

THE METHODOLOGY OF GODFRIED-WILLEM RAES' IMPROVISATION TEACHING AT CONSERVATORY OF GENT, BELGIUM - REVISITED

by Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen.

Written 1998, revisited 2020, after having experienced an improvisation workshop with Godfried -Willem Raes at European Intuitive Music Conference 2018 in Gent at Logos. I felt like adding and clarifying a few points to the old documentation which I still find inspiring, notwithstanding Godfried's present retirement from ensemble music teaching. The old text is almost untouched, however, I had to revise one passage right in the beginning of the intro stating that elaborate improvisation teaching methods were not frequently described in articles and books - later developments have changed the picture too much! Other than that, and a change of literature references to point to a more comprehensive and updated list, new features consist simply of additions in italics.

INTRODUCTION

Godfried-Willem Raes' improvisation teaching method relates to various forms of analysis of sound phenomena and relations between musicians, and it takes into account the difficulties students encounter when beginning to improvise. Some basic elements are the training of expressive abilities and the study of musical rhetorics. Under these headings one can further distinguish parameter exercises, relational exercises and the study of sentic form.

This article was written on the basis of an interview done in April 1998 with additions made in collaboration with Godfried.

GODFRIED AND LOGOS

Godfried-Willem Raes was born in 1952. His career may be said to reflect the changing times in the latter half of this century! He started studies at the Conservatory of Gent but was thrown out in 71 as 'anti/musical'. As an autodidact, he had even before that time started his career as musician and composer. He also organised concerts and festivals and built up the Stichting Logos which now has several administrative employees. It now houses a major archive of recordings, books and notes concerning experimental and improvised music as well as a concert hall and has long been an important European organizer of experimental concerts. In 1982 the Conservatory asked him to come back to teach modern chamber music classes. In 1990 he became a professor and member of the Board of Directors, and he made a doctors degree in 1993.

Logos is also a performing duo consisting of Godfried and his wife, Moniek Darge. In earlier times, there were several other alternating members of the group. An improvising amateur orchestra, the 'Filharmonie van Gent', was formed and was active during the period of 1974 to 1985. Nowadays, there again is -next to the duo - a Logos ensemble, consisting of about 8 professional musicians, most of them former students of Godfried at the conservatory. (Arne Deforce, Joachim Brackx, Karin Defleyt, Marc Maes, Stefaan Smagghe, Ann Vancoillie, Francesca Verbauwheide, Moniek Darge, Godfried-Willem Raes).

A text from the music publication Logos Anthology (1974) tells us about the emancipative ideas:

"The group was founded in Ghent 1968 by its actual leader. Although its members have changed very much, its artistic manifesto has remained rather constant: no more authoritarian scores nor relations between the members, no 'professionalism' research in electronics ... emancipation of real creativity (negation+action), process-music instead of musical products."

BASIC FRAMEWORKS OF TEACHING

Three-year courses in free improvisation has existed in their present form at the Ghent Royal Conservatory since 1988.

One such course is compulsory for every student during the 3 last years to be spend on getting a masters degree, instrumental or vocal, except for jazz and light music students. This is a result of the initiative taken by Godfried. He has at present approx. 25 new students per year, thus covering more than half of the student population. His improvisation course is compulsory for those composers studying with him. A lesson of one hour is taught every week during semesters - there are between 30 and 35 semester weeks per year.

Godfried considers 7 persons to be the maximum for improvising freely. With numbers higher than 7 people, he thinks it becomes impossible to follow simultaneously the individual musical contributions to the ensemble as musical voices. However, with larger groups other improvisation related topics can be treated but always there will be some form of unifying principle underlying the musical process: an instruction, a (maybe graphic) score, a set of rules, limitations... This kind of playing is taught under a different heading, mostly as an aspect of his class in avant-garde chamber music.

Voices and instruments are used ad lib., regardless of subject studied. Students of a specific instrument do not at all have to join the class on their instrument. They can use just about anything. The tool is not important, rather the range of sonic possibilities a player can dispose of becomes a bonus, regardless how a player achieves this: either through elaborate use of extended techniques on a particular instrument, or, at the other extreme, by bringing together a large quantity of sound objects, each pretty simple to handle.

Even with parallel groups running practical measures have to be taken, such as subdivision of the group during lessons and letting sub-groups alternate in different weeks.

ROOTS OF IMPROVISATION

Godfried says that improvisation typical of the 20th century did not exist before in music history. It is based on the idea of individual liberty and the importance of the individual and his expression. He views surrealism and the l'écriture automatique as an important starting-point. This is quite the opposite of Carl Orff's approach employing a notion of uniform alleged collective primitivity by for instance emphasizing the pulse phenomenon, or the (faulty and europeocentric) theory of development of musical scales from unison, fifth via pentatonic to major/minor scales.

