I am happy to be able to address you on the occasion of this seminar which is part of the exciting Intensive Project on Improvisation. It is a marvelous initiative to take Improvisation as a topic for an IP as I feel that improvisation is one of the most important issues to address for a musician. I would like to share some thoughts about improvisation with you, based on research which I did and am still doing at this very moment. It does not have to do with music history, although I will definitely talk about biographical perspectives.

Seeing improvisation as something that really needs its place in conservatoire training and education may be more or less ‘new’. However improvisation itself is of course not at all new and has existed since as long as we can remember. I will not go into that any further, it would take not a single address but a symposium of at least two weeks.

I would like to talk to you about what improvisation means for musicians, from the perspective of their personal and professional identity as a musician, and those two can hardly be seen separate from each other.

First of all I will share some interesting outcomes with you from a biographical research which I conducted (Smilde 2009; 2009a), where I basically tried to find out how professional musicians actually learn. I did this by holding narrative biographical interviews with professional musicians from different countries, different age categories, different backgrounds and different professional practices. In the interviews I was in particular interested in the relationship between their life history, their educational history, and the history of the development of their musical careers. How do these musicians learn throughout their lives?

A narrative biographical interview needs some explanation. When holding such an interview you don’t ask many directed questions, but you try to get your interviewee in a ‘story telling mode’, by asking very open questions. Holding yourself as an interviewer in the background you let your interviewee tell his or her story, in their own order, and address what they choose to address or stress. Only in a later stage of the interview you can then ask deeper about issues which you are interested in and which were for example only touched briefly,
and after that you can ask questions about things you would like to know and which were not addressed at all. By using such an interview style most interviewees are quite reflective and they see things they reflect upon, sometimes (in my experience for the first time in their lives) in a new light and become very insightful. I often heard back from the musicians that they found these interviews very beneficial for their thinking.

In these interviews I learned a lot about how these musicians started their music making during childhood, how their period at the conservatoire evolved, and the stories were, obviously, very different. Some things were striking, and one of the striking things I found was the extremely important role of improvisation.

Nearly all musicians whom I interviewed (there were 32 in total) improvised spontaneously from early childhood on, that is, as soon as they got an instrument in their hands or access to an instrument, f.i. when there was a piano at home. That is good news. The bad news however is that only in a few cases attention was given to improvisation by their teacher during childhood and adolescence. Mostly teachers had no idea how to deal with their pupils’ eagerness to improvise. As a consequence nearly all of the musicians stopped improvising as soon as they got formal music education, instrumental lessons. Teachers’ reactions to their attempts to improvise would range from remarking that “it’s sounding nice enough, but that is not what is in the score” to downright forbidding the pupil to improvise.

In general the musicians took this for granted whilst pursuing their own pathway in improvisation outside the formal lessons. However they could feel quite insecure about it. The improvisers could be found in all generations and career categories, but it was clear that in the older generations there was even less attention for improvisation during formal education than in the younger generation. We will look into some examples and let musicians speak for themselves.

Some of the musicians were even fantastic improvisers from childhood on, just by informal learning (which can simply be defined as ‘learning without a teacher’, learning through listening to examples, think f.i. of cover songs, or of pop musicians creating their music in the garage). The most amazing case which I found was that of the British pianist Jonathan, born in South Africa, who started improvising as a four-year-old, playing solely by ear and performing throughout South Africa:

“I played entirely jazz as a child; when I was four, five years old I used to tour South Africa, being called the Boogie Woogie king of South Africa. I was very much influenced by jazz pianists like Earl Hines and Art Tatum, ‘Pinetop’ Smith and by the wonderful jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald. I only improvised. I could not read music at all (...) I took part in several talent competitions, like for example Stars of Tomorrow. I played a lot, used to go to Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth and Durban and at a certain
moment I became a bit exploited by people. I also played with jazz bands (…) Everybody wanted to hear me play. I used to sing the pop songs of the day as well.” (Smilde 2009a)

Jonathan learned the music through jazz records of his older brother. When he was eight years old his parents found that he should start to learn the piano ‘seriously’, but Jonathan refused. He described himself in the interview as a “rather precocious child”. When Jonathan was 14 years old his parents intervened radically and put a stop to all the touring. Through a critical incident in the same period, his father losing his business, Jonathan had to change schools and in his new school he met a music teacher with whom he connected extremely well. After his strong informal experiences Jonathan was ready and motivated to start learning music in a formal way. Within a year he was playing classical concertos with an orchestra. It is not surprising that Jonathan learned very quickly to read music, as sight-reading skills and improvisation skills are related modes of the same (implicit) learning (Thompson and Lehmann 2004).

