects and meanings of music, as they appear in their own teaching therapy, are supposed to learn the skill of improvisation. It is not rare that the complexity of the (expressed or imagined) level of demands causes some inhibition at first: satisfying demands concerning the musical/instrumental/vocal abilities, and on the other hand meeting the imagined demands regarding the personality structure of future music therapists, both of which in turn have to be related to the therapy concept taught at this particular university, as well as to the clients' therapeutic commissions derived from that etc. Do I behave correctly? Do I present myself as a good enough musician, piano player, drummer? Do I behave in a manner that is presumably expected from a therapist? Does perhaps something unacceptable show in my personality, do I „give myself away" through my playing? - Anyway, teaching improvisation is about a paradoxical activity: learning how to play. This learning has a

lot to do with the liberation of demands, of a network of conditioning, the dismantling of fixed patterns, changes of points of view. But at the same time „improvisation" is also a subject of the final exam, i.e. it is connected with expectations and criteria (that are difficult to define) on the part of the training organisation. In this field of tension it has proved helpful and has reduced the complexity within the situation, when during improvisation instruction the artistic aspects on the one hand, and the methodological aspects pertaining to therapy on the other are clearly focussed, the aspects of personality development however (including the disturbance phenomena that at times may become apparent here) are not being addressed, but are trustfully left to the work in the teaching analysis or to supervision (see the contribution by SUSANNE METZNER). Mainly aspects of skills, of proficiency or non-proficiency and the appropriate ways of solution, but not however the personal or biographical background for a certain inhibition or hang-up in playing are addressed.

For me improvisation instruction is essentially about practising a new general outlook, an attitude that not only seems to be vitally important for music therapists, as one may infer from a socio-psychological text by the psychoanalyst HORST PETRI:

„Today the young generation (...) has to adjust to a world full of imponderables and insecure future perspectives. (...) Dropping out or diving in - that is the question. The sense of a stable job orientation as well as of the continuity of human relations and life plans increasingly gives way to the consciousness of an improvised life, a borrowed time lasting from today until tomorrow, and in any case can only be planned over short time periods."

(HORST PETRI: Guter Vater - böser Vater, Bern, 1997, p. 142)

## **Beginning, beginners' mind - two examples**

In Zen there is a beautiful word for what is needed to have a developmental-oriented attitude towards the world: „beginners' mind". I do not approach the world from the role of expert who knows everything, but rather like a beginner who wants to learn something, who is on the move. This is also an attitude needed for improvisation. I am getting involved with the beginning of something that is completely unknown as yet, and I will simply begin. Even a long way starts with one step. I am trying to develop confidence in the productive force of movement itself.

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*I always like to illustrate this attitude of being on the move with the following conceptual image as a counter-movement of the relationship between the fixed and the movable in improvisation: the crossing of a river. A broad, shallow river has to be crossed, where single rocks are everywhere either just visible below the water surface or just out of the water a little. In between fast or slowly flowing water. It is possible to jump from rock to rock. From each rock you'll get a new perspective, new conditions, opportunities, circumstances. I'll jump in at a favourable spot. Now I could stop after every jump, take my bearings, assess, plan my next jumps. The conditions and my courage allowing, however, I can also keep moving, use the jump to go on jumping. I find my way „on the move", joining up the individual movements into one single action - i.e. crossing the river.*

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Under the keyword of „beginnings" I would like to invite you to have a look in my workshop, by giving two basic exercises as an example, and adding a few thoughts.

I. One exercise is called: *Casual Playing*. In the German-speaking countries we have the lyrics of a well-known folksong, a poem by GOETHE titled „Found", the beginning of which describes very well the desired playing attitude of not-searching and the casualness in finding:

Ich ging im Walde  
So für mich hin,  
Und nichts zu suchen  
Das war mein Sinn.

Im Schatten sah ich  
Ein Blümchen stehn  
Wie Sterne leuchtend,  
Wie Äuglein schön. (...)

For this exercise I would e.g. accordingly formulate the following assignment:

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*Play casually along, without looking for anything in particular, but be open for what might happen unexpectedly; and then follow that up with determination! (Expect the unexpected.)*

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The trick here is not to find too quickly, but to prolong this first moment of openness, of not knowing, this state of suspense „preceding the creation of the world“, not to start „tinkering around“ here, but to wait in an active state of mind, playing, until something really unexpected occurs, something convincing and compelling.

After these solo-improvisations I ask the players to describe to their small study group what they have experienced. One of these descriptions went like this:

„At first it was rather easy to play casually. Then I began to feel stress: now it's about time that something else should be coming up, now I really have to think of something. [Here the sound level goes back a little] Then I tried to do something [one hears more powerful sounds]. Here the stress is gone. But I realise that I am not in the right state of mind any more and I switch - here coincidentally „half“ cluster sounds occur that I find interesting: strangely dull sounds. They spread as if by themselves. The attempt to control them fails. Now one could also do a sudden ending, that's what I'd like right now.“

A summarising formulation: I unexpectedly come into contact with something that's fascinating but hard to control - and opt for an abrupt exit.

Before the exercise is repeated or someone else starts playing, we talk about surprises. You cannot make them, produce them. You can merely be alert in a receptive state of mind. How can one do justice to that which occurs unexpectedly? Or: How can you best guard yourself against surprises?

II. Almost a counter-exercise to *Casual Playing* is *Melody from a single note* (which by the way I owe to PAUL NORDOFF):

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*Concentrate and wait for the right moment to come. Then suddenly play a very strong note! Listen intensively to the fading note, until you suddenly know which notes have to follow from this beginning.*

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In contrast to casualness here the formation energy is at first being concentrated, collected, gathered. It is the extreme sketch, living off the highest speed, the throw, the excitement. The piece becomes very short, the eruption, the formation in an outcry. Necessary for this are: presence of mind, courage, the seizing of the right moment (compare: catching a fish with your bare hands). The expectation is that something will come of it: a motif, a melody, a pithy form.

Here as well the difficulty lies in the *right moment* which however is gone more quickly than in

the first exercise. The impact of this one note is quickly used up, by waiting and listening too long the possibilities of continuation will evaporate. Then the excitement does not increase any more but levels off, and those notes being played anyway do not appear convincing, but rather studied and artificial.

Possible continuations of this exercise: *Repeat the melody, the motif. Elaborate the motif material and develop variations.* We certainly do not mean that that what has been played could be repeated precisely and note per note. Rather the attention should be directed to the past and the memory should be activated. Oftentimes that what was played cannot be remembered at first, it occurred below the threshold of perception as it were. The given assignment is supposed to widen the scope of attention and also to focus on the suspenseful contrast of spontaneity and reflection running up against each other. The elaboration and variation of the note material which has been found, and with which indeed certain transitions towards composition are being initiated, leads to a deepened exploration and appropriation of one's own, oftentimes ever so strange, within musical activity.

With these exercises one can observe how *interest* develops, as an indication of an authentic psycho-aesthetic gestalt formation which is apt and adequate. And this topical interest which is being sensed, oftentimes initiated because of the element of the unexpected, in my opinion is also the most important guideline in any therapeutic relationship, without which no contact and no change can be found.

These two exercises are really about extending the improvisation process itself, which develops between the letting go and the seizing - approached from two sides. In both exercises the player senses the endeavours of the self as well as the musical material. Both exercises can be regarded as experiments to explore one's own subconscious behavioural tendencies (psychological aspects), and also as exercises how to deal with the musical happening occurring at this moment (material aspect).

### **About the task of improvisation instruction in music therapy studies**

Besides the more technical part of training the instrumental or vocal playing ability, an *expansion of the intuition* as well as the related ability *to reflect* are aimed at. We attempt to create experiences like the ones which STOCKHAUSEN described in the context of the so-called „intuitive music“:

„...suddenly a situation is reached where all players are obviously fascinated by something that is in the air. They are completely fascinated by the sound and act immediately without thinking - I mean spontaneous acting -, and then very intense structural patterns emerge that are being maintained for a certain time“ (STOCKHAUSEN 1978, p. 131)

Such a state of mind of partial self-abandonment can simultaneously include creative/liberating as well as worrying experiences, just as they also may be triggered in patients through the harmless-sounding request „Just play what comes to mind“. Something begins, something gets started; processes are being initiated that might develop a certain independent dynamic. In such situations we (as music therapists and as improvisation teachers) function as some kind of travel companion, hopefully well-equipped with experiences.

In my opinion this teaching is about *mediating between art and psychology* - provided that psychology is here understood literally as the knowledge or the science of the processes of the psyche. One could even say, improvisation instruction is about expanding psychology training in terms of music - or about teaching music through the eyes of the psychologist. *Learning how the soul creates music*: one experiences something both about the soul and about music. What happens is a psychological view of the musical elements and a way of expressing the psychological in an aesthetic or musical manner. These two factors of expertise (psychology and musicology) are being brought into a stimulating hermeneutic interrelationship, but without losing their specific nature in the process. A musical phenomenon (e.g. an improvisation) can be

grasped through the terminology of musicological theory of musical forms as well as through an experiential description. The formulations may be related to one another in an exploratory manner (e.g. how could this experience be connected to those forms?), subsequently the results (depending on the form of the question) can be reflected further, either in psychological or aesthetic-cultural contexts. In the practice of playing these background considerations have been integrated.

Improvisation instruction serves to equip or to provide the music therapist with both a specific psycho-aesthetic organ of perception and treatment/action, and a corresponding ability to reflect what is happening in verbal form. The playing itself seems - metaphorically speaking - to become a great ear, like a wide-spread sail, taking up the vibrations, the excitement, the drifts and irritations of the relationship process (resonance), and incorporating them into the formations. CARL BERGSTRØM-NIELSEN probably means something along those lines when he speaks of the „collective ear“ with regard to ensemble playing.

It is the demanding task of the subject's didactics to promote those interrelation processes which also have an exemplary significance for (music) therapeutic activity in general.

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