What is Improvisation?

By Jerry Leake

You may ask, "What is improvisation?" I may answer, "Good question," or "I don't know," or "What do you think it is?"

On face value, the question is vague, perhaps purposely so. It is difficult to define in concrete and agreeable terms. The word is like "art" itself, capable of a variety of interpretations in the mind of music improvisers, listeners of improvised music, or improvisers in daily life. The question can only be answered anecdotally and metaphorically from diverse perspectives in all forms of art. "Improvisation" comes from the Latin "improvises," which means, "that what was not foreseen." But in general musical terms the word has no absolute meaning, and as such it should be used with great care. The word is, in fact, inherently problematic.

By nature, human beings are the greatest improvisers on the planet, and newborn babies are authentic "pure" improvisers. They are making up everything from the moment after birth, without any past memory or context. Within minutes newborns are learning quickly. They discover how limbs move, vocal cords produce sound, and interact with the mysterious world of doctors, nurses, lights, camera, and so much action. They begin to form relevant contexts to continue improvising with increasing structures of familiarity, memories of a short past, and an instinctual awareness of how one moment relates to the previous.

LECTURE CONTEXT

During lectures on Indian music, with a focus on the tabla of Hindustani music, I am often asked, "How much are you improvising?" My answer usually follows this train of thought: Improvisation occurs in Indian music much like it does in playing jazz. But the word implies something arising from nothing. With trained musicians that is never the case. What is "improvised" in the moment is supported, substantiated, and quantified by everything I have played in the history of my music—not just as a tabla player, but as a drumset player, a performer of African music, and in any style other than strict western classical music. In that last context, the composer did the improvising. But this is not to say that classical musicians or composers are not able to "freely" improvise in the moment. Virtuoso pianist Franz Liszt was famous for improvising variations on any theme, composing on the fly with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of ideas. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven exhibited deep intuitive and technical understanding of the necessary skills and concerns within pure improvisation.

I directly answer the question by putting it in a context you are familiar with: your datebook. Every day you open your datebook, which tells you where to go and when. It tells you what classes you are taking, what teacher you will be listening to, perhaps even what chapters you need to have prepared. Subconsciously you know what sidewalk you will traverse, streets you will cross, and people who might prepare your morning coffee. This is the structural "timeline" upon which your improvisation will take place. So what constitutes the improvisation?

You awake and head to the shower, but suddenly realize there is no soap, so you improvise a solution. Or there is no hot water and your improvisation is even more essential. Or you can't find one of your shoes and are forced to use a less-comfortable pair. You improvise by adjusting to patterns in the world to avoid running into people, crossing the street to miss oncoming traffic, or spotting a puddle or ice patch for self-preservation.

You also do not know what your teacher will present in class, if there will be a pop quiz, or if you will be called upon to improvise an answer to a topic you should have studied. We are improvising constantly. However, on-the-spot decision-making is based on a prior context, pattern history, learned social issues, and interactions. As if inherent instincts have been retooled, you follow the clock of time to be where you must at the correct time. In fact, it is this form of life improvisation that is identical to how a jazz musician or students of North Indian classical music create. Ideas are all formed from deeply entrenched training on patterns and permutations, on a countless exploration of the unexpected until it all falls under the category of what is expected.

RESOURCEFUL IMPROVISATION

In contemporary music settings I invent new tabla grooves to serve the music. But where do these patterns come from? Usually they are derived from fragments of patterns that I have played before—perhaps from "ancient" traditional phrases that have been sliced and diced to fit the "modern" context. I do not fully own the new idea. I borrowed it from other phrases and made specific choices about why and how it is to be played and developed. Even in a free "solo" I grab what is familiar, what has been played before, and reassemble ideas into a new rhythmic "sentence."

Imagine a collection of words that form a sentence. You can reassemble the same words, with slight grammatical adjustment, to recreate the same thought. You can explore a variety of uses until all possibilities are explored.

Ultimately the answer centers on individual resourcefulness. How many ways can you apply the same idea in different contexts, using different combinations of sound, technique, and instrument? The improvisation is as much about the choices I make for applying the material ("arrangement") as the material itself ("composition").

INDIAN MUSIC

In South Indian music the rhythm system is based on mathematics. Musicians assemble patterns of differing lengths that are strung together to fit a given rhythm cycle. The language-based method of learning is called "solkattu," which literally means "words bound together." Mrdangam artists will attest that nothing new is being invented on the spot. Rather, virtuosic drummers are extracting and assembling phrases that have been played hundreds (thousands!) of times before in a new strand to fit a different context. Confidence arises by the fact that all of the material is contained within the player (the datebook). All that is required is to live the music in the moment (the day to experience).