We then go to Cornelia, a jazz and pop guitarist who is already since years continuously very successful in the Netherlands with innovative projects.

“I was alone at home watching a documentary film about Nicaragua on television. It was very striking and quite terrible and it touched me deeply. After that I took up my guitar and started improvising. I had not done it much by that time and I remember it as an extremely important point in my development.” (Smilde 2009a)

Here Cornelia was 16 years old when she improvised as an emotional response to something she was confronted with and which touched her deeply, being the terrible situation at that time in Nicaragua. The outlet for her feelings was improvisation, “being engaged in a conversation with yourself” (Berliner 1994) and by doing this she discovered that for her this was an extremely powerful artistic means of self expression.

At the conservatoire she studied classical guitar. When she was graduating at the conservatoire, she was forbidden to improvise during her final exam. This can, when keeping this story in mind, be considered a kind of violation of her self-identity.

What I also found was that when musicians met other musicians who helped them with their improvisation, empowered them, so to speak; this led in more than one case to the choice for the music profession. That ranged from finding a teacher who could help with improvisation to a story of a young musician who was made to improvise during a formal audition for the junior school at a London Music College. This very given was fundamental for the confidence with which he pursued his pathway.
For Daniel it was from the very start crucial to have his own sound and music. He had piano lessons as a child, and started improvising at the same time. As his teacher had no idea about improvisation, Daniel would not even bother and developed his own strategies. “I worked for 10 minutes on a Chopin Mazurka and then I thought ‘okay, now I know enough’, and I continued improvising”. He had supportive parents who encouraged him to improvise.

However this can be different. Parents could, in addition to teachers, also forbid their children to improvise. I was one of them: when my, by then young, son would practise the cello, start his study and after two lines would wander away improvising, I would say: “hold on, get back to your study!” …Until I read this highly interesting article of John Sloboda and Jane Davidson, from 1996, called “The young performing musician’, a highly recommendable article. In this article they followed during a number of years some ‘high achievers’ on violin. Amongst their main findings was one which struck me in particular: in addition to a lot of formal practice it is also very important to have space for non formal practice, read improvisation. The child, Sloboda says, must have the space “to mess about”, so to doing exactly what I was more or less forbidding my son. Of course this makes sense, it creates a sense of ownership and can lead to increased intrinsic motivation. Sloboda and Davidson found more in this study, e.g. that the role of the teacher for young beginners is crucial, not that she or he should be the best teacher in the world, but that she or he must be genuinely interested in the child, and only at a later stage (during puberty) the teacher becomes through his performance skills a role model for the child. And last but not least, also a finding to make you humble: they found that the young high achievers were better off when the parents were no professional musicians! Just be supportive to the child and be interested is much more important than being knowledgeable about music.

Let’s get back to the Chopin Mazurka boy Daniel who wandered off and was messing about. Today he is an improvising musician. He says:

“I like to step on a stage and to start improvising without having prepared anything. I just hope then to bring something as compelling as can be the case with written music. I’m in pursuit of beautiful moments.” (Smilde 2009a)

So: improvisation is described as fulfilling and being in pursuit of beautiful moments. It requires trust and self confidence and a strong sense of self-identity. I will get back to this later on.

In addition to self expression improvisation also serves as an important educational tool. Two elderly cello pedagogues whom I interviewed, at that time aged 83 and 68, both used it on purpose. They never improvised in the conservatoire, and started to do it at a much later age. They both use improvisation consciously in their lessons for the development of artistic and interpretative skills.
In improvisation musicians bring previously learned material together, where they use motor, cognitive and knowledge based skills (Kenny and Gellrich 2002); this happens of course in an internalised and implicit way. As such it should be regarded (and used) as a strong educational means, especially since musicians are clearly from early childhood very motivated to improvise.

**Improvisation as self identity**

Within my biographical research it showed clearly in many of the life stories that three interdependent incentives appear fundamental to the process of shaping musicians’ self-identity: the first being singing and informal music-making throughout childhood, the second improvisation, and the third is engagement in high quality performance.

