

Biography, identity, improvisation, sound: Intersections of personal and social identity through improvisation

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Abstract

This essay addresses the relationship of improvisation and identity. Biographical research that was conducted by the author into professional musicians' lifelong learning showed the huge importance of improvisation for personal expression. Musically, the concept of *sound* appeared to serve as a strong metaphor for identity. In addition, ethnographic research conducted as part of the project *Music for Life* in London, and published by Smilde, Page and Alheit in 2014, where musicians work in creative music workshops with people with dementia and their caregivers, shed light on the use of improvisation as an expression of the identity of 'the other' (i.e. the person with dementia). Sound again appeared to serve as a metaphor for identity. The essay draws on the work of George Herbert Mead on identity, which distinguishes between the personal 'I' and the social 'Me', and points out that both aspects are essential for the self. In this sense, improvisation can be conceived as a means of communication that connects the personal with the social. Furthermore, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* (1992), it is shown that this concept of improvisation in relation to personal and social identity may be transferred to forms of community engagement through music. However, despite its huge importance, improvisation is still often marginalised in specialist higher music education, particularly in conservatoires, and the essay finishes with a strong plea for conservatoires to take up their role in the midst of society and embed improvisation in the core of the curriculum.

Keywords

Communication through music, creative music workshop, empathy, (person-centred) improvisation, (self-) identity

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Introduction

No musician will doubt the fact that improvisation forms a key part of musical artistry, and that the ability to improvise is hugely important for many reasons. Improvisation is a concept that incorporates a multiplicity of musical meanings, behaviours and practices (Kenny and Gellrich, 2002). However, central to the concept is the understanding that all improvisation involves a highly reflexive process, requiring self-awareness alongside the ability to be present in the moment (Smilde, 2009a: 62). This aligns with the notion that improvisation is ‘a performance art *par excellence*, requiring not only a lifetime of preparation across a broad range of musical and non-musical formative experiences, but also a sophisticated and eclectic skill base’ (Kenny and Gellrich, 2002: 117).

The multi-faceted nature of improvisation addressed in this essay relates to its strong connection to *identity*. From this perspective, the essay explores ways in which improvisation may bring together personal and social identity, evidenced for example in contexts where musicians, engaging in musical improvisation, identify with ‘the other’. Two different completed studies are considered. The first study deals with biographical research amongst professional musicians; the second study entails ethnographic research illuminating a practice where professional musicians work with people with dementia and their caregivers.

Biographical research which was conducted into the relationship between the lives, education and career development of professional musicians (Smilde, 2009a, 2009b) demonstrated the huge importance of improvisation as a means of self-expression, as an educational tool, and also as a way to reduce performance anxiety. This study demonstrated that improvisation connected powerfully to musicians’ identity, both personal and professional, particularly in relation to their expressivity, musical communication and conversation, social learning and sense of artistic and professional ‘ownership’. Musically, the concept of *sound* served as a strong metaphor for identity.

Ethnographic research conducted as part of ‘*Music for Life*’, a project of Wigmore Hall Learning in London (Smilde et al., 2014), where musicians work collaboratively in creative music workshops with people living with dementia and their caregivers, shed light on the use of improvisation as an expression of the identity of ‘the other’ (i.e. the person with dementia). What emerged was that the ‘applied’ or ‘person-centred’ improvisation used here reflected the identity of the other, and made the musicians wonder what *sound* they could use to connect with and reflect the personhoods of those with dementia.

This essay brings together the exposition of improvisation from the perspectives of these two studies to draw out the concept of improvisation as a means of communication that interconnects personal and social dimensions of identity. To do this, the essay considers two particular approaches to theorising identity, which appear to coalesce in the practice of improvisation. The first, which emerges in the first place from the practice of ‘finding the person behind the dementia’ through person-centred improvisation, is Georg Herbert Mead’s perspectives on identity (1934/1967).

Mead distinguishes between the personal 'I' and the social 'Me' and points out that both aspects are 'essential to the self in its fullest expression' (1967: 199). The second is Paul Ricoeur's concept of 'oneself as other' (1992). Critical reflection on the work of Mead and Ricoeur points to significant relationships between the research outcomes of the two studies, and suggests that in the realm of improvisation the personal 'I' and the social 'Me' are closely interconnected.