There is a famous story of the great Hindustani khyal singer Bhimsen Joshi who, in the midst of singing a long and slow composition, forgot the words of the song. Rather than stop singing and look awkwardly "wrong" he called up the most familiar thing he could. He proceeded to sing his home address. In the slow, elongated form of the song, no one was able to recognize what he had done, except his students who turned the incident into legend. Mr. Joshi "improvised" a solution, but he chose to sing something all too familiar. (This example loosely reminds me of freestyle rap artists who create instant rhyming insults through their art, apparently from no prior preparation.)

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The drummers of North (Hindustani) and South (Carnatic) Indian music approach improvisation from somewhat opposite perspectives. Tabla players in the north accompany featured artists using "theka" patterns. Theka is the specific arrangement of tabla bols (sounds/syllables) to define a given tal/cycle. Think of this as the "groove" with ornamentation applied to enhance interaction and development. But, as with jazz drumming, too much ornamentation and embellishment would distract the featured artist and possibly destroy the essence of the composition. When it is time for a featured moment, tabla players improvise appropriate compositions they have mastered over years of practice. Or they may invent new phrases based on existing models of development. In this context, the accompaniment is structured and the featured moment is "improvised."

In a general sense, this is the opposite of how Carnatic drumming is presented. The mrdangam player will improvise during the accompaniment of the composition, creating flourishes and rolls that flow with the melody. They are free to tastefully introduce cross-rhythmic phrases that add tension and dynamism. However, during the extended drum solo (usually at the end of a concert) they will present a vast collection of learned compositions (*mora, korvai)* that are strung together as a unique arrangement. The end of the solo requires an even more specific set of rules. The drummer must render a long *korvai* with signature strokes and phrases that alert the other musicians to resume the composition from *sam* (beat one).

In both contexts, improvisation is controlled by specific guidelines of several types, some more restrictive than others. Performers build up a repertoire of effects that have worked well in the past, recalling phrases and shuffling the deck of possibilities to fit the next unique context.

JAZZ IMPROVISATION

Jazz musicians improvise all the time; it is the primary characteristic of the idiom. Players must invent, be bold, bare their souls, take chances, trip, fall, and pick themselves up. Jazz is the definition of improvisation, and vice versa. So why bother learning hundreds of scales and jazz standards, the function of harmony, and its infinite interpretations? If you want to explore pure, unadulterated improvisation, do not study any of these things. Will that work? Of course not.

All jazz improvisation is built using prior models of development, years of "woodshedding" countless phrases, licks, and ideas that you add to your toolbox of resources. In the moment, you reach into your toolbox and assemble phrases that fit the needs of the composition: mood, tempo, form, harmonic structure, and rhythmic intricacy. All of these tools are developed (and finely polished) well in advance. They are essential to the artist in the moment of "invention." Without these tools, sound would be noise: unstructured and without purpose.

You can also imagine a spice rack of ideas that are used to add flavor to the musical "stew." The stew is the composition, and the spice of improvisation keeps it tasty and interesting. However, add too much spice and you have ruined the meal. It is a careful balance of spices that retain the essence of the stew, while enhancing it with your flavors that make it unique. Those spices are always available for you to "select in the moment."

WHAT IS IMPROVISATION?

This leads us to the essence of "What is improvisation?" Improvisation is defined as much by when and how you play the idea as it is by the idea itself. Therefore, musical context becomes the most important aspect to guide you in your choices. My vibraphone teacher, Gary Burton, left me with a profound observation about jazz: "To be a good improviser you must first be a good analyzer. Then and only then will you be able to play the right notes at the right time."

Improvisation is not easy. And yet it is the singular thing that humans do all of the time. As we speak, we are improvising every word, based on the principles of a "conversation." Present in every conversation is the give and take, the listening and responding, all leading to a concluding point and purpose of the words shared. We are not inventing new words. Rather, we are arranging those that we know in an order that fits the context of dialogue. We are speaking "the right words at the right time."

When musicians tell me they don't know how to improvise, I look at them with a puzzled expression, as if to say: "How is that possible? How can you play your instrument with proficiency, able to get around in it with ease and expertise, but you cannot just play for the sake of playing?" The most common excuse is, "I play classical music." This explains why there are school ensembles for non-improvisers to learn basic jazz methods and practices. Such an experience allows one to break away from the confines of a page of "right notes in the right order" into the liberating experience of "freely choosing the right notes and deciding on the right order."

CONCLUSION

Improvisation merely requires the desire to try. All musicians need to take chances and freely bare the soul. Words may attempt to explain how to get to the door, but only the individual can open it and step inside. As humans, we must experience the trauma of artistic shipwreck before finding salvation in the lifeboat. Through success and failure, we learn by forming new memories of possibilities, building new tools that are polished and organized.

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