

This text was written for a workshop held at the Symposium on „Improvisation Didactics in Higher Music Education“ at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, Hannover, Germany, on April 21-25th, 2018.

Listening to Improvised Music

A MATTER OF OPINION

By Carl Ludwig Hübsch,

Translation by Carl Ludwig Hübsch and Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen

Short Summary: Hübsch proposes a model for analysis for free improvisation. His idea is based on a general communication model by Schultz von Thun in which different aspects of verbal communication are described. By transferring and applying this model to improvised music Hübsch aims to enrich the possibilities of description and review of improvisation beyond the levels of material (sounds and their production) and taste. The proposal deals with four aspects of listening to improvisation: The Factual, the Self-revealing, the Relational and the Appealing Level.

Hübsch's model is not meant to be turned into playing strategies nor does it claim to be complete. It should rather lead to a deeper experience and exchange about improvisation and be a base for more explanations of how improvisation works.

When I read reviews of Improvised Music concerts or CDs I frequently notice a restriction to the mere description of the sounds. Whether the music rustles, squeaks, bubbles or squeals; most reviewers are completely taken by new sounds, mostly evoked by extended and at times very personal playing techniques of the musicians. But, for the musicians themselves, these sounds are well known companions on the road into the unknown and nothing more than their regular working tools.

So, if it comes to speaking about an improvisation on a different level I propose to speak about something which is more difficult to describe objectively: the contact amongst the musicians.

Even the musicians themselves hesitate to speak about this subject. Why should one talk about something that is - after the concert - over and collect knowledge which will turn out to be useless at the next opportunity (concert) and which can not be turned into a useful playing strategy?

Also perception of improvised music differs immensely depending on the personality: Where one listener hears a passionate sound embracement another listener might just notice an insipid devoid of simultaneous excitement. And - even worse: Any joyful playing experience can be drowned in an exaggerated, overwhelming analysis.

This being said I would like to inspire you to take the risk of making maybe unprovable, questionable statements about the contact in an improvisation by offering you a tool for this difficult to describe aspect of improvised music.

A good part of processing an aesthetic work takes place in its discussion - in using and applying the experiences which were made. Thus, a work acquires significance, in a social but also in a political sense. Put in a different way: something you don't talk about becomes meaningless.

On the other side, verbalization and the search for appropriate expression clears up a matter, adds sense beyond the mere auditive experience.

Any work that is consumed without deeper exploration or discussion remains just an object of consumption, without any meaning beyond this fact. There are even entire categories of works that seem to have been produced solely for the purpose of not being noticed at all (I am not just talking about elevator music).

But I claim that improvisation wants to be perceived in a different way. It takes the listener to a journey in an unknown land. It delivers itself to the listeners reflective listening, to head and guts, since both need to be nourished (is there a friction between these two at all? Is the head not a part of

the body? Don't we think with the guts?). And this reflection will probably profit from a growing competence in describing the musical-interpersonal contact between the players.

In a fixed composition notated sounds determine the relationship between the musicians or instruments. But the ink with which an improvised work is written, is the interaction. Interaction is actually the criterion of improvisation per se. Because only improvised music is produced by immediate interaction, regardless whether it may sound reduced or complex.

In this article I propose a method of discussing the interaction between the musicians. And even if there might be a bit of sociology or psychology involved, the musical content should always be the base. Because in the end this is about the music.

SCHULZ VON THUNS FOUR-SIDED MODEL

In an improvisation sound is not only the musical material but also gives information about the contact between players. It conveys - in an immediate way - information about how the players deal with each other, musically. A more musical term for the word contact could be communal sound. [*German: Zusammenklang*]

The quality of this communal sound may be categorized aesthetically in different ways. Even in a seemingly totally independent improvisation the common ground between the players makes the base for a good communal sound. The communal sound refers to a good part to the act of listening and of being listened to. So to speak the communal ear. Hear the hearing.

In recent years I have developed various models for listening to interaction in improvisation. For this Symposium in Hannover, in February 2018 I have taken inspiration from the four-sided model of non-violent communication by Friedemann Schulz von Thun¹.

Schulz von Thun's work focusses on the communication in human language. He divides language into four aspects. An example:

A passenger in a car approaching a traffic light says to the driver: „Green!“

Schulz von Thun divides this message into four components:

The Fact Level: "The traffic light is green",
the Self-Revelation Level: "I am in a hurry",
the Appeal or Plea Level: „Speed up!“,
and the Relation Level: "You need my help".