Also, opposite to a pretty common conviction, improvisation definitely does not stem from influences of jazz on western music. Jazz has yet to discover real improvisation. At those points in recent history where jazz started exploring the real possibilities of improvisation, it ceased to be jazz. (ref.: Anthony Braxton, Han Bennink...)

DEFINITION OF IMPROVISATION

What is the difference between improvisation and composition? According to Godfried, improvisation is dialogic or "polylogic". One cannot improvise solo, because one cannot interrupt the flow. Instead, "instant composition" solo becomes "ex tempore", a term from baroque music, which literally means "out of the time of the score", that is, going on in the same way. The social aspect, reacting to others, is crucial. This does not mean that composition is less artistically valuable than improvisation, only that the methods are different.

The surrealists had the idea to break the individual flow of following one's own line. John Cage continued that, using chance as an external source, however, that does not make it improvisation, but chance music.

Vocal improviser Norbert Zajac objected that when he improvised solo he did not follow a plan, because he took inspirations from the audience, which could then be regarded as his partner. Godfried stated that of course we do that, but it is rather to be called strategy.

SOCIOLOGY/POLITICS

The sixties and seventies brought about emancipative tendencies and an emphasis on improvisation in experimental and contemporary music life. At present, there is a postmodernistic trend affecting concert life, although improvisation generally may be more widespread than ever before, including being taught now at many conservatories which is completely new compared to the situation thirty years ago - for instance at Liege and even Leuven which Godfried calls a real bastion of conservative and catholic thinking. The postmodernistic trend is politically to be seen as right wing and conservative because it implies the refusal of taking position - anything goes -, it keeps the power at the place where it is. It renders anything legitimate and thus undermines real critical thought. Free improvisation has, however, come to stay.

EXPRESSIVE ABILITIES

Children at a very young age have and develop natural expressive skills. The basic aim of pedagogy is to suppress this ability. Children are made into well-behaved ones who do not make loud noises and do not throw objects around - this takes place from one year of age and on. There is a heavy weight on making them learn standardized ways of expression and signs which are easy to recognize. Thus, in music they learn a repertoire of songs at the expense of personal expressive abilities.

To communicate, it is to a certain degree necessary to be alike, to make use of a repertoire of standardized signs. But it should not be at the detriment of individual expressive behaviour and development. With the historic development of recent centuries, oppression has aggravated. Only artists are allowed to express themselves. Real musical amateurism does not exist anymore. Amateurs now merely try to imitate 'professionals', serving as 'examples', if not 'Gods'. Artists got the privilege of expressive behaviour at the detriment of others just considered to be audience.

Therefore, as the first task in improvisation training we have to release taboos, says Godfried. We are used to thinking that an oboe must be an oboe, a French horn must be a French horn. Instead we should get acquainted with thinking in a continuum -taking in all possible sounds and valuing sounds for what they are.

A basic exercise illustrates this. Short sounds are made with several objects - for instance, percussive strokes against the floor are made with pieces of wood of various sizes, a metal object etc. Two consecutive sounds are made, and students are now asked which had the highest pitch. Usually, conservatory students cannot answer correctly, although at an earlier stage they would have been able to, as experiments with children have shown. They have been conditioned to thinking in terms of notes and fixed pitches, and without this kind of sound input, their whole reference systems tends to fail. Another exercise: "make a sound louder than the previous one you heard". This is also difficult to students, they have no standard. "One plays a pitch, everybody imitates it as fast as possible". Also difficult - people will tend to translate their perception into a pitch name (a symbol), then find that pitch on their instruments, by looking it up in their 'motoric lookup table'. This makes the reaction time very slow and unspontaneous. One should go past the symbols, the language reference, in order to develop more responsive abilities.

This kind of PARAMETER EXERCISES are carried out in different parameters:

Pitch
Loudness
Timbre
Space Orientation (with eyes shut - from where / is it moving etc.)
Time Scaling (long/short; rhythmic structuring)

Then comes focus on RELATIONAL EXERCISES. One background for them is Globokar's categories of roles like imitating, commenting, contrasting, opposing something another player is doing.

2018 workshop: we did a pointing-out-to-react exercise: standing in a circle, someone makes an individual playing contribution and, at the end, points someone else out who is to continue. This relates to the realistic indeterminate situation in playing. It trains the ability to react fast in the moment. One may make contributions increasingly short (or maybe unpredictable in duration?) to increase the challenge and to involve everybody, possibly several times.

Additionally, we did a classic round exercise: still standing in the circle, playing freely, but only 3 at a time.

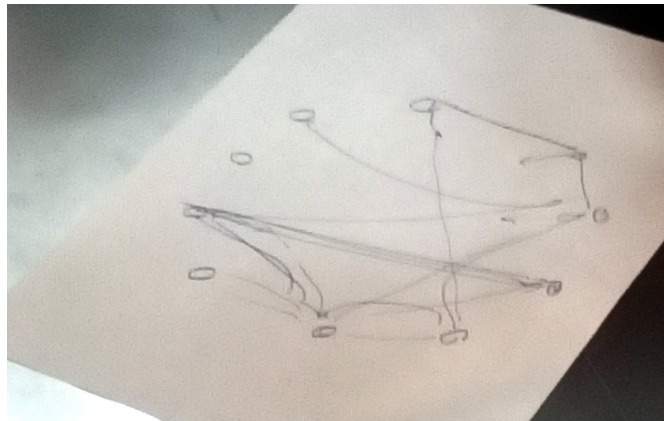
Another background is classical rethorics from the 18th century dealing with how to do a debate. I could for example say: Carl, you are perfectly right, making you feel secure and then give it a twist.

From here, there are two directions in which one can continue working:

- the First, to make a game. The game is very processual - you don't watch the same football game two times. Focus of attention is, how interesting are the moves of the players involved. A condition to make a game meaningful to watch (or to listen at) is that the listener has some idea of the alternatives the players have within reach at each moment in the game. For this reason, it is very hard to make meaningful recordings of this type of improvisations. The listener is deprived from the essential visual input he gets when watching and listening the game in real time.

It is Godfried's thesis that groups should be anarchic. There should be no leader, initiatives should be spread out over a period of time. A SOCIOMETRIC ANALYSIS is made of an improvisation which might have one of Clynes' sentic forms (explained below) as a topic. Participants are given the names A, B C etc, and lines with arrows are drawn on the blackboard (or mentally in the instructors head) whenever an initiative and a following from another person occurs. The

diagram will reveal how active persons are and whether they have a balance of making initiative and following. If the same number of arrows goes to and from a person, one could say he has a balance rate of zero - if there are 2 more initiatives than followings with one person, this person could be said to have a balance rate of +2- etc. *See example below...*



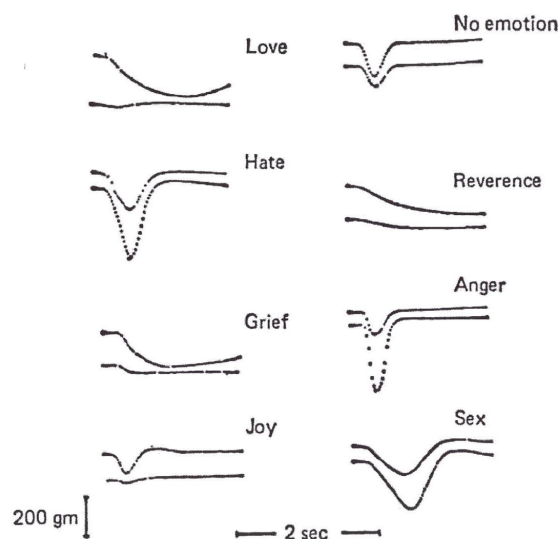
From the 2018 workshop for European Intuitive Music Conference. Sociometric diagram of a free improvisation, drawn by Godfried.

In the example above, an assymetric structure is revealed. Arrows for taking initiative and following an initiative do not appear very clearly, but it is important to note the differences between them. Other players might be "just contributing" which is not to be noted in the drawing, the main issue being initiative and following.

- The Second direction: how can we make the sounds expressively relevant in the group.

To this, a background exists in the Sentic Theory by pianist and music psychologist Manfred Clynes. It is about what underlies the general form of emotion. Persons respond to concepts like "sadness", "tenderness", "anxiety" etc. by exerting pressure on a sensor. The shapes of pressure in time reveal very similar curves for certain basic emotions, even when we go outside Western culture to Bali, aboriginal Australia, and Japan. We do exercises which are STUDIES IN SENTIC FORM to discover these areas, in order to be able to express these things without suffering (or enjoying...) the emotion, just like good actors do. For instance, an actor should be able to express pain without being actually in a state of pain. - Some more categories of Clynes are: love, hate, grief, joy, reverence, anger and sex.

This is about teaching how to express a set of different (abstract) emotions in a communicative way, so that other people are lead in the same direction.



From Clynes (1978) p.29. "Sentograms" showing characteristic "sentic forms" of different emotions. The upper trace marks the vertical movement, the lower the horizontal deflection. Each figure is measured at the average of fifty actions. Subjects were to think of an emotion and press the button according to the feeling they associated with it.

RHETORICS

Rhetorics is actually the ability to organise the former techniques such that a sense of seductive logic seems to emanate from the process or dialogue/polylogue. To think in terms of a time scale - how do I distribute this over time. One task may for instance be to make an uninterrupted flow of 60 minutes for a concert. In the lessons, we have exercises of three to six minutes. Tasks for imaginary audiences are given, for instance: "A concert for school kids third year within school context seven years old" or: "concert in a prison" or: "Sunday morning in church".

Another example: reading a poem aloud and asking the students to react on it right away. (Examples: Bertolt Brecht, Les Chansons de Bilitis, The hunting of the shark, ...)

The different tasks will make necessary different approaches of time. At a Logos concert at an art exhibition opening, LOGOS duo decided to react to the standard format of such an event with an speech, a piece of music, then having drinks and looking at pictures... After the speech, Logos made verbal noises continuing the speech as it were and lead people through the rooms to the pictures during playing, thus making a surprise.

It is about seducing - getting people's attention as much of the time as possible. The aim of musical rhetorics is not much else than seduction. Rhetorics however are an abstract technical skill and are unrelated to what we could call 'content' or expression. We live in a zappy culture with commercials and TV stations attempting to do exactly this! It can be interesting to try to change the way people perceive time. For instance, to become meditational, to cope with a time span of ten minutes. We try to apply rhetorics to a good end: extending and enlarging experiential worlds of people.

THE SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPROVISATION AND COMPOSITION

What distinguishes improvisation from composition for Godfried is that it is a game. The game allows for individuality. Although group improvisation may also be practised with a cohesive sound (as for instance with Stockhausen, Oliveros, European Chaos String Quintet), he finds this kind of group behaviour less interesting.

At the 2018 workshop Godfried described a Japanese game. There is a field filled with sand, 2 persons alternately place stones on the sand, with or without traces in the sand created by moving the stone. There is no winning or losing, just a building up together. Curiously, Haruhiko Okabe from Japan was among the musicians and knew the game which he had played as a child. Haruhiko's notion of how to end the game was to declare it to be over. Godfried's idea of ending was to pull a stone across the field in a rough way, destroying the result.

At least, the cohesive way of playing together serves another set of purposes: for instance, it could be used to stimulate social coherence, meditation, a feel of togetherness. In this example it becomes some sort of praying together, sharing emotions and dissolving them in a supposed collectivity. It serves as a microsocial glue.

In other types, the improvisation becomes a ritual, wherein some taboos otherwise felt as very important and restrictive, are released. Improvisation as party-time, during which individuals are left released from some social taboos.

Godfried holds that music culture needs improvisation simply because it is even a condition for the possibility of a democracy. The idea of democracy is based on the participation of knowledgeable people capable of expressing themselves. It is his conviction that this basic condition for democracy as yet is not fulfilled in any culture over the whole world... Nonverbal expression, as typically practised in musical improvisation is just one aspect of this expressive capability.

Godfried's own view of composition is that despite of its hierarchical nature it can be used for revealing ideas one could not develop in improvised music. However, he emphasizes the wish to seduce musicians by scores and to give them enjoyable tasks. He considers this diametrically opposed to the ideas of for instance Bryan Ferneyhough, who likes to make compositions that challenge musicians by being extremely complicated to play. For Godfried, this is a dictatorial procedure, reinforcing the culture dominated by commensurability we happen to live in.

INSTRUMENTS

Each player should according to Godfried cultivate special tools, including self/built instruments to be able to produce the desired sounds and to strengthen the individuality so as to be discernible among the others in order that the game of improvisation can function well. Contrasting instruments are welcomed, and alike instruments should not sit near each other, nor use the same individual playing techniques.

LITERATURE:

1) For exercise collections and related texts concerning free improvisation outside elementary education, please see my bibliographies:

Old department before 2000 - www.intuitivemusic.dk/iima/legno1uk.htm

or:

<https://vbn.aau.dk/da/publications/experimental-improvisation-practise-and-notation-1945-1999-an-ann>

Category F.1.1 generally - and especially:

Globokar (1986 + 1995)

Reibel (1984)

Schwabe 1992

New department - from 2000:

www.intuitivemusic.dk/iima/legno1uk_add.htm

or

<https://vbn.aau.dk/da/publications/experimental-improvisation-practise-and-notation-addenda-2000-pdf>

Category F.1.1 generally - and especially:

Agrell (2008+2016)

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Mäder (2019)

2) Clynes, Manfred: *Sentics. The Touch of the Emotions*. N.Y (Anchor Press), 1978.

3) Godfried-Willem Raes and Logos:

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Raes, Godfried-Willem: "Improvisatie. Aantekeningen en fragmenten". Manuscript, 1991. Downloaded 8.June 2020 from <https://logosfoundation.org/kursus/3010.html>

Bergstroem-Nielsen, Carl: *Creativity is not a speciality. Western Cultural Democratisation and Logos* (2018).

www.intuitivemusic.dk/iima/gwr_logos.htm