All in all, the aim of this essay then is to take a step towards an enriched conceptual understanding of identity for musicians and of the way in which this may be explored and expressed through improvisation in different contexts.

Although improvisation is clearly considered a very important performance art in some contexts, and undoubtedly is a crucial skill for community engagement through music, it is still generally not high on the agenda of higher music education, particularly in conservatoires. Research conducted by the European Association of Conservatoires into musicians' needs for professional development, musicians' employers' requests, and conservatoires' responses to this (AEC, 2007; Lafourcade and Smilde, 2001), indicate a clear need for, yet marginalisation of, improvisation. This essay therefore closes with a strong plea for improvisation to be positioned in the core of the curriculum for today's professional musician.

Transformative learning and theories of self-identity

Literature on identity is abundant and this essay does not attempt to review the whole domain. Rather it explores specific concepts relating to identity that seem to be critical to the consideration of the improvisation practices that provide the initial research material for the essay. In the first place, the notion of 'transformative learning' needs to be addressed, as this provides a key bridge within the improvisation practices themselves between the different elements of self-identity discussed. Transformative learning, as defined by Mezirow (1990), can be considered as learning through critical reflection on one's (life) experiences, changing one's frame of reference or 'a way of knowing' (Kegan, 2009: 45). It is about the potential of musicians to change their view on the world and to look at a situation with new eyes, and often *through the eyes of the other*. This is a key condition for musicians engaging with different audiences and relates to the need to connect to the social context.

In addition, the theories of self-identity of George Herbert Mead (1934/1967) and Paul Ricoeur (1992), are significant. The point of departure for Mead's analysis of the self is the crucial importance of *social experience*:

[The self] is not initially there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to the process as a whole, and to other individuals within that process (Mead, 1967: 168).

The self, Mead says, is always a 'social self'. Furthermore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the self, Mead distinguishes between the 'I' and the 'Me' as two different aspects of the self. Both have a distinct position within social interaction:

the 'I' is the direct utterance of the self, acting and reacting, the 'Me' is the *social* self, the self that is aware of others and that views itself through the eyes of others.

Ricoeur (1992) makes a similar distinction: he relates to what Anthony Giddens (1991) calls 'selfhood' (the 'I' of Mead), as the *ipse* identity. 'Ipse', Latin for him or herself, expresses one's unique individuality. Ricoeur then uses the *idem* identity ('Idem' being Latin for 'the same') to delineate something akin to Mead's social 'Me'. 'Idem', says Ricoeur, is the type of identity that can be referred to as 'sameness'. Ricoeur goes on to connect *ipse* identity and *idem* identity, the 'I' and the 'Me', through the notion of *narrative identity*, which he calls 'a dialectic of sameness and selfhood' (Ricoeur, 1992: 140). Thus narrative identity is, according to Ricoeur, a dialectic of the 'Me' and 'I'. The relationship between transformative learning and both Mead and Ricoeur's concepts of self-identity lies at the heart of the following exploration of two studies involving musical improvisation.

Improvisation and biography

Improvisation has profound meaning and significance for musicians from the perspective of their personal and professional identity, which tend to be deeply intertwined. This was demonstrated clearly through biographical research looking at lifelong learning processes of professional musicians (Smilde, 2009a, 2009b). Using a methodological approach of narrative biographical interviews¹ with professional musicians from different countries, age categories, backgrounds and professional practices, this research illuminated in particular the interconnected relationships between musicians' life span, educational span, and the development of their musical careers.

Through these biographical interviews I learned much about how these musicians started their music-making during childhood, how their period at the conservatoire evolved, and how their professional lives developed. The stories were inevitably diverse. A particularly striking finding was the extremely important role of *improvisation*. Nearly all the musicians whom I interviewed improvised spontaneously from early childhood onwards: as soon as they had access to an instrument, for instance when there was a piano at home, they improvised. However, once formal music education came into play, for example instrumental lessons, their teacher seldom gave any attention to improvisation. For the most part teachers had no idea how to deal with their pupils' eagerness to improvise and some of them even went so far as to forbid it. Consequently, nearly all of the interviewed musicians stopped improvising as soon as they received formal tuition.