I have tried to transfer these four aspects to music. Even though I had to make some adaptations, the model became an interesting tool for a differentiated observation of the contact between improvisors.

Musical information works obviously totally different than language information. In normal language informations are mostly exchanged alternating, whereas musicians send and receive information at the same time. Also, improvisors don't convey messages. But each sound will be perceived in context with the other occurring sounds. From this point of view any sound is a statement or feedback to another statement and has an interactive aspect.

For a critical language about improvisation it is obviously senseless to scrutinize each single sound's coding ("a bad-tempered A") and it's reception ("wow, a screeching A"). So I have modified the model to make it more applicable to the reality of improvised music and the purpose of observing and developing the a post play discussion of improvisation.

1 Friedemann Schulz von Thun: „Miteinander Reden, Störungen und Klärungen“ rororo Sachbuch 1997

As a player, please avoid to turn the gathered observations into playing strategies. It will not work and will eventually turn improvisation into conceptual improvisation.

But as listener/playing listener your listening will expand, which will automatically influence your playing intuition.

It is all about building up interactive verbal reflection and - last but not least - inspiration for the listening and playing, not about whether musicians had been wanting and achieved to play a certain sound.

The following collection of only partially sorted descriptive terms are meant to be guidelines for the participants who should eventually add their own terms.

The four levels of improvisational contact.

1) I connect the Fact Level to the musical material (**WHAT?**):

here are some assorted examples for possible descriptions:

Examples: in small parts, curved, in sections, in different threads, homogenous, diverse, dynamic – static, varied, monochromatic, pulsating, organic, electronic, stylistic, fields, pointillistic, narrative, poetic, concrete, noisy, microtonal.

Or, following Gertrud Meyer-Denkman's description of sounds: sound points, sound commas, movement sounds, sound chains.

Or, following Helmut Lachenmann's Sound Types of New Music: colour sound, fluctuation sound, textural sound, cadence sound, structural sound.

2) The Self-Revelation Level is assigned to the individual characters of the players (**WHO?**): The aspect of the artistic and instrumental aesthetics, also of abilities and skills, also of applied musical knowledge. The attitude of each single musician.

Examples: reduced, neutral, active, awaiting, risky, cautious, controlled, compositionally, self-forgetting, planning, absorbed in the momentum, flexible, still, surprising, hesitating, sleepily, exuberant, disappointed..

also: expressive, electronic, jazzy, classical, machine-like

psychologically: pre-occupied with one's own playing, one's own possibilities, one's own failure, shy, self-indulgent...

3) The Relation Level describes the relationship between the players being expressed in sound. This level highlights the musicians' group behavior in a piece, as well as the the general group dynamics (**HOW?**)

Examples: traditional functions and hierarchies like soloing, accompanying, choral etc.

But also beyond: accepting, leading, avoiding ping-pong reactions, copying, shy, following, unanimous, contradicting, varying, ornamenting, instrumenting, orchestrating, indifferent, commenting, affirmative, agreeing, neutral, contradicting, deepening, modifying, softening, delaying...

4) The Appeal Level corresponds to the interactional aspect, the musical freshness, its crispyness, to the speed of the networking brains and their permeability for change and freshness, and to the perceived interest of the musicians in each other, the flexibility, the aspect of how one's playing influences other players in a mutual process (**HOW? WHO? WHEN?**).

I have kept the connection to the concept of "Appeal" because provoking or asking for a musical reaction seems to be pretty discernible to me. Turning points are crucial for this observation: Who initiates a shift, who follows and who does not? Were impulses not perceived at all, or purposely neglected?

This Level points out where change occurs and describes it.

Examples: giving impulses, surprising, bumping into, dynamising, taking initiative, being passive, playing manipulatively, rejoicing in reactions, calming down, being indifferent, affirmatively, agreeing / rejecting, acting with haste, being sluggish, inviting, seeking contact, impeding, assimilating, polarising, integrating, connecting, carrying on, confusing, focusing, delaying, trivialising, jumping on any train, staying unaffected => see also: interesting misunderstandings.
In other words:

A would like B to play with him, he seeks direct contact

or A would like to be left alone – to play a solo

Or, as a question: is it possible to perceive an open, inviting character in a sound? Is it possible to listen to a sound while focusing on its intention towards the interpersonal dimension?

It is a challenge to share one's own experience and discuss personal observations which can not be proved. Besides the Fact Level which deals with the musical material, such a discussion can become a very personal and, at times, hurtful affair.

It is important to remember that this discussion is not about the right or wrong or the better or worse taste but rather about exchanging observations of a highly personal quality.

It is not rare that perceptions fit into several of the four categories. But they may mean something different according to the type of player, to the kind of music and to the actual playing situation.

In dealing with all these approaches it is crucial not to turn them into playing strategies which would lead to a playing mode so to speak „à la carte“. They should rather inspire the listening. Anyway, the secret of how to improvise can and should not be completely explainable at all².

Strategy exercises of any kind may lead to a change in listening, but so called "free" improvisations, and this text deals with those, is not a compendium of acquired ways of behavior.

To me, improvisation is rather a place where things happen by themselves and in which any plan will lead you directly to the hell of missing each other³.

The more experienced the musicians, the more subtle and rich the possibilities of interaction will become. Diversity, surprise and the mutual understanding will expand accordingly.

When players perform with a maximum of individual *determination* and, in the same time, a maximum of appreciation of change, communication will be exciting.

"LANGUAGE HYGIENE"

Language about improvisation is sometimes characterized by a striving to be definite and clear, out of supposed honesty. Consequently, music may perhaps be described as inconsequent, uninteresting, way too loud, way too reduced or something similar.

If an improvisation is described to be too loud, too soft or too boring, this signifies that the musician cannot or does not wish to establish a connection to this music and thus to the co-players. But maybe the others find it exactly right to play in this way. So if you have the desire to improvise a certain kind of music, the best way to achieve this is to select the right colleagues, colleagues with similar likes and dislikes.

An improvisation can not be changed after playing. Things were as they were. From this point of view nothing ever went wrong. Reflection improves music on a meta-level. It is not transformed into a strategy or used for an evaluation of those who played. Whatever I like or dislike, I keep it for myself and maybe refrain from improvising more with these supposedly difficult colleagues.

2 This applies obviously to any music, any work of art. This is in fact what makes these so valuable.

3 Of course, I am not against open scores [German: Konzepte] and composition. There is a time and place for everything.

Some remarks to the issue of "mistakes" in the improvisation:

Of course there are those "mistakes" one can make in any kind of music: not to there, acting socially instead of musically, being egoistical, etc...

But here are some „mistakes“ especially dangerous for "free" improvisation:

Good ideas - because they usually include others - and, of course, plans of any kind. But as it seems to be almost impossible to have no plans at all, I propose instead to simply leave all conscious or subconscious plans alone, wherever they sprung - inside your own brain or elsewhere - and to not give them any space on the scene.

Social motivated behavior impedes an improvisation. Take full responsibility primarily for your own playing. Somebody helping someone else out of a seemingly difficult situation is not acting musically but socially. The well meant help might deprive all listeners and musicians of experience of a beautiful failure.

I would like to state these „mistakes“ in a positive way, quasi as a suggestion for playing: No one follows ideas. All plans are totally forgotten. No one takes responsibility for the others and no one behaves socially instead of musically (positive or negative). Listening comprises all levels and all channels. It is not limited to the acoustic sphere but includes all circumstances for the playing activity (space, movements, audience...). There is nothing we should do - let's get it done.

A POSSIBLE REALISATION OF THE FOUR-SIDED MODEL:

Person 1 names the material: WHAT?

Person 2 names the player's characteristics: WHO?

Person 3 names the group dynamics: HOW?

Person 4 names concrete contact related situations: HOW/WHO/WHEN?

(you may use the four pages to be found as an appendix in the last part of this article for making notes).

Variations: One observes only one player, about when (s)he is playing or not.

One attempts to describe the music according to its emotional contents.

Others simply listen, without a goal. (Please invent further tasks).

Referring to an improvisation, experiences are then shared.

LINKS:

Link to interviews with improvisors: blog.huebsch.me

Website: www.huebsch.me ((<http://www.huebsch.me/index.php/de/text>))

AUDIOPLAY FROM INTERVIEWS WITH IMPROVISORS ON SFMOMA [open space]: listen here:

<https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2018/02/nailing-a-banana/>

1) Fact: **WHAT SOUNDS?:**

The musical material

Examples: in small parts, curved, in sections, in different threads, homogenous, diverse, dynamic – static, varied, monochromatic, pulsating, organic, electronic, stylistic, fields, pointillistic, narrative, poetic, concrete, noisy, microtonal.

Or, following Gertrud Meyer-Denkman's description of sounds: sound points, sound commas, movement sounds, sound chains.

Or, following Helmut Lachenmann's Sound Types of New Music: colour sound, fluctuation sound, textural sound, cadence sound, structural sound.

2) Self-Revelation: **(WHO SOUNDS?)**:

The aspect of the artistic and instrumental aesthetics, also of abilities and skills, also of applied musical knowledge. The attitude of each single musician.

Examples: reduced, neutral, active, awaiting, risky, cautious, controlled, compositionally, self-forgetting, planning, absorbed in the momentum, flexible, still, surprising, hesitating, sleepily, exuberant, disappointed..

also: expressive, electronic, jazzy, classical, machine-like

psychologically: pre-occupied with one's own playing, one's own possibilities, one's own failure, shy, self-indulgent...

3) Relations Level (**HOW DOES THE GROUP WORK GENERALLY?**)

The relationship between the players | the general group dynamics

Examples: traditional functions and hierarchies like soloing, accompanying, choral etc.

But also beyond: accepting, leading, avoiding ping-pong reactions, copying, shy, following, unanimous, contradicting, varying, ornamenting, instrumenting, orchestrating, indifferent, commenting, affirmative, agreeing, neutral, contradicting, deepening, modifying, softening, delaying...

4) Appeal/Plea (**HOW? WHO? WHEN? HOW ARE THE MUSICAL INTERACTIONS?**).

The interactional aspect, the musical freshness, crispyness, the flexibility, the aspect of how one's playing influences other players in a mutual process. Turning points, where change occurs: Who initiates a shift, who follows and who does not? Were impulses not perceived at all, or purposely neglected?

Examples: giving impulses, surprising, bumping into, dynamising, taking initiative, being passive, playing manipulatively, rejoicing in reactions, calming down, being indifferent, affirmatively, agreeing / rejecting, acting with haste, being sluggish, inviting, seeking contact, impeding, assimilating, polarising, integrating, connecting, carrying on, confusing, focusing, delaying, trivialising, jumping on any train, staying unaffected => see also: interesting misunderstandings.

In other words:

*A would like B to play with him, he seeks direct contact
or A would like to be left alone – to play a solo*

Or, as a question: is it possible to perceive an open, inviting character in a sound? Is it possible to listen to a sound while focusing on its intention towards the interpersonal dimension?

Two short examples (from CDs, without any claim of being exhaustive): (translation Carl Bergstroem Nielsen (thank you))

Küchen/Münzing

Material Level (WHAT): Kitchen equipment, electronics, a relaxed pulse of bell-like, music box-like and throbbing sounds. At 5:11 moving sound: textural sound (small motors on fur) and increasing density. The inner character of the music is kept very relaxed and transparent (also through the use of microphones near by).

Players (WHO): seemingly un-virtuosic or trying out, casual, between random and following an intention.

Group dynamics (HOW): very homogenous playing together, almost symbiotic. Insisting rhythms which occur sometimes do not lead to something solid, nor to ideas/competition of proposed materials. The musical material allows for and plays together parallel existence. One could say that one player plays with him/herself and another one participates.

Permeability (WHO HOW WHEN): 5:11

The moving sound with a sharp attack is an appeal for change which is also accepted. At some places it is counteracted by ostinato-like playing.

7:00 new impulse: regular knocking => increased action respectively ostinato

More generally: left player (stereo) is more active regarding contact, the right one more passive.

The left material is clearly more diverse than to the right. New sounds and structures keep coming (motor, music box, rhythm), while playing to the right is relatively stoically carried on.

Three Pullovers:

Sea of Mice

Material Level (WHAT): textural sound coming from several players, because of its density and diversity this is closer to textural as Küchen/Münzig (they performed more "pulsi"-like). At 4 minutes something changes, towards becoming somewhat lighter and with a more intimate contact.

Players (WHO): big diversity, very pronounced maneuverability, they act with consequence and at the same time with permeability.

Group dynamics (HOW): Strong communal flow with very contrasting material.

Strong unanimity of shared pulses. No parallel existence but directly a big density in the common sound in spite of very heterogenous instruments / instrumental possibilities.

Permeability (WHO HOW WHEN): Occasionally louder, more dangerous sounds make themselves heard from those of the toy piano and the guitar. Insisting moments: toy piano.)-01
Percussion => guitar.

At 9 Min. strong change. More and more direct reactions to the material (variation, orchestration).