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# An investigation of the benefits of improvisation for classical musicians

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**An Investigation of the Benefits  
of Improvisation for Classical  
Musicians.**

Rebecca Shanthi Kossen

## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

For centuries improvisation has been an integral part of European classical music culture. Until the nineteenth century most musicians were composers, improvisers and performers. Today, improvisation is less common in the classical music scene with most classical musicians being either performers or composers and only a minority of them having the ability to improvise. Is improvisation relevant to the classical musician whose main concern is the performance of written repertoire?

Learning how to improvise and practicing improvisation requires a musician to develop particular skills which can be directly applied in the performance and interpretation of pre-composed music. This makes improvisation a valuable tool for the classical musician. The musician who improvises will have a deeper understanding of the music they are performing, an enhanced capacity to critically listen to the sound that they are producing and the ability to compose intuitively; becoming an inventor of the music as opposed to a reproducer of notes that they are reading or have memorised. Furthermore, the musician seeking to interpret repertoire from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should have an understanding of the thriving tradition of improvisation that existed throughout those eras and perform this repertoire with an awareness of that tradition.

There are classical musicians today who perform improvisation and this is a practice that should be encouraged. However, even if a musician is not engaging with improvisation in this way, the process of learning to improvise and regular practice of it will assist musicians when interpreting repertoire and preparing for a performance. The final chapter of this paper provides an overview of how classical musicians might incorporate improvisation into their practice.

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# 1. Introduction

As a pianist trained in classical performance, improvisation has not been a significant part of my musical education. Two years ago, I began jazz piano lessons with Tal Cohen and had my first lesson in improvisation. The skills that I acquired through practicing what I learnt in these lessons have affected the way that I interpret and perform classical repertoire. In practicing improvisation, I noticed that the way I thought about harmony and chord voicing developed and I was listening more critically to my playing. As I became more comfortable improvising (even at a rudimentary level), I was able to play intuitively using the new chords and scale patterns that I had learnt. These skills attained in improvisation lessons have helped me in my interpretation of classical repertoire.

This dissertation is an investigation of the way that learning to improvise and having the ability to improvise encourages the development of musical skills, namely, the ability to understand and internalise the musical devices of the text, a musician's aural awareness or their capacity to critically listen to their playing and a development of a musician's ability to compose intuitively. Obtaining and developing these skills will benefit a classical musician, particularly when it comes to interpreting written repertoire. An understanding of the important role improvisation has played in classical music history will also aid a musician who is seeking to interpret music of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

To gain an improviser's perspective on this topic, I carried out interviews with six improvisers; classical pianists David Wickham and Jango Chapkhana, classical/jazz saxophonist Matt Styles, organist Stewart Smith, jazz pianist Tom O'Halloran, jazz saxophonist Jamie Oehlers and actor/singer Brendan Hanson. These interviews enabled me to discover a great deal about how different improvisers learn, practice and perform. Translating these discoveries to the practice and performance experience of a classical musician lead me to form ideas about

how the process of learning to improvise and practicing improvisation will benefit a classical musician.

See the Appendices for transcripts of these interviews.

## Definitions

Bruno Nettl defines improvisation as “the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between.”<sup>1</sup>

The above definition could apply to improvisation within any musical genre and this paper does not seek to explore any genre in particular, rather it assumes that improvisers of all styles of music share common attributes and learning to improvise in any style will benefit a classical musician. Whether a performer improvises by realising a figured bass in a Baroque style, creating a fantasy using Romantic harmonies, using bebop, harmonies from South India, or in a “free form,”<sup>2</sup> they are essentially using the same skills. Clearly these stylistic examples differentiate widely from one another harmonically and structurally, however there is a wide body of literature supporting the idea that the improvisers of these styles share many attributes.

David Dolan’s research into extemporization within classical music makes references to jazz, classical and Arab improvisation acknowledging their stylistic differences but treating the practice of improvisation within these styles as having the same mental processes.<sup>3</sup> Similarly Derek Bailey’s book and documentary series examine the improvisation within a large range of

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Nettl et al. "Improvisation," in *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press, accessed May 4 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music* (United Kingdom: British Library National Sound Archive, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> David Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," in *The Reflective Conservatoire: Studies in Music Education* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005).

musical styles including, Baroque, jazz, rock, noise, Gaelic and South Indian music.<sup>4</sup> Bailey explores the differences of performance practice and harmony between these styles but treats improvisation as something that they all have in common. Ernest T. Ferand's anthology of improvisation in Western music, though chiefly concerned with classical improvisation until the nineteenth century, makes reference to improvisation by *Gypsy bands* and within the *boogie woogie* piano playing of the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The writings of David Beckstead<sup>6</sup>, Robin Moore<sup>7</sup>, Bill Dobbins<sup>8</sup> and Carol Gould with Kenneth Keaton<sup>9</sup> also refer to range of music styles, treating the improvisation within them as being the feature that they share.

### **The Skills of an Improviser**

From the writings of Dolan, Moore<sup>10</sup>, Bailey, John Kratus<sup>11</sup> and Bill Dobbins it becomes clear that the skills improvisers of all styles share include having the capacity to internalize the devices of a text, critically listen to the sound that they are producing and compose intuitively. This paper will explore the ways that practicing improvisation will encourage the development of these skills and how having these skills will benefit the classical musician in their interpretation of written repertoire.