Informal learning appears a very important mode of learning in music, in childhood as well as later in life. A sustained opportunity for informal learning and improvisation brings musicians in a situation where dependence of each other and thus trust and overcoming one’s feelings of vulnerability are required. It can lead to musicians’ feelings of ownership of their learning, and thus to the development of more positive self-esteem. I found very interesting relationships between being engaged in improvisation and reducing stage fright, or performance anxiety.

Improvisation deals with expressing one’s inner self, it is connected to your identity as a person and as a musician. It relates to expressivity, musical communication and conversation, social learning and ownership. I found that and would like to explore that a bit further.

When ‘my’ musicians talked about artistic processes, they often used metaphors, it seems a kind of shared language. Metaphors for musicians’ self-identity are often found in the notion of sound. A strong connection between the notion of sound and identity is articulated by Simon, a creative music workshop leader who engages through improvisation with different sorts of audiences:

“(…) things need to be said through music, through sound in the first instance (…) Saying things through music can contribute to how people interact, to how people feel about themselves, view themselves as individuals, and how they interact in groups. That is achieved through the fundamental organisational means of sound, like rhythm, harmony, textures whatever. They are steered, created and manipulated even in response to what is needed at that moment.” (Smilde 2009a)
The word ‘whatever’ above might, together with the other musical parameters which Simon addresses, indicate the notion of *colour*, often mentioned by musicians, not only referring to instrumental timbres or textures, but also to certain moods in music.

The following scheme draws some of the metaphors together. ‘Sound’ and ‘colour’ can be found in the left box.

However, there is more to be found in the area of sound connected to identity. Jonathan, the pianist we met earlier on, even speaks about sound as “a personal enriching experience”, where “sound has got to relate to and mirror (...) all the emotions and feelings of life”.

In addition, improvisation and singing (singing especially during childhood) and engagement in high quality performance clearly address musicians’ sense of *belonging*, which includes notions of *being seen*, and *my thing* (top box). All these three words are used often by the musicians, basically addressing the question of their self-identity.
Furthermore, sound and improvisation are both connected to feel (left and right box). ‘Feel’ is a word used by the musicians for the tacit understanding of their musical language, but it also emerges in a second connotation, referring to relations between musicians. Those two understandings are interconnected: in order to play together in a reflexive way, coming to flow whilst having tacit, implicit understanding amongst yourselves, most musicians need to have an open and trusting relationship. That came across very clearly.

Lastly, we see the word ‘transformative learning’, which is learning through critical reflection on life experiences as well as learning through reflexive artistic experiences, in improvisation. Transformative learning means: changing your frame of reference or “knowing differently” (Kegan 2009) and that brings me to the last part of my address. We have just addressed the relationship of improvisation to your self-identity as a musician and now I would like to explore the use of improvisation as a means of connecting with “the other”, the identity of the other.

Improvisation is a very strong means to use in practices where musicians engage with many different audiences in the community (be it children in schools, elderly people, prisoners, whatsoever). A strong example which I would like to discuss with you is a practice on Music and Dementia, a practice which we have researched in the UK and the outcomes of which are currently being used for the development of a programme within the joint master New Audiences and Innovative Practice, in a collaboration between the conservatoires in Groningen and The Hague.

The project which we researched is called Music for Life; it is managed by Wigmore Hall in London and consists of series of interactive creative music workshops in care homes and day care centres for people with dementia in the UK. During a period of eight weeks three musicians, including one music workshop leader, work with a group of eight residents and five members of the care staff, using musical improvisation as a catalyst to bring about communication in a wide sense. The main objectives of the project are to strengthen the relationships between people with dementia and those with their carers.

The musicians use a wide range of verbal and non-verbal ways in order to reach the individual residents and the residents and care staff as a group. Both the pleasure in music-making and the reflection of the care staff on the impact of the sessions are important. The insights and motivation which the care staff may gain can result in positive long-term effects on their work with the residents. It can lead to improved interaction between care staff and residents, which can also take place on a deeper, implicit and non-verbal level. The projects therefore are especially concerned with finding, or rather ‘re-finding’ the person behind the dementia. Again, identity.
Let us listen to Oliver Sacks in his book Musicofilia, Tales of Music and the Brain:

“The perception of music and the emotions it can stir is not solely dependent on memory, and music does not have to be familiar to exert its emotional power (…) I think that [people with dementia] can experience the entire range of feelings the rest of us can, and that dementia, at least at these times, is no bar to emotional depth. Once one has seen such responses, one knows that there is still a self to be called upon, even if music, and only music, can do the calling.” (Sacks 2008: 385)

In their workshops the musicians need, as they call it themselves a ‘360 degrees radar’ for their improvisation with the residents and care staff. This means that their sensitivity towards the people with dementia is key. This way of improvising has been termed by us: ‘applied improvisation.’ By this we mean improvisation, that can be ‘applied’ within a particular social context for a particular audience. It means that musicians not only use improvisation in a manner that communicates meaningfully with their audience, but also acts to engage this audience in the music making process. Applied improvisation or person centred improvisation entails a variety of approaches that seek to ‘tune in’ to the group in order to create music that authentically reflects the group and its members, with musicians drawing upon a body of shared repertoire and approaches.

Damian:

“…it requires individual freedom, and not to be so fixed in what you’re doing, but to be very flexible to go with somebody else’s ideas. Because the balance is very fragile. And in the rehearsals and the preparation hour we always do some playing where we have to develop our sensitivity to each other and a sort of responsibility about where the music is going. It’s very easy to just improvise freely, and just sort of let the music go wherever, but when you have a particular agenda, you have a person who is playing that music with a particular resident, you have to incorporate them into what you’re doing. So you can’t just think, ‘o well, I feel like playing it like that’. Because then that’s your thing, you know? So it’s really floating, we float around each other in that way, and that is why the people we have in the project are really special.”

The person-centred musical improvisation in this practice consists of tuning in with a resident and yourself and can therefore be considered a musical metaphor for identity and connection, for I and Thou, as the cellist Fiona says “you’re trying to be someone else’s music for them.” (Smilde, Page and Alheit 2014). Fiona asks herself the question what sound can reflect who the residents are at a particular moment: “What sound can I try now to help either reflect who they are at this moment or what sound is going to connect? It’s all about your observations about that person, rather than about what you’re creating.”
It is of critical importance to connect; the word ‘connection’ is used a lot in this practice in relation to identity. Sensitivity is therefore also a much used word amongst the musicians. As people with dementia are sensitive, Fiona observes: “There has to be a real honesty from within yourself. Residents will pick up if you’re not being authentic.” Sensitivity amongst the musicians, ‘feel’ or ‘knowing that the other knows’ is therefore key. Trust and extensive personal contact are conditional for the transfer of tacit knowledge and understanding in this practice.

Music is a communicative, social activity and can play an empowering role for many more ‘audiences’ than we tend to envision. Key is the validation of both the artistic identity of the musician and the context to which she responds. Such an artistic and social learning process takes place on an equal and mutual basis. Or, to put it in the words of the staff development practitioner, the music is: “generated by the musicians from the residents.”

And that is key. These words can apply to any context! In particular the ability to make observations through the eyes of another is important, as one of the musicians remarks in her reflective journal: “How can I reflect who you are and how you are in the music I play for you? How can I play music that you can own? What is your sound?”

Matthew:

“I think there’s […] that sort of thing that musicians or artists can do that other people don’t do or that sort of, yeah, it’s another level of support, isn’t it? About acknowledging who somebody is that’s completely without words, completely beyond words, a sort of recognition of them […] You know, of kind of losing myself so much in the essence of another person.”

So: with the aim of finding the person behind the dementia in a participatory process at the core of this practice, this project which we researched opened up learning processes for the musicians involved, which were nurturing their professional lives and development and went far beyond learning into this particular practice. It stimulated deep reflections about their identity as a musician. Damian, by that time part-time violist in the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and musician in this practice gets the last word, because in this quote he brings together what improvisation brings him in terms of his own identity and in terms of bringing out the identity of others. And also it is a clear statement about the enrichment which being involved in this practice brings him as a musician and a person:

“Doing this work has been a way for me to connect my musicianship with a deepening sense of who I am in this world, brought about by extraordinary interactions with extraordinary people (…) This work continues to teach me who I am, and is a bench mark against which I judge everything else I do. It’s extraordinary how working with people whose version of reality is so vague can in fact be the ultimate reality check!”
I hope to have made the case for the importance of improvisation and the depth of it in the lives and professional practices of musicians!

REFERENCES


www.lifelonglearninginmusic.org