Interestingly however, quite a number of the musicians pursued their own development of improvisation at some later point, outside their formal tuition path. These 'improvisers' were found in all generations and career categories. Nevertheless they indicated that they felt quite insecure about it, and it was clear that there was even less know-how amongst the older musicians than the younger ones. A few examples are explored in the following sections.

Jonathan

Jonathan,² a 68-year-old British pianist, born in South Africa, 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 . . . Ella Fitzgerald. I only improvised. I could not read music at all . . . I took part in several talent competitions, like for instance *Stars of Tomorrow*. I travelled 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, 2009b: 97).

Jonathan learned music through listening to the jazz records that his older brother owned. When he was eight years old his parents felt that he should start to learn the piano ‘seriously’, but Jonathan refused. He described himself in the interview as ‘a rather precocious child’ (Smilde, 2009b: 98). 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, where his father lost 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 now 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 to read music very quickly, as sight-reading skills and improvisation skills are related modes of (implicit) learning (Thompson and Lehmann, 2004). Where improvisation can be regarded as being strongly related to self-expression, and sight-reading is seen as a largely mechanical task, both skills are however open psychomotor skills, requiring the performer to adapt to a constantly changing environment. Thompson and Lehmann (2004) compare this to a game of soccer, where players will never know what kind of motor sequences they will be required to execute next (p. 143, Smilde, 2009a: 63).

Cornelia

Cornelia is a jazz and pop guitarist who has for many years been very successful in the Netherlands with innovative projects. She created her own band by contacting musicians from the Dutch jazz and pop world with whom she would like to play: ‘People just had to feel like trying . . . I wanted it to be an exciting and cool band, with a lot of freedom’. Cornelia then established a foundation with as its challenging aim ‘initiating border-crossing collaborations, stimulating cross-pollinating projects and working on chasing away narrow-mindedness’ (Smilde, 2009b: 312). She started realising a number of astonishing musical projects, where she brought different musical styles and art forms, in particular literature, together.

As a young adult Cornelia started to improvise when she had a deep emotional experience:

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, 2009b: 308).

When this happened Cornelia was 16 years old. She improvised as an emotional response to something she was confronted with and which touched her deeply, the terrible situation at that time in Nicaragua. The outlet for her feelings was improvisation, 'being engaged in a conversation with oneself' (Berliner, 1994), and by doing this she discovered that for her improvisation was an extremely powerful artistic means of self-expression. At the conservatoire Cornelia studied classical guitar. When she was graduating she was forbidden to improvise during her final exam. In the light of her narrative of self-expression, and taking into account how Cornelia went on to develop her musicianship, this can be considered a kind of violation of her self-identity.

Simon

When musicians met other musicians who helped them with their improvisation, empowering them, this led in more than one case to making a choice to join the music profession. Experiences ranged from finding a teacher who *could* help with improvisation to a story of the young musician Simon who was made to improvise during a formal audition for the junior school at a London Music College.

The audition at [College A] was terrible. Nobody spoke to me. [College B] was friendly. But after auditioning at both schools I felt 'I do not think this is for me'. But then came the audition at [College C]; I played and then they asked me if I had ever improvised or composed. I had not really. This woman, who was head of the Junior School basically got me to improvise on the piano. It just happened (Smilde, 2009b: 273).

This very positive experience was fundamental for the confidence with which Simon then pursued his pathway in music.

Daniel

For Daniel, it was crucial from the very start to have his own sound and music. He had piano lessons as a young child, and started improvising at the same time. His teacher had no idea about improvisation; Daniel would not bother so much with notated music he was given and turned to developing his own approaches to improvisation: 'I worked for 10 minutes on a Chopin Mazurka and then I thought

“okay, now I know enough”, and I continued improvising’ (Smilde, 2009b: 233). He had supportive parents who encouraged him to improvise. Today, he is an improvising musician. He said:

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, 2009b: 237).

Julian and Dora

In addition to self-expression, improvisation also serves as an important educational tool. Two elderly cello pedagogues whom I interviewed, Julian and Dora, at that time aged 68 and 83, both used it when teaching. They never improvised during their studies in the conservatoire, and started to do it at a much later age. They both used improvisation consciously in their lessons for the development of artistic and interpretative skills.