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<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*.

"On the Edge - Episode 1," (United Kingdom: Channel 4 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Thomas Ferand, "Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction," ( Köln Germany: Arno Volk Verlag, 1961).

<sup>6</sup>David Beckstead, "Improvisation, Thinking and Playing Music," *Music Educators Journal* 99 no. 3 (2013).

<sup>7</sup> Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (1992).

<sup>8</sup> Bill Dobbins, "Improvisation: An Essential Element of Musical Proficiency " *Music Educators Journal* 66, no. 5 (1980).

<sup>9</sup> Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton, "The Essential Role of Improvisation in Musical Performance," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 58, no. No. 2 (2000).

<sup>10</sup> Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change."

<sup>11</sup> John Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation," *International Journal of Music Education* 26, no. 1 (November 1995).

Due to this focus on the classical musician and as a result of my experience as a classical pianist, most of the examples within this dissertation will be concerned with improvising in a “classical style.”<sup>12</sup> Jazz is also referred to regularly, as the thorough and practical methods that exist within its pedagogy and its thriving improvisation scene, allow it to be an accessible genre for the twenty- first century musician who wants to improvise.

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<sup>12</sup> “Classical style” here refers to the improvisation styles common in the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras.

## 2. An Overview of Improvisation within Western Art

### Music

At this point a brief overview of improvisation in Western music history is required. This will demonstrate the important role improvisation has in the classical musician's heritage and highlight the effect it has had on much of the standard repertoire performed by classical musicians. Later chapters will investigate how an understanding of this history will affect the performance practice of classical musicians when interpreting repertoire.<sup>13</sup>

#### The Importance of Improvisation

From melismatic Gregorian chant, to the realisation of a figured bass line, the extemporisation of Baroque ornaments, improvised cadenzas in the concertos of Mozart and the tradition of fantasy playing and preluding that existed in the piano scene during the Romantic era, it is impossible to study classical music history without coming across the existence of improvisation.

Henry Peacham in his book *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622) states that it is a "*sign of good breeding to be able to sing a voice of a polyphonic composition at sight and to play extempore.*"<sup>14</sup> In the sixteenth century it was expected that musicians who worked in the court and in the church were able to improvise polyphony. In Ippolito Camatero's collection of polyphonic Introids he comments on the novelty of writing down what is normally extemporised.<sup>15</sup> The requirements for organists wanting to work at St. Mark's in Venice were to "*play a fantasy on a given theme for a*

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 3. The Benefits of Improvisation, IV) Improvisation and Authentic Performance

<sup>14</sup> Ferand, "Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction," 7.

<sup>15</sup> "Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction," 9.

Kyrie or a motet with the instructions to make it sound as though four singers are singing.”<sup>16</sup>

Later on, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a pianist’s ability to improvise a prelude was seen as sign of “civilised training in harmony and musical good manners.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Examples of improvisation**

In those times, the line between composer, improviser and performer was much more blurred than it is in today’s classical music scene. As Couperin stated, “What we write is different to what we play.”<sup>18</sup> A Baroque continuo player’s role in an ensemble was to provide a rhythmic spur, integrate all that was going on and act as a stimulus to other people in the group through their realization of a figured bass line. Handel in particular was well known for producing bass lines that sounded like “extemporized composition.”<sup>19</sup>

Baroque and Classical singers were required to provide their own coloraturas for da capo arias and an examination of different versions of Corelli’s violin sonatas shows the way performances could vary depending on how ornamentation was employed.<sup>20</sup> Keyboard improvisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was commonplace. CPE Bach’s free fantasies and the written out cadenzas of Mozart are thought to be merely models for a performer to study extemporisation rather than mandatory notes for them to perform.

Often literature that laments the decline of improvisation within classical music neglects the rich tradition of organ improvisation that continues today and has flourished for centuries. Church organists are expected to provide voluntaries, postludes, interludes throughout a service. Some of the requirements of church organists were and still are to be able to embellish a vocal or

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<sup>16</sup> "Improvisation in Nine Centuries of Western Music: An Anthology with a Historical Introduction," 15.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*.

<sup>20</sup> Bowen José A, *Finding the Music in Musicology: Performance History and Musical Works* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 426-27.

an instrumental melody, improvise polyphonically and perform free improvisation; the early form of this improvisation being preambles, toccatas, fantasias and preludes.

The piano recital as we know it today evolved from a tradition of recitals which contained mostly improvisations and arrangements by the pianist. Liszt's recital encores were often improvisations on pieces he had just performed or on popular tunes of the day. Herz and Liszt would ask their audiences to give them suggestions of tunes that they could improvise on.<sup>21</sup> Hummel is said to have been able to take the "commonest tune, and so grace, and enhance and alter it, as to present it in the liveliest forms of new pleasure."<sup>22</sup> There are accounts of Mendelssohn improvising on themes from Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Bach sonatas. His extemporisations have been described as being "as fluent and planned as a written work and the themes... were not only brought together but contrapuntally worked."<sup>23</sup>

Kenneth Hamilton explores in great detail the eighteenth and nineteenth century practice of preluding by pianists that was commonplace in the recital of the day. According to Czerny, it was a way for the pianist to introduce the beginning of a program, link the pieces within it together, "prepare listeners and set the mood," and to examine the quality of the piano. The prelude had to "appear to be the birth of the moment."<sup>24</sup> Liszt, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Paderewski, Rachmaninoff, Busoni and Hoffman are just some examples of notable pianists who engaged in preluding within their recitals. The beginning of *Beethoven's Tempest Sonata*, his fourth piano concerto, the *Andante Spianato* preceding Chopin's *Grand Polonaise*, Chopin's *Preludes* for piano and the *Preludio* from Liszt's *Transcendental Studies* are a few samples of written music that are thought to reflect the spirit of an extemporised composition.

