

## Improvisation: magic or a matter of course

Start a top spinning in passing, forget all about it, and when  
you look back later, it will still be quietly spinning.

Peter Handke, *The Weight of the World*, 1977 <sup>1</sup>

Everything is unpredictable when music happens. It rouses, surprises, provokes, enchants, overwhelms us. Can we also say this of the situation described by Peter Handke? When music happens, it is all about instantaneous pleasure, the gravity and daring of playing and listening, of trying things out, of simulation and playful transformation. Does this apply to Handke's moment of stillness? It's the vitality of the moment, the magic of presence, the physical sound and the awareness of one's own proximity which is so fascinating. Every kind of music makes this possible, improvised music even more so. Improvisation deliberately emphasises the element of unpredictability.

Improvisation is a magic word. It has magical powers. We bow in humility and awe before those who practise and can do it. Constanze Rora<sup>2</sup> describes the mythos of musical improvisation: "[...] improvisation appears to be a musical event, spontaneous, unrepeatable and therefore unique." Descriptions such as these are commonly found in texts on concert improvisation and improvisation in the context of musical education. This emphasis on the singularity of the moment is a central philosophical issue.

In this text, I would again like to comment on the special role improvisation plays in our musical life and the importance of improvisation in musical education. However, I would also like to question why all this effort is actually necessary. Spontaneity, singularity, uniqueness are the essence of our daily lives, our perceptions, our observations. If every detail of our everyday lives had to be planned and performed to schedule, our lives would be robbed of one of their primary elements. In their introduction to the book *Human Actions as Improvisation*, Ronald Kurt and Klaus Näumann<sup>3</sup> approach the topic as follows: "Improvisation is human. In view of the fact that life challenges us to deal with the unpredictable, improvisation is an important skill not only in art, but also in everyday life. Every human action contains the potential for improvisation. If this assumption is correct, the term 'improvisation' ought to be central to cultural thinking - only it isn't, at least not yet."

## Nothing is more precise than coincidence

Nothing is more precise than coincidence; the question is, how much attention do we pay  
to it and how much importance do we attach to it.

Ruth Schweikert, *Ohio*, novel 2005 <sup>4</sup>

Ruth Schweikert expands on the topic. She doesn't merely focus on the precision of the moment, the singularity of what is happening at any given time. She also introduces the concept of

“coincidence”, a term with a wealth of meaning which emphasises the providential nature and purpose of what is happening. She then addresses the question of attention and our freedom to direct it where we want. The term “coincidence” does not refer to the kind of coincidence which happens when two people reach for the telephone at the same time or the flower pot happens to fall on the head of our delightful neighbour. Instead, she refers to the type of coincidence taking place every minute. It is the ultimate in vital energy. Vitality from the continuous movement of everything living, all matter, from physical movement (breathing, blood circulation, behaviour, gesticulation, thinking, speaking, communicating, acting). And everybody can perceive or observe this constant state of being alive. It ought to be a primary need for every human being. However, it may be more important to ask why and to what we turn our attention in different situations.

I have vivid memories of a game I played as a child. I used to play with marbles in a bucket. I would sit on the floor with the bucket between my legs and move it backwards and forwards vigorously so that the glass marbles rolled around the side, the centrifugal force making them rise ever higher. The more violently I swung the bucket, the higher the marbles climbed. I loved letting them gather momentum until they almost went over the edge. A handful of glass balls went spinning in a group. The loud sound gave the game a special dynamic. It reminded me of the daredevil wall-of-death bikers at the fairground. I had a black marble which I was particularly fond of. It was smaller but shinier than the others. I would pretend that they were having a race to see which of them could keep spinning the longest. One marble after the other was eliminated. Either they hurtled over the edge of the bucket or they fell behind the others. I moved the bucket in such a way that I sometimes managed to keep the black marble spinning as the very last. Every race was different, and it was never clear whether the black marble would win. I was fascinated by this game with the loud noise made by the marbles; I loved watching how the centrifugal force kept them spinning. It wasn't the victory of my favourite black marble which enthralled me. I enjoyed moving the bucket. I loved the way in which the marbles rattled their way up the inside. I pretended that the marbles were independent racing machines. I was thrilled by how my movements controlled the marble race – in a state of high physical and mental excitement and satisfaction.

Like Ronald Kurt und Klaus Näumann, I believe that everybody should be able to improvise as a matter of course. After all, everyone has had this kind of experience. Whenever music is alive and powerfully immanent, our experience of force, sound and tempo is not so far removed from games like these. Free improvisation with voice or instrument can awaken the same playfulness and love of movement. The only question is whether the listener can or wants to build a bridge to his own world of experience when listening to someone else's improvisation. And – even more importantly – whether young people have the opportunity to participate in musical activities which guide them in this direction.