Julian’s students were a strong incentive for him to continue learning. He practised his artistic skills by improvising daily: ‘I still want to grow and to be able to share this skill with my pupils’ (Smilde, 2009b: 378). He regretted very much not having learned to improvise earlier in his life. While teaching her students, Dora raised musical consciousness through improvisation, and also used images or metaphors to enhance musical learning (Smilde, 2009a: 175). This makes sense, as both improvisation and the use of images and metaphors serve as strong devices to create musical awareness (Kenny and Gellrich, 2002; Juslin et al., 2004).

When improvising, musicians bring previously learned material together, combining motor, cognitive and knowledge-based skills (Kenny and Gellrich, 2002). Much of this happens in an implicit way through embodied practice, and as such, improvisation needs to be recognised, and also proactively enabled, as a powerful educational process, not least when musicians tend from early childhood to be so very motivated to improvise. Furthermore, informal practice, which includes improvisation, encourages expressive development (Sloboda, 2005: 270).

Self-identity

The biographical research showed clearly that three interdependent incentives appear fundamental to the process of shaping musicians’ *self-identity*: singing and informal music-making throughout childhood; engagement in high quality performance, and improvisation (Smilde, 2009a: 243). In addition, the study showed that informal learning appears to be 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 into situations where they are able to establish trust, overcome feelings of vulnerability and embrace their interdependence. These contexts can then lead to stronger feelings of ownership of their

learning, and thus to greater motivation and the development of more positive self-esteem. There also seem to be interesting relationships between being engaged in informal practice and improvisation and reducing performance anxiety (Smilde, 2009a: 248).

Sound

Improvisation deals with expressing one's inner self, it is connected to one's identity as a person *and* as a musician. It relates to expressivity, musical communication and conversation, to social learning and ownership. When the musicians interviewed talked about artistic processes, they often used metaphors as a kind of shared language. Metaphors for musicians' self-identity frequently alluded to the notion of *sound*. Jonathan, the pianist quoted earlier on, said:

[Music] has to be about life. When you play a phrase it has got to relate at some level to something experienced or remembered in life. The act of playing is such a personal enriching spiritual experience... It is all about the living kaleidoscopic quality of *sound*. I think sound has got to relate to and mirror life, to all the emotions and feelings of life (Smilde, 2009b: 107).

Simon, the young musician who improvised during his audition and developed into a creative music workshop leader engaging with different sorts of audiences, also articulated a strong connection between the notions of sound and identity:

... 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, 2009b: 279).

These concepts, the shared language used in the musicians' narratives, and the ways in which they interrelate are drawn together in Figure 1.

The three incentives related to the concept of self-identity discussed above (singing and informal music making, high quality performance and improvisation) address musicians' sense of *belonging*, which includes notions of what musicians refer to as 'being seen', and 'my thing' (see top box in Figure 1).

Furthermore, sound and improvisation are both connected to 'feel' (see left and right box in Figure 1). '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 relationships between musicians. Those two understandings are interconnected: in order to play together in a reflexive way, coming to flow whilst

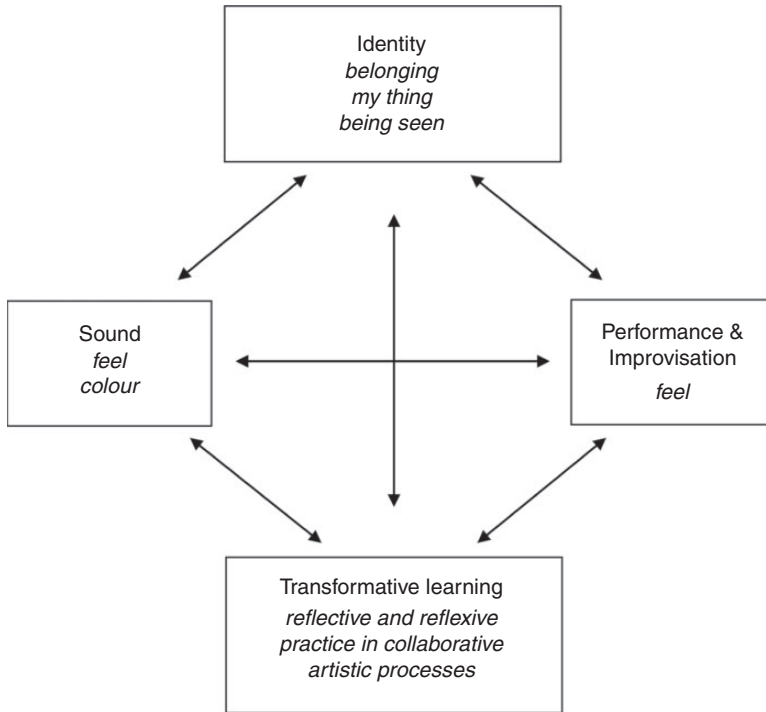


Figure 1. Identity, improvisation, sound and transformative learning.

Source: taken from Smilde (2009a: 243).

having tacit, implicit understanding amongst themselves, most musicians need to have an open and trusting relationship (Smilde, 2009a). Schön (1983) relates to this first connotation of ‘feel’ when he describes the notion of reflection-in-action through an example of improvising jazz musicians, where they improvise ‘through a *feel* for music’ (p. 56). Schön considers this a reflective conversation, where ‘conversation’ needs to be understood in a metaphorical sense (Schön, 1987: 31).

The second connotation, ‘feel’ in the sense of mutual trust amongst musicians, is addressed in the biographical interviews by French horn player John, when he talks about the tacit dimension (Polanyi, 1966) of trust between musicians in the orchestra:

... you learn to develop antennae that receive everything and transmit this to you so that you can respond. All these antennae in our orchestra are directed towards each other... We have a tremendous feeling of musical empathy... Everyone recognises each other’s colour and sound, everybody listens to each other’s sound... *Listening to each other’s sound is the secret of everything. You catch someone’s sound and the sound catches you.* (Smilde, 2009b: 340)

Improvisation and the identity of ‘the other’: Music and dementia

The concept of transformative learning, which appears in the lowest box of the Figure 1, is, as we saw earlier on, related to self-identity and this creates an important bridge to the next part of this essay, which addresses a transformational improvisation practice where the primary focus is on connecting personal and social identity through music. In addition to improvisation relating to one’s self-identity as a musician, improvisation can also serve as a means of connecting with the identity of ‘the other’. Improvisation offers a powerful way for musicians to engage with different audiences in the community, be it children in schools, elderly people, prisoners, etc. (Gregory, 2005; Higgins, 2012). The point of departure is the notion that artistic processes have transformative potential which can serve to make sense of the complex world we live in and can bring about a sense of community, inclusion and collective identity.

An impressive and transferable example of this lies in the project *Music for Life*, a practice that focuses on Music and Dementia, founded and developed by music educator Linda Rose and managed by Wigmore Hall in London in collaboration with the organisation Jewish Care. Between 2009 and 2012 ethnographic research into this project was conducted (Smilde et al., 2014).

Music for Life consists of series of interactive creative music workshops for people with dementia and their caregivers in care homes and day care centres 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 their caregivers.

The musicians use a wide range of verbal and non-verbal interactions in order to reach the individual residents and the residents and care staff as a *group*. Both the pleasure in music-making and the reflections of the care staff on the impact of the sessions are considered important. The insights and motivation that the care staff may gain from the process can result in positive long-term effects on their work with the residents (Rose and Schlingensiepen, 2001). These positive effects include improved interaction between care staff and residents, which may start to take place on a deeper and non-verbal level. The projects are therefore especially concerned with finding, or rather ‘re-finding’ *the person behind the dementia* (Kitwood, 1997: 10), in other words they have a clear focus on identity.

Oliver Sacks observes in his book *Musicophilia, 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’ or ‘person-centred 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 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 (Smilde et al., 2014: 27). Damian, a *Music for Life* musician, said in this respect:

... it requires individual freedom, and ... to be very flexible to go with somebody else’s ideas ... 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. (Smilde et al., 2014: 27)

The person-centred musical improvisation in this practice consists of tuning in with a resident *and* oneself and can therefore be considered a musical metaphor for identity and connection, for ‘I and Thou’ (Kitwood, 1997), as the cellist Fiona, one of the musicians involved in the research, said: ‘you’re trying to be someone else’s music for them’ (Smilde et al., 2014: 90). Fiona asked herself the question what *sound* can reflect who the residents are:

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? (Smilde et al., 2014: 249).

Here, we see again the notion of sound connected to identity, but now to the identity of *the other*. Fiona added to this: ‘It’s all about your observations about that person, rather than about what you’re creating’ (Smilde et al., 2014: 90).

Connection

Linda Rose, founder of the project *Music for Life*, observed:

... if you get it right as a musician, if you match something in your music, about the person you are working with, whose identity is lost, who very often doesn’t know who they are, where they are, what’s going on ... if that match is right, then somewhere between you and that other person, somewhere in that space where the music is

happening, is that person's identity. It's in that music. And they see themselves, they feel themselves, they notice, they know that somewhere in there, is them. And that is the essence of that connection (Smilde et al., 2014: 292).

It is thus of critical importance to connect; the words 'connection' and 'sensitivity' are therefore often used in this practice in relation to identity. As people with dementia are sensitive, Fiona reflected: 'There has to be a real honesty from within yourself. Residents will pick up if you're not being authentic' (Smilde et al., 2014: 74).

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. The musicians need to keep everyone in the group safe enough to cope with unpredictability, risk and trying something new. They need to be prepared to go out of their comfort zone, whilst at the same time inspiring confidence in the group (Linda Rose in Renshaw, 2010: 221). The musicians could sense a feeling of failure as soon as a resident did not respond to their music or suddenly became locked into utterances of dementia. The main learning process for the musicians was therefore to accept that at one moment a resident could be a conductor, and the next moment she could tumble back into the darkness of her mind. This required a lot of implicit understanding amongst the musicians. The musicians discussed this support of each other in terms of their 'safety net' (Smilde et al., 2014: 17, 203).

Matthew's story: Looking through the eyes of another

Reflecting the identity of a person with dementia, whose language may have left her, is key in this practice. This makes an important connection to the theories of George Herbert Mead (1934/1967) and Paul Ricoeur (1992), discussed earlier on in this essay. Ricoeur argues that the *meaning* of what we do can come alive in a *story* and that we can come to understand this meaning through what he calls the *plot* of the story. An example of this can be found in a story of music workshop leader Matthew, as he described it in his reflective journal. Matthew mentioned 'the Snark', a fictional enemy, being his inner voice, which sometimes makes him feel extremely unconfident.

During one of the sessions Matthew is interacting through singing with Rebecca. Rebecca is a very difficult-to-reach resident, and often she can be aggressive. Matthew sings to her, and after some more or less confused responses, Rebecca gradually starts to respond in a concentrated and genuinely interested way by initiating new phrases of Matthew's singing through playing the bass bar (Smilde et al., 2014: 54). Things start to flow at some point, and Rebecca's responsiveness is quite new. However then Matthew's inner voice, which he calls 'the Snark', starts nagging at him:

The Snark went into overdrive, 'you aren't a singer! It's an easy trick to sing Jewish sounding music for Jewish old ladies – you aren't even Jewish yourself, you have no

right!’ But as the responses came from Rebecca, and I focused more and more on my singing, trying to make it as beautiful as I could, the Snark got quieter and quieter, silenced eventually (Smilde et al., 2014: 59).

Here, in this short narrative, one can hear a confrontation of the ‘I’ (the Snark, the inner voice) and the ‘Me’ (the social self; the awareness that it is okay, as the response came which silenced the inner voice), a dialectic of *ipse* and *idem*, of ‘selfhood’ and ‘sameness’.

The piece that evolved in dialogue with Rebecca was perceived by Matthew as a kind of *ceremony*, where, as Matthew relates:

Rebecca would ring the bell and then the music would happen again until it died down and it was back to her and she would ring the bell again and initiate the next wave. And it felt very, very serious. And that was what was in her face as well (Smilde et al., 2014: 59).

The moment where Rebecca’s confusion left her, where she stopped playing the bass bar aggressively and musically changed into a dialogue with Matthew where she initiated each joint musical phrase, was a turning point. This echoes Sacks’ (2008: 385) observation on the *self* that can be called upon, through music. At that moment, Matthew could really highlight Rebecca, reflecting her selfhood, and, in a Ricoeurian sense, her ‘sameness’ through the music (Smilde, 2011). Matthew said after this session:

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 . . . Singing with Rebecca, I can’t think of anything that I’ve ever done in my life that’s anything like it. You know, of kind of *losing myself so much in the essence of another person* (Smilde et al., 2014: 144).

Reflecting the identity of the other through improvisation, completely without and *beyond* words brings us once more back to George Herbert Mead. According to Mead’s ideas there is always an ‘I’, *also* when the cognitive competence to become an ‘object to oneself’ (Alheit et al., 2015: 24), has diminished. Even when the ‘Me’, the ability to see oneself through the eye of another, has disappeared, the eyes of others (the musicians) can still be directed to *me*, the person with dementia, and they can be recognising and acknowledging me by musically reflecting my competences for a conscious self. The value that the other gives me has its basis in who I am, in my biography, my life story, in the person *behind* the dementia, as that is a story of relations which do not stop when my conscious ability for my life design has been reduced or is declining. The ‘I’ remains there, but also the vivid memories to the ‘I’ in relations, which now need to be understood and reflected by the others (Alheit et al., 2015).

Empathy

Giddens (1991) refers to self-identity as the capacity to use the word 'I' in shifting contexts, arguing that, 'A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour (...) but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (p. 54). Keeping a particular narrative going, also a narrative without words, by musically reflecting the other through person-centred improvisation, connects the musicians' musical identity to the context and thus makes this a social phenomenon. Such an artistic *and* social (learning) process takes place on an equal and mutual basis. It is, as the musicians at some point discuss amongst themselves, a cyclical action which has to do with others as much as with oneself (Smilde et al., 2014: 247).

The ability to make observations through the eyes of another, *empathy*, is thus very important. To put it in the words of Brian, the staff development practitioner who worked with the caregivers on dementia awareness, here, through improvisation, 'the music is generated *by* the musicians *from* the residents' (Smilde et al., 2014: 222). These deeply insightful words can apply to any musical engagement in any social context, as these words are about *belonging*.

Implications for future practice in conservatoire education

Music can be a significant agent of change, and improvisation is, as the Music and Dementia research has demonstrated, of critical importance in this respect. As we saw, improvisation is both fundamental to the process of shaping musicians' sense of self-identity, and can serve in community contexts as the connection to the identity of 'the other', bringing about empowerment and a sense of wellbeing and inclusion.

It goes without saying that it is therefore of key importance for conservatoires to give improvisation a fundamental place in the curriculum, more so as there is a lot of evidence that musicians, once they have graduated, come to realise that they need improvisation skills in nearly every professional engagement (Lafourcade and Smilde, 2001; Smilde, 2009a).

Improvisation as a means for self-expression can lead to a sense of ownership of one's musicianship and to empowerment, thus also helping to overcome performance anxiety caused by low self-esteem (Brotsky, 1995; Smilde, 2009a). In addition, improvisation as a tool for community engagement is an important provision for students' future professional activities.

'Identity' in music can, as we also saw, be both a personal expression and an expression of the identity of 'the other' and a musician's role in society is always about an interconnection of the two. Conservatoires need to reflect this, considering their role in contemporary society seriously and taking up responsibility to connect to society in ways that intertwine with their purpose in supporting development of artistic and personal expression. A conservatoire that fully values improvisation therefore cares about nurturing both personal and social dimensions of identity.

These perspectives on improvisation and identity also highlight ways in which individual expression through performance at the highest level and community engagement through music can go hand in hand. Improvisation connects these two practices, and therefore has a vital part to play in the core of the curriculum for emerging professional musicians in higher education.

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Notes

1. A narrative biographical interview aims at trying to get the interviewee in a 'story telling mode'; the interviewer asks very open questions, holds back as much as possible and enables the interviewee to tell his or her story, in their own order, and address what they choose to tell or stress (the 'main narration'). Only in a later stage of the interview, further questions are asked about for instance issues which were only touched briefly ('potentially missing stories'), and at the end of the interview (evaluation phase), questions can be asked about matters that were not addressed at all by the interviewee (Alheit, 1993). The narrative interview can help the interviewee to be reflective and can thus be beneficial for their thinking. Narrative (expert) interviews were also used in the research into Music and Dementia.
2. All names used are pseudonyms.

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