Improvisation began to fade from the classical recital in the late Romantic era but there are still examples of it occurring into the early twentieth century. Richard Strauss was known to

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<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 112.

improvise between songs and to vary difficult passages when he was accompanying, “as though he already considered the material as an orchestral score – how often have we pianists longed to have that freedom ourselves!”<sup>25</sup> Alfred Orel observed that Strauss’ transitions between songs used themes from his operas or themes that were closely related to the song he was transitioning to. “Before ‘Du meines Herzens Krönelein’ he played very softly - apparently entirely for himself - the famous closing duet from *Der Rosenkavalier*... It was an irrefutable demonstration of the great unity which encompasses Richard Strauss’s total œuvre.”<sup>26</sup>

Whilst improvisation gradually lost its place in the classical piano recital, the contribution of composers such as Frederic Rzewski in the area of free improvisation and Charles Ives and John Cage in aleatoric music (“inviting the performer to find his own solutions”<sup>27</sup>) are examples of improvisation occurring in the twentieth century. In addition, Iannis Xenakis through his use of indeterminacy and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and Luciano Berio in their use of mobile form perpetuate the practice of improvisation into the twentieth and twenty first centuries in classical music.

Dobbins describes jazz as the most “highly developed form of music improvisation currently practiced in the West.”<sup>28</sup> While any study of contemporary organ improvisation might cause this claim to be debatable, his justifications for the statement are insightful. He notes that jazz improvisation is often an extension of the musician’s personality and almost all jazz musicians are improvisers, composers and arrangers. He also makes the point that jazz is an aural art form where musicians learn the most expressive parts of their performance through imitation. Dobbins argues that jazz’s tendency to “inclusion and assimilation” as opposed to the “exclusion and elitism” of much western art music makes it unique and “unequaled in music

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<sup>25</sup> Lorraine Gorrell, "The End of an Era: Mahler and Strauss," in *The Nineteenth-Century German Lied* (New Jersey USA: Amadeus Press LLC 2005), 324-25.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Rush Philip Eugene, "A String Player's Guide to Improvisation in Western Art Music," *Electronic Theses Treatises and Dissertations Paper 1939* (2004).

<sup>28</sup> Dobbins, "Improvisation: An Essential Element of Musical Proficiency".

history.” Finally, Dobbin argues that jazz rhythm is a physical rather than an abstract element and its chromatic harmony has extended beyond that of most twentieth and twenty first century classical composers.

While each of these claims can be debated, there is no question that jazz is a paradigm of what an improvising music culture can be. The contemporary jazz scene is perhaps a picture of what the eighteenth and nineteenth century performance scene may have been like. Robert Levin and Kenneth Hamilton both compare the recital of the Classical/Romantic era, with its energetic, involved audience and spontaneous performer, to that of a modern day jazz performance.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Decline of Improvisation**

It is clear that improvisation was not embraced by all performers/composers throughout classical music history. Mendelssohn didn't enjoy improvising and believed it “was madness to improvise in public.”<sup>30</sup> Mozart expressed frustration with singers taking excess liberties when ornamenting his arias and wished they would adhere more closely to his instructions.<sup>31</sup> In 1892 Pachman was accused by the London Times of “artistic impertinence”<sup>32</sup> for prefacing the slow movement of Beethoven's 3<sup>rd</sup> concerto with an improvisation.

### **Reverence to the text**

The Romantic era brought with it a rise in reverence for the composer and their work.<sup>33</sup> As attitudes changed, performers became more reluctant to change or add to what the composer specified and from here began our modern obsession with studying different editions and trying

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<sup>29</sup> Levin, quoted in Bailey, "On the Edge - Episode 1."

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 46.

<sup>31</sup> Frederic Neumann, *Ornamentation and Improvisation in Mozart* (New Jersey Princeton University Press, 1986).

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change."

to discover precisely what the composer wanted. Bailey writes passionately about how the rise of the conductor has taken control over the way that classical musicians and audiences engage with music and eliminates the possibility of improvisation. Hamilton suggests that the modern classical pianist's practice of playing by memory was what replaced improvisation in recitals; musicians seeking to maintain the perception of a spontaneous and free performance despite the lack of improvisation.<sup>34</sup>

### **Recording**

Hamilton, Levin and Lionel Salter<sup>35</sup> point out that the advent of recording aided in the demise of improvisation. They argue that it led to audiences and performers becoming accustomed to hearing a piece being performed in a particular way and introducing an element of chance in one's performance increases the risk of failing to adhere to the audience's expectations in this way. Salter argues that eliminating the element of chance goes against the spirit of the Baroque and this argument will be further explored in later chapters.<sup>36</sup>

### **The Musician's Context**

Additionally, in our contemporary moment, classical musicians have less opportunity to be absorbed in one particular style of music, due to the requirement on them to perform a variety of styles. Musicians before the nineteenth century often were absorbed in one style of music, daily engaging in singing, transposing, improvising and regularly hearing performances. Seventeenth and eighteenth century musicians often worked in a court or a church or studied an instrument with a master. Singers worked closely with their teachers to develop good coloratura and Czerny's *Opus 200* treatise on improvisation reveal the exercises his students were

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<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*.