## Improvisation on stage and in the classroom

Improvisation, specifically free improvisation – joint creation with no prior agreement – has become a factor in our music life, a small one maybe, but one to be taken seriously. I would even go so far as to claim that free improvisation and its radical approach will become – must become – more important in the near future. The old call for “Liberty, equality and fraternity” has burst forth in various regions of the world – I am currently thinking of events in the North African countries. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, music made the breakthrough to become an autonomous language parallel to the famous imperative. We talk about “absolute music”, no longer bound to events such as festivities, dances or church services. Even if the composer’s work was an artistic monologue and thus hierarchically definitive, his music nevertheless expressed the dialectic of the times, the upheaval in social thinking. How does modern music reflect our times? The call for freedom and autonomy in the streets ought to be expressed as a basic democratic principle on an artistic level by choosing free improvisation. However, it doesn’t have to be the call to revolution we are hearing in North Africa, inspiring conviction and the courage to experiment with creativity. Goodness knows, there are enough grounds for transformation and breakthrough in our own territory. In the new contemporary theatre and dance scene, this cultural and political dimension of art has been developing for decades. The results of these efforts are also being felt in the contemporary music scene, but the music industry is still dominated by a bourgeois consciousness of tradition, whether in major classical symphony concerts or in jazz and pop events featuring veteran stars. The last half century has given rise to immense social, cultural and political change, ideal conditions for adopting a more open, easy-going attitude towards music and art. However, perhaps it needs the upheaval taking place in the neighbouring continents. Perhaps these waves will reach us and wash away our cosy complacency; perhaps our society will some day open up to all kinds of free improvisation – an expression of the current moment which helps support the necessity of paying attention to the real world.

The importance of free improvisation in concert and the indispensability of improvisation in musical education cannot be emphasized enough. A lot happens in both situations. There are numerous new ensembles who mainly give concerts of free improvisation and do not balk at mixing free improvisation with all kinds of styles in the most undogmatic manner. There are a few small festivals which are making quite an impact. This culture is still small but nonetheless vibrant. Its adherents are also fighting for response, for cultural funding, for wider recognition. This is by all means important, but I believe that in this scene, artists should ask themselves even more about matters of content.

In his book *Hear and Now*, Peter Niklas Wilson<sup>5</sup> states “that the changing premises in musical production should motivate people to think about new models of interpretation for this novel, different kind of music.” He is of course addressing musicologists here. I am speaking to the musicians, the organisers, the listeners and the critics. It is all well and good to set the wheels of artistry and cultural policy in motion to gain greater scope for action, but we should also think fundamentally differently. We have to remind ourselves that free improvisation in groups is a radically different process of musical production. Firstly, it is a collective form of authorship which is otherwise not the norm, and secondly every musical structure is decided while playing. This is explosive not only in artistic terms but also in terms of cultural policy – a fact which cannot be emphasised enough. Is it right to continue judging this music by similar criteria to

those we apply to the majority of the music we hear in the concert hall and the media, and which is created in conditions which are familiar to us but entirely different to the conditions prevailing during improvisation? All the parties mentioned above are subject to this prejudice, which has considerable influence on the reception and evaluation of improvised music in terms of cultural policy. Shouldn't we be asking where this other music is supposed to happen? In which scene or environment does it receive the response its visionary attitude deserves?

Musical educationalists value the importance and effects of improvisation somewhat differently (they may be concerned with general forms of improvisation) – in part more naively, in part also more consistently. More naïve insofar as many musical educationalists underestimate the diversity and complexity of the learning areas of improvisation and often understand them merely as an interesting way to balance “learning proper music”. Teachers in the areas of music, movement & rhythm work in a more differentiated fashion, as do music therapists. They understand the comprehensive effect and significance of individual creation as an alternative to excessively work-oriented and reproductive forms of musical life and education. They know that learning capacities increase during the process of creative invention, and that strengthening links with other areas of musical education leads to an organic whole. Improvisation demands and promotes an open attitude. In the broadest sense, this corresponds to “freedom in teaching and research”, incidentally also the central idea underlying university education, which in many places is deliberately complemented by the term “personal responsibility”.

In the small yard of the tall house, a sudden fall wind in the bushes  
Peter Handke, *The Weight of the World*, 1977 <sup>6</sup>

Handke's image, an event which we have seen many times, could be symbolic in character. It reflects the decision to sharpen our perception of the moment, to accept the unexpected (in-providere) and to give it its intrinsic meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt* (The Weight of the World), a Journal, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1977

<sup>2</sup> Constanze Rora, *Vom Sinn der Improvisation im Spiel* (On the Sense of Improvisation during Play), in 'Menschliches Handeln als Improvisation' (Human Actions as Improvisation) R. Kurt/K. Näumann, pub. transcript Verlag Bielefeld, 2008

<sup>3</sup> R. Kurt/K. Näumann, introduction to 'Menschliches Handeln als Improvisation' (Human Actions as Improvisation), pub. transcript Verlag Bielefeld, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Schweikert, *Ohio*, Novel, Amman Verlag, Zurich 2005

<sup>5</sup> Peter Niklas Wilson, *Hear and Now*, Wolke Verlag, Hofheim 1999

<sup>6</sup> Peter Handke, *Das Gewicht der Welt* (The Weight of the World), a Journal, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1977