

The Lived Experience of Improvisation: In Music, Learning and Life.  
Simon Rose

Chapter 1 Human Improvisation

We like to describe the world in terms of fixed structures while our being a creative response within changing structures; a truer description of being is through creative improvisation. Improvisation is a pervasive aspect of being human, in every sphere of life, enabling existence; life without the improvisational response is difficult to imagine. From an evolutionary perspective the capacity for improvisation is there for good reason. There is a need to more fully understand the processes of engagement in improvisation. Improvisation is clearly evident in performing arts, performing makes processes apparent as things are seen and heard, in so doing, we become aware of how performance occurs. Understandably we identify improvisation with such performing arts but this has also led to an over-identification. Improvisation is within all areas of existence; the process of mutation in evolution is itself highly improvisatory. Unsurprisingly improvisation is found in every sphere of activity and can be better acknowledged as a human capability.

This book explores the established practice of improvisation in music and, in particular, free improvisation – the creation of not-predetermined music in the act of performance. Improvisation in music is interpreted as a social example of the human capability of improvisation. The book considers what the lived experience of improvisation in music, represented by themes, also tells us about improvisation as a phenomenon across experience. Within a range of activity and disciplines, there is growing interest in the potential of improvisation. The agency of improvisation, as a capability, is the focus and the exploration of the lived experience of improvisation in music forms a case study for the broader experience. The question of theory's relation to the practice of improvisation becomes central to the book's themes and the intention has been to write in a way that is of use to both non-academic and academic readers.

The book gathers a 'body of knowledge' of improvisation in music from an international community of practice in which improvisation is central. Ten practitioners from Europe and North America took part in interviews: Roscoe Mitchell, Maggie Nicols, John Butcher, Pauline Oliveros, George Lewis, Mick Beck, Tristan Honsinger, Alan Tomlinson, Sven-Ake Johansson and Bob Ostertag. The criteria for inclusion was that participants should be very experienced in the practice and I was interested in diverse perspectives. The method of inquiry, phenomenology, focuses upon and interprets the particular within the participants' experience (idiographic) rather than seeking an aggregate of opinion across a larger sample. The practitioners have spent their working lives with the advanced practice of improvisation in music and developed sophisticated understanding – recording and analysing this important body of knowledge is a way to better understand the phenomenon.

The research developed from work as a professional saxophonist and teacher of drama and music, which included work in special educational needs and with excluded students. The research is informed by an early training and career in drama and theatre-in-education in which improvisation processes are centrally important for devising and developing socially orientated, educational drama work. Three studies concerned with the practice of improvisation in music, drama and education contexts have helped develop the research perspective (Rose 2003, 2008, 2013).

The book describes improvisation's unique relationship with learning and how, at the same time, constructs within education can be resistant to the modes of creative, collaborative, embodied learning that improvisation presents. This has led to the need to grasp the at times thorny issue of

improvisation's relation to education. The fault-line of this relationship illuminates important underlying issues regarding the phenomenon of improvisation and contemporary educational practice. In order to examine what occurs in the experience of improvisation, rather than how presuppositions within education may possibly relate to the phenomenon, a distinction is made between education and learning – in this way the potential of improvisation remains the primary focus. The question of improvisation's relation with education draws out fundamental themes concerning the nature of our learning, questioning suppositions about what happens during the significant portion of our lives we all commit to education. Competition that prioritizes individual over group learning; de-contextualized teaching; assessment; the significance of 'voice'; the role of the teacher and related themes are explored.

The way in which the concept of improvisation becomes constructed is centrally important as this defines its role in practice, in education and elsewhere. I have approached the study of improvisation aware from the outset of the importance of improvisation as enacted and how this can become too readily problematized and marginalized by academic structuring that values the written over that which is achieved through or represented by doing. There has been an institutionalized resistance to acknowledging, and therefore valuing, the potential of improvisation. It should be emphasized that formal understanding of composition and improvisation practice is simultaneously embedded in and largely constructed through education. At the same time, it has become clear in research that teaching itself benefits from the agency of skilled improvisatory interaction that can clearly enable and enhance teaching-learning relationships. Paradoxically, the formal space dedicated to the sharing of knowledge and its development, 'education', has had difficulty responding to the capability or understanding presented in the form of improvisation. Recognizing improvisation's lack of acknowledgement and its relative absence from formal education is important if we are to understand how potential may become realized.

Presenting a picture of improvisation that has value in and beyond academia inevitably leads to a repeated self-questioning about the kind of narrative that is being developed and what that signifies. Immediately there is a tension: improvisation is so pervasive and 'shape-shifting' that the adoption of too straightforward a correlation with theory is obviously questionable. Improvisation certainly presents itself in many guises within and across disciplines and these themselves interrelate with one another. In this way the themes of improvisation are co-present and overlapping in a necessarily complex manner. Reflecting this, theory from a multitude of disciplines is relevant and necessary in the discussion of improvisation. At the same time overly focusing on a particular area of theory and the associations that this brings with it can pull away from the truth of improvisation as practice. In 1997, Ornette Coleman and Jacques Derrida performed together in Paris, playing and reading, in the course of which Derrida was booed by the audience. Without wishing to negate Derrida's contribution, this seems to me to offer an illustration of the practice theory dichotomy – audiences understand how value is taken from improvisation through the experience of the activity, theorizing the activity is not the activity and a lack of awareness of this can pull in the opposite of the intended direction. Focusing on practitioners' experience has addressed the need for narrative that becomes developed from grounded experience.

The concept of being illuminates improvisation in a number of ways. In my 2008 study of improvisation and education, improvisation became represented in the findings by four features: Awareness, Social, Play and Unknown. Understood as working together, these were encapsulated by the term being. Describing the activity of improvisation did not benefit from overly categorizing and instead was more helpfully explained by not fragmenting. Interviewees consistently described improvisation in terms relating to being in the act of improvisation. The

need for immediacy and spontaneity in order to compose in the process of performing requires a particular presence within engagement in improvisation. The demand of composing in real-time emphasizes this presence. Improvisation's interrelatedness with the theme of being subsequently influenced the design and choice of method for the research project that followed, 'Improvisation, music and learning: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis' (2013); this study provides much of the content of the book. The method was phenomenology, the study of lived experience through which the project explores the practice of highly experienced improvisers. Through this method, the researcher's subjectivity and perspective are overtly acknowledged (through the conceptualization of interpretation).

Exploring improvisation's relationship with being, Heidegger's (1962) examination of 'Being-in-the-world' became significant as it includes a re-examination of the 'background' or supposition upon which knowledge is based. Free improvisation's potential for the interrogation of the 'boundaries' of musical experience similarly re-examines this 'background' as a traditional or formalized construct that is not necessarily already fixed. The question of being becomes compounded as the most influential book on the subject was written by, to say the least, a highly controversial author. Heidegger's philosophy, and 'Being and Time' in particular, has had a major influence within philosophy and this has extended, unusually, to other diverse disciplines. At the same time, Heidegger also became an ambitious member of the Nazi party in the 1930s. Unsurprisingly, views on his work are easily polarized and have not been aided by an unwillingness to acknowledge either the significance of the influence of the work on the one hand, or the extent to which he envisioned his role as Nazi thinker on the other. Simon Critchley (2009) has put it in this way:

'There is no way of understanding what took place in continental philosophy after Heidegger without coming to terms with "Being and Time". Furthermore, unlike many Anglo-American philosophers, Heidegger has exerted a huge influence outside philosophy, in areas as diverse as architecture, contemporary art, social and political theory, psychotherapy, psychiatry and theology.'

The theme of being and improvisation resonates through the book's other themes. In his interview, Lewis explains how in improvising: '[...] you're part of an environment and also creating an environment [...]' – interpreted here as being-in-the-world. The opportunity presented by free improvisation in music of creative, collective, embodied, real-time experience provides an instance of '[...] the human world coming into being' (Bachelard 1958) through artistic practice. In John Butcher's interview he similarly describes the shared activity of free improvisation as 'an unrepeatable moment'. Created through the act of improvisation, the human world is realized through playing: in the process of 'holistically' composing in real-time, we create the environment, or world, through our being/improvising.

Interrogating and being clear about the terms of reference of improvisation in order to better understand the phenomenon is fundamental. This book's central focus is with themes of free improvisation (FI) within musical practice, and to this end Chapter 2 describes the distinctive development of free improvisation in the United Kingdom. Key figures emerging in the 1960s and 1970s: Cornelius Cardew, John Stevens, Derek Bailey and Evan Parker and groups: AMM, Joseph Holbrooke (trio), Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME) and the Improvisation Music Company are discussed with reference to the sociopolitical context of the period. The increased interest in inter-disciplinary arts activity and the democratization in musical practice are also discussed in relation to ideas of composition and improvisation. This includes the work of John Cage, the Fluxus movement, Morton Feldman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Terry Riley and others. Improvisation's diversity is then described by means of the range of research in different areas of

activity with examples from music, drama, dance; organizational theory, management and finance; sport; fire-fighting; reflexivity theory; sociology, anthropology, philosophy and others.

Chapter 3 provides a personal perspective by explaining why and how I began researching improvisation while working as a teacher and musician. The interviewees' experience is central in the book and so too is the way lived experience has led to and shaped the research approach. The chapter discusses how improvisation is as important for successful learning and teaching as it is for improvising musicians and drama practitioners and describes the relatedness of improvisation processes in drama, music, teaching and counselling in education.

Chapter 4, 'Improvisation and Knowledge', highlights the under-acknowledgement of improvisation by exploring conceptions of creativity, how practice and theory are situated and how perceptions of improvisation are influenced by the ways in which knowledge is constructed. The chapter also describes the phenomenological method of research that contributes to Part 2 and the book's central Chapters, 5 to 9, in which the themes of free improvisation are explored.

Within the globalized context of personal, social, organizational and political life improvisatory processes are apparent and need to become better understood. Contemporary questions in art, education and elsewhere become very much addressed by the scope of the social phenomenon of improvisation. Improvisation in music offers clarity of practice that other disciplines have looked to in order to better understand their own areas. The analysis of the practice of improvisation in music contributes to uncovering the nature of the broader phenomenon. One outcome of this is that improvisation can become more fully understood as a human capability (Chapter 10), and so too themes of improvisation found in the study of the phenomenon in music may become understood as transferrable to other areas of activity.

Rose S.D. (2017) *The lived experience of improvisation: In music learning and life*. Bristol, UK/ Chicago, US. Intellect.