<sup>35</sup> Salter, quoted in Hoy, Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 3: "The Benefits of Improvisation, III) Improvisation and authentic performance"

encouraged to practice daily.<sup>37</sup> This type of exposure to music naturally led to a culture of improvisation and Robin Moore argues that a lack of this exposure is a key reason for the decline of improvisation within the classical music scene today.<sup>38</sup>

Today, with our access to the Internet and increasing globalisation, the modern musician is exposed to more styles of music than any generation of musicians in the past. In addition to this, modern conservatories are under increasing financial pressure which has led to a reduction of specialised tuition time with instrumental teachers therefore less time to focus on techniques such as improvisation.<sup>39</sup>

However recent evidence suggests that interest in the field is growing. Robert Levin is known for his improvisations in the style of Mozart and the Guildhall School of Music has a department, headed by David Dolan which specialises in teaching classical improvisation. The following chapters will investigate how engaging in improvisation can benefit classical musicians.

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<sup>37</sup> Carl Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*, trans. Alice L Mitchell (New York: Longman Inc, 1983).

<sup>38</sup> Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," 64-66.

<sup>39</sup> GAP - Global Access Partners, "Higher Music Education in Australia in 2011: The Need for Change, Twenty Years after the 'Dawkins Reforms': Music as Part of the University System," *Tertiary Music Education in Australia Task Force Report* (Sydney: Global Access Partners Pty Ltd, 2011).

### 3. The Benefits of Improvisation

#### I) Assisting the Performer to Understand and Internalise Musical Devices

##### Understanding Musical Devices

Dolan writes that one of the main components of an improvisation are the learned schemes associated with the musical style being improvised within. He describes these learned schemes as “building blocks of musical knowledge” which include the harmonic, rhythmic, melodic and structural devices of a style. These devices are different for every musical style and may be consciously learnt or unconsciously obtained.<sup>40</sup> There are many improvisation scenarios in which a performer needs a conscious understanding of the learned schemes associated with the style they are extemporising upon. A keyboard player seeking to realise a figured bass line in a Handel oratorio will need to be familiar with the harmonic language Handel used and should understand the conventions of figured bass. Also, a jazz pianist performing a version of *Round Midnight* by Thelonious Monk will need an understanding of how bebop harmony functions. These styles are examples of improvisation situations where an intimate understanding of the style is essential.

Taking note of some improvisation pedagogy scenarios and practice methods will further enhance this idea. Jangoo Chapkhana discusses the importance of having a good understanding of the harmony, line and chord changes of a style when improvising within it.<sup>41</sup> When jazz musicians practice, they devote much time to thinking about scales and patterns and how they can fit into different musical situations.<sup>42</sup> Musicians who extemporise fugues might prepare by

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<sup>40</sup> Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 103.

<sup>41</sup> Jangoo Chapkhana, 31st July 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers* (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music 1998), iv.

writing one out, analysing the subjects and counter subject and thinking about ways to treat the subject within the context of the fugue. C.P.E Bach's lessons on improvising contain exercises for students which are based on scales and designed to help them understand harmonic changes within the music.<sup>43</sup> Brendan Hanson argues that practicing improvisation assists actors and opera singers in getting to know their text more intimately and puts them in a better mindset to understand what the composer or author were thinking when they were creating the text.<sup>44</sup>

Improvising does put the performer in the position of the composer. It assists them in gaining a deeper understanding of how the music works; its structure, harmonic progressions, chord voicing, rhythmic devices. Stewart Smith supports this idea and discusses how improvising can help a performer to see "the trajectory that the composer took and also see that in any one particular place there's other ways that the music could actually go."<sup>45</sup> David Wickham states that thinking like the composer will help the performer in "feeling the patterns, relationships and tone colours."<sup>46</sup>

### **Internalising Musical Devices**

"Feeling" the devices associated with the music is a key point to examine. Improvisers must internalise the musical devices of the style they are extemporising upon to the point where they can naturally draw upon them in the moment of performance. This requires a deep aural understanding of the structure of the work and the devices within it. Jamie Oehlers states that having the ability to pre-hear a chord will "aid a performer in memorising a complete idea."<sup>47</sup>

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Tom O'Halloran, 22nd August 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Carl Phillip Emmanuel Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, trans. William J Mitchell, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1949).Chapter 7

<sup>44</sup>Brendan Hanson, 16th August 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart Smith, 6th September 2013.

<sup>46</sup> David Wickham, 20th August 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Jamie Oehlers, 13th September 2013.

According to Dolan, drawing upon pre- practiced ideas in the moment of performance is essentially what happens when a performer improvises. He argues that in an improvisation, learned schemes combine with spontaneity as well as an instinctive understanding of structure. Being able to improvise in a particular style will help a performer “internalise the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures.”<sup>48</sup> Dobbins goes as far as to label a performance that lacks this internalisation of melody, rhythm and harmony “cheap imitation.”<sup>49</sup>

### **Gaining a Sense of Authority**

I am interested in what might happen if more classical musicians sought to internalise their music in the same way that many improvisers do, and took a composer’s view of the text. For example, if a pianist preparing a performance of one of the *Intermezzi* of Brahms set themselves the task of improvising something similar, how might this affect their later performance of the piece? To be able to improvise a piece such as an *Intermezzo* the pianist would need to gain an intimate understanding of how the works of Brahms are structured, the type of harmonies and rhythms employed within them, the way that chords are voiced and melodies are designed. Once these musical devices are well understood and aurally internalised, the performer will gain a sense of authority when performing Brahms. Even if the improvisation is at a rudimentary level, this type of exercise is beneficial.

David Wickham suggests that in this way, improvisation can give the performer a sense of authority because, “...once you get confident at improvisation the borders between styles don’t seem to matter much. If you get under the surface to intuitively feel the stylistic rules you can adapt surprisingly quickly.”<sup>50</sup> An authoritative performance is one where the audience feels as if the performer understands the music that they are performing at a deep level. Dolan theorises that performers who improvise can feel the structure and phrasing patterns of a piece

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<sup>48</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>49</sup> Dobbins, "Improvisation: An Essential Element of Musical Proficiency".

<sup>50</sup> Wickham.

better and states that this could have implications for how they interpret written music.<sup>51</sup> Dobbins argues that having the kind of confidence that comes from being able to improvise, gives the performer the ability to transmit musical meaning but also points out that “a highly proficient command of language is necessary to achieve true clarity of expression.”<sup>52</sup> Delving into this further, Dolan makes the point that improvisation should be taught and practiced as a “mother tongue” rather than as a foreign language. A performer should be able to speak through their music as one who is familiar with the language that they are using, rather than someone who has memorised a set of phrases in a language that is foreign to them. William Harris writes that orators who improvise can be good story tellers while “academic committee members reading from a set of cards are always a bore.”<sup>53</sup> “Reading from a set of cards” is something that classical musicians must avoid.

This is not to say that loyalty to the text is unimportant - in fact Hanson makes that point that improvisation “is not an excuse for sloppiness”<sup>54</sup> and Handel is known to have criticised Gluck saying that he “knew no more counterpoint than his cook”<sup>55</sup> demonstrating how even the “master of extemporized composition”<sup>56</sup> valued a solid understanding of the text. Instead, I am suggesting that getting to know the text intimately facilitates a more convincing performance. Stewart Smith explains that improvising allows a performer to “enter into the unfolding of the music and the unfolding of the structure, maybe in the same way the composer actually

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<sup>51</sup> Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 100.

<sup>52</sup> "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 106.

<sup>53</sup> William Harris, "Improvisation: The New Spirit in the Arts," <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/MusicPapers/MusicAlive.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Hanson.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce Alan Brown Julian Rushton, "Gluck, Christoph Willibald Ritter Von.," in *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online, ed. Oxford University Press.

<sup>56</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*.

envisioned. Because I've got a deeper understanding as to how the music can work and how it does work it makes me a better performer.”<sup>57</sup>

A classical musician who practices improvising with their repertoire will be able to “go deeper with the music and with the score.”<sup>58</sup> They will take on the persona of a composer and attain the ability to understand the devices employed throughout the music. Once this understanding of the music is aurally internalized, the classical musician will have the freedom to perform with authority. Instead of performing a set of memorised notes without understanding them, they will be able to use the notes as a way to speak to their audience, “possibly in the way that the composer envisioned.”<sup>59</sup> It must be reemphasised that having this freedom is not an excuse for “sloppiness” or a way to avoid the work of properly learning a piece. Rather it is an opportunity for the classical musician to take their performance to the next level, to be truly creative and to speak honestly as a performer.

## II) Increasing a Musician's Aural Awareness<sup>60</sup>

### The Aural Skills of an Improviser – ‘Audiation’ and Pre-hearing

On the topic of teaching jazz improvisation Winton Marsalis states, “We have to teach them how to hear, just like you have to be taught to listen in a conversation.”<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Smith.

<sup>58</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>59</sup> Smith.

<sup>60</sup> George Pratt, *Aural Awareness: Principles and Practice* (Philadelphia: Open University Press 1990).

<sup>61</sup> Winton Marsalis, *Teaching Music through Performance in Jazz*, ed. Richard Miles and Ronald Carter (Chicago Illinois: GIA Publications, 2008).

The musician who possess the ability to improvise in a particular style, will have an aural understanding of that style. "Part of being an improviser comes with having strong aural skills and also being able to manipulate those aural skills."<sup>62</sup>

The pedagogical experiences of improvisers such as David Wickham<sup>63</sup>, Jango Chapkhana<sup>64</sup>, Matt Styles<sup>65</sup> and Pundit Hanuman Misra<sup>66</sup> further enhance this idea; each of these musician cites listening to and imitating other musicians as important factors in the development of their improvisation abilities. As stated previously, the skill of improvisation is best cultivated in a performer who is being aurally immersed in a style of music. <sup>67</sup> Thurston Dart argues that the writing down of counterpoint was a key reason for the demise of improvisation amongst classical musicians because it "sacrificed the ear on behalf of the eye."<sup>68</sup> Indeed Crawford argues that improvisation "is the best form of ear training available and it cultivates the habit of 'pre-hearing' which is a vital factor in true listening."<sup>69</sup>

Edmund Gordon's term "audiation"<sup>70</sup> adds another dimension to the concept of pre-hearing music. He invented the term to describe a musician who is "mentally hearing and comprehending music even when no physical sound is present."<sup>71</sup> Gordon theorizes that when a musician is 'audiating' they are "summarizing and generalizing from the specific music patterns

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<sup>62</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>63</sup> Wickham.

<sup>64</sup> Chapkhana.

<sup>65</sup> Matt Styles, 1st August 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Bailey, "On the Edge - Episode 1."

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter 2, iii) "The decline of improvisation"

Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," 64-66.

<sup>68</sup> Thurston Dart, "Extemporisation," in *The Interpretation of Music* (Great Britain: The Anchor Press Ltd, 1967), 62.

<sup>69</sup> H. A. B. Crawford, "The Use and Importance of Improvisation at the Keyboard," *The Musical times*, 1904-1995 69, no. 1023 (1928).

<sup>70</sup> Edwin E. Gordon, "Learning Sequences in Music: Skill, Content, and Patterns " (1997).

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

just heard as a way to anticipate or predict what will follow.”<sup>72</sup> He notes that ‘to audiate’ a musician must have an intellectual understanding of music and argues that ‘audiation’ is essential for true musicianship and should be taught from the beginning of a musician’s education. According to Gordon, it is evident that a musician is ‘audiating’ when they can sing what they are playing, vary the melody, transpose or change the fingering of a melody and physically move with the phrases of a melody. Once a musician can do this they will be able to “sing and move in (their) minds, without ever having to sing and move physically.”<sup>73</sup>

Crawford states that the musician “whose playing is absolutely confined to what has been written by others on paper, and who cannot even modulate readily and musically at the keyboard, is but half-educated.”<sup>74</sup> In light of these observations, this chapter aims to explore the ways that the ability to ‘audiate’ or pre-hear music can benefit the classical musician’s performance.

### **The Musician who Sight-Reads with no Aural Response**

There is an onus on the classical musician to be accurate to the score as this will supposedly assist them to best represent the intentions of the composer. According to George Pratt, this loyalty to the score and the sight reading method of learning repertoire often leads to an exaggerated priority placed on reproducing the exact notated pitch at the expense other musical elements such as phrasing and rhythm. Pratt promotes a form of reading where the musician converts the symbols into imagined sounds and forms notes in their mind rather than physically responding to what they are reading with no aural response.<sup>75</sup> Crawford argues that it is quite possible for the average classical music student who only learns visually to “continue his

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Crawford, H. A. B. (1928). The use and importance of improvisation at the keyboard. *The Musical Times*, 69(no. 1023), 418-419.

<sup>75</sup> Pratt, *Aural Awareness: Principles and Practice*.

musical education without ever really learning to listen to music at all. His work depends entirely on his ability to transfer written symbols into corresponding key movements.”<sup>76</sup>

### **The Benefits of Pre-hearing and ‘Audiation’**

#### **Perceiving Musical Works in their Entirety**

A musician who can pre-hear and ‘audiate’ will find it much easier to perceive a musical work “in its entirety.”<sup>77</sup> Nick McAdoo promotes the importance of perceiving a work in this way and rebuts the theories of Jerrold Levinson and Edmund Gurney who argue that musical perception must be limited to snatches of the fleeting “now-moment,” which may be according to Levinson, as short as half a minute.

Using visual art as a metaphor, McAdoo explains that when one is observing a painting, the “sense of ‘wholeness’” comes from the eye “rapidly flitting over the whole surface” or (if the eye is settled on one aspect of the painting), from a connection between the point that the eye is focusing on and the viewer’s peripheral vision or sense of the wider context of the painting.<sup>78</sup>

Further developing this, he draws upon Edmund Husserl’s idea of temporality (from *The Phenomenology of Perception*) which theorises that our experience of time is like a “mobile setting that moves away from us like the landscape seen through a railway carriage window” and while “the gate keeper by the level-crossing is whisked by, the hill over there scarcely moves at all.”<sup>79</sup> McAdoo relates this to listening to a work where the notes of a musical theme may rush past but the theme will still maintain its perceptual presence.

Supporting the ideas of Husserl, he claims that they confirm what is practically obvious – our ability to perceive time passing in large chunks is what makes possible “the further aesthetic capacity to hear melodies as melodies.” McAdoo suggests that this ability comes from a capacity

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<sup>76</sup>Crawford, "The Use and Importance of Improvisation at the Keyboard."

<sup>77</sup> Nick McAdoo, *Hearing Musical Works in Their Entirety*, vol. 37, *British Journal of Aesthetics* (1997).

<sup>78</sup> McAdoo, “Hearing Musical Works in Their Entirety.”

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

for musical sensitivity and any limitations to this ability are due to cultural and historical restraints or a person's "unwillingness, reserve, mistrust or insincerity." He argues that musical sensitivity or obtaining a deeper sense of hearing and perception, are attributes that can be learnt and practiced.

Practicing improvisation is the ideal way for a musician to obtain this deeper sense of hearing and to expand their aural understanding beyond the "now-moment" so that they can focus on musical ideas rather than the "dots on the page."

### **Performing ideas and telling a story**

The "dots on the page" are not just "dots" but represent musical ideas and musical gestures. It is the role of the performer to release these musical ideas. Essentially, what an improviser does is experiment with musical ideas and use them to "make a convincing argument."<sup>80</sup>

Once a musician has the ability to focus on their sound, rather than on the mechanics of the music, they will be free to express ideas and tell stories through performances. Brendan Hanson makes some observations from his experience teaching classical musicians to improvise, noting that when he encouraged the musicians to think about their performance in terms of a literal story, the performance standard lifted and the music had more creativity and interest.<sup>81</sup> Oehlers has similar ideas, noting that he is fortunate for having a jazz tutor who encouraged him to focus on expressing ideas as a beginner.<sup>82</sup>

Heinrich Neuhaus tends to resist the literal, story-telling nature of performance but does state that a performer must "Strive first of all to improvise and develop the ear and musical facilities, the faculty to imagine, to represent, i.e. the artistic ability."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Smith.

<sup>81</sup> Hanson.

<sup>82</sup> Oehlers.

<sup>83</sup> Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art of Piano Playing* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 85.

### **Encouraging a Musician to Analyse Their Sound**

It is important for musicians to be constantly listening to themselves and critiquing what they hear. Itzhak Perlman states, “The single most important goal for performing artists is to see how they are doing” and adds that “our performances inescapably reveal whether we truly hear ourselves and perceive the impact of our delivery.”<sup>84</sup>

Jamie Oehlers discusses the obvious differences between the performance of a musician who is remembering a piece of music and that of a musician who is hearing a piece of music. He praises the performance of Jacqueline du Pré as someone who “hears the music” and would be “able to sing every note of her performance” and compares this to some other classical musicians whose performances sound, “like an accountant churning out the numbers.”<sup>85</sup>

Improvisers are constantly listening to their sound and analysing what they hear. Tom O’Halloran theorises that the classical musician who is able to improvise will be encouraged to listen to their sound, analyse their touch and consider whether the music is “saying what (they) want it to.”<sup>86</sup>

### **Helping a musician turn off self- talk and play intuitively**

O’Halloran also emphasises the importance of practicing improvising intuitively and turning off self-analysis. “Rather than critically thinking “what am I doing? Is this right? Does it sound any good? What are people thinking,” it’s about letting go (and being) more intuitive, creative and free, kind of like being at play... like a child at play.”

Hanson supports this idea of intuitive performance, stating that an improviser is able to “forget about their ego and let the story channel through them.”<sup>87</sup> He argues that it is obvious when a performer is on stage and more focused on themselves than on the text that they are

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<sup>84</sup>Gerald Klickstein, *The Musician's Way* ( U.S.A: Oxford University Press, 2009), 202.

<sup>85</sup> Oehlers.

<sup>86</sup> O’Halloran.

<sup>87</sup> Hanson.

performing. Being able to perform intuitively helps a performer to relinquish control over the text and encourages them to be free it. Having the free “child at play” mindset comes chiefly from having a deep aural awareness of the music. An academic understanding of the piece will produce a technically correct and well informed performance but if the performer is not hearing what they are playing the performance will not be creative “like a child at play,” rather their performance will be “like an accountant churning out the numbers.”<sup>88</sup>

Related to intuitive performance is Mihaly Csikszentmihaly’s theory of flow which David Dolan draws upon heavily. He discusses the idea that improvisation assists a performer to achieve a “state of flow” – in which there is no ego, no time, the whole being is involved, there is a moving away from the physical and the musician is using their skills to the utmost. In this state action and awareness merge, the concentration level is high and self-consciousness disappears.<sup>89</sup>

One of the benefits of regularly performing in a “state of flow” is that the performer practices spontaneous expression. Dolan argues that emotional experience is one of the main reasons why people engage with music and musicians must be expressive in order to communicate. This emotional expression is something that must come about spontaneously and cannot be thought about in the moment of performance. He draws parallels between speech and music, theorising that listeners follow the tone of a conversation over the content.<sup>90</sup> From Dolan’s findings it becomes obvious that improvisation is a vital tool for performers who want to be able to spontaneously expressive themselves in performance.

Having a spontaneous, “play by ear”<sup>91</sup> intuitive approach does not negate the importance of structured, planned practice and an academic understanding of the music one is performing.

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<sup>88</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>89</sup> Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 100.

<sup>90</sup> "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 106.

<sup>91</sup> Pratt, *Aural Awareness: Principles and Practice*, 96.

In fact, David Dolan argues that “planning and spontaneity’s co-existence is conditional to skilfully executed improvisation.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance," 100.

### III) Helping a Performer to Find Their Own Voice

Performing with the Csikszentmihaly 'state of flow' will not only enable a musician to play with emotional expression, but it will also encourage them to play with their own personal expression. Performing written music and repertoire that has been heard by audiences many times, means that for a classical musician, bringing an individual voice and interpretation to a performance can be a challenge. The classical musician needs to make decisions about how to speak to their audience in a unique way, while still respecting the text and style they are performing in. Is it possible for there to be an individual interpretation of a performance where the performer doesn't choose which notes to play? (Note that even the question of "which note to play" has ambiguous answers due to the multitude of editions available to the modern performer). Gould and Keaton state that even where a performer is closely following a score, "the precise realization of dynamics and rhythmic subtleties, timbre, intonation and articulation arises at the moment of performance."<sup>93</sup> They argue that these decisions made in the moment of performance are examples of improvisation.

Practicing improvisation will assist the classical musician to make these decisions in a personal, original way. Whilst it is important for the classical musician to be aware of the stylistic requirements of them and it is also beneficial to listen to and learn from the performances of great artists, there comes a time where a performer must stop imitating others and aim to create performances that come from their own personality, their own ideas on how the piece should go and their own ideas on how they best can communicate with their audience. "It's...like how a painter will go through a period of trying to mimic another painter to get techniques that they

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<sup>93</sup> Keaton, "Improvisation in the Arts."

can use in the future...blending colours etc. In order to become an artist there has to come a time when you stop doing that and try something of your own.”<sup>94</sup>

Finding out what “your own” is can be a daunting prospect for the musician whose main objective has been to discover what the composer’s wishes were. Improvisation can help with this. “Improvisers generally play like their personality”<sup>95</sup> and practicing improvisation will help the classical musician achieve a sense what their own personality is.

Styles argues that practicing improvisation allows a performer to practice “their own voice” to learn what they like and what they don’t like. He encourages students to experiment with interpretation<sup>96</sup> and gives examples of possible discoveries that musicians might make while improvising which can benefit them when making decisions in the moment of performance. For instance, a musician who sets themselves the task of improvising with five notes might discover several different ways to phrase, articulate or dynamically express those five notes. Then, when coming to a piece of repertoire that might have a phrase repeating itself several times, the musician/improviser has a palette of ideas they can apply to that musical situation.<sup>97</sup>

On the subject of originality and creativity, classical musicians can learn a great deal from listening to jazz and observing how jazz musicians approach performance. Jazz is an art form that is constantly evolving and reinventing itself and to be successful a jazz musician must be original, creative and “say something new.”<sup>98</sup> “Preserving the spirit of jazz means change. That’s what jazz is – breakthrough”<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Oehlers.

<sup>95</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>96</sup> This idea is similar to that of Gould and Keaton in "Improvisation in the Arts."

<sup>97</sup> Styles.

<sup>98</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>99</sup> Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*, 196.

## IV) Improvisation and Authentic Performance

There is a view that the modern classical musician is not expected to say something new, should be assessed by their ability to remain faithful to the letter of work and to reflect the composer's wishes in their performance. Lionel Salter, when asked about whether a performance of a Baroque piece could be considered remarkable for the contribution of the performer rather than that of the composer, stated that "that would be an absolute artistic crime."<sup>100</sup>

A large amount of literature has been devoted to deciphering exactly what the composer would have wanted in terms of ornamentation, phrasing, tempo, technique and dynamic markings. The writings of Dieter Gutknecht on the importance of staying true to the letter of the score,<sup>101</sup> William S. Newman on interpreting Bach<sup>102</sup>, Sandra Rosenblum on copying the "piano masters" when developing technique and interpreting ornamentation<sup>103</sup> and Sigismund Stojowski<sup>104</sup> on always co-operating with the composer and the "letter of the score" are just some examples of this view. Adhering to the views in this literature, classical musicians often devote themselves to studying different editions of pieces, old recordings and performing on period instruments, with the goal of achieving the most authentic performance possible.

### Is Authenticity in Performance Possible or Necessary?

It has been emphasised in previous chapters that loyalty to the text is important but it must be noted that deciding precisely what the seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth century composer intended can be challenging.

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<sup>100</sup> Salter, quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, 28.

<sup>101</sup> Dieter Gutknecht, "Performance practice of recitativo secco in the first half of the 18th century," *Early Music* xxxiii, no. 3 (August 2005).

<sup>102</sup> William S Newman, *The Pianist's Problems* (New York: Da Capo Press Inc, 1984).

<sup>103</sup> Sandra P Rosenblum, *Performance Practices in Classic Piano Music* (Indiana Univesrity Press 1988).Chapter 7

<sup>104</sup> Sigismund Stojowski, "What Interpretation Really Is," in *Great Pianists on Piano Playing* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications Inc. , 1999).

There is a substantial body of literature that investigates whether achieving authenticity in performance should be a goal of the classical musician, since the concept of what characterises an authentic performance is difficult to define. A detailed discussion of this area of research is not necessary in this paper, however it is worthwhile making several points about the question of authenticity in performance.

Firstly, no matter how specific the composer's wishes, performers still make their own decisions about precisely how they will execute the detailed nuances of the performance even when they don't choose which notes to play. No two performances of one work will sound exactly alike.<sup>105</sup>

Secondly, the countless amount of editions available of the average seventeenth or eighteenth century keyboard work reminds us of the fact that many composers didn't have one idea about how a particular composition might be performed. (Levin demonstrates the obvious differences between two editions of the slow movement of the Mozart F Minor Sonata and speculates that if the text to one of them hadn't survived and a performer were to extemporize a version similar to it, they'd be "attacked for having no taste.")<sup>106</sup>

Thirdly, a study of recordings of nineteenth century composers (such as Debussy, Poulenc and Rachmaninoff) performing their own works will reveal that often these performances actually contradict some of the instructions provided on the score which can leave the performer striving for authenticity in a conundrum. Does one remain loyal to the score despite the obvious lack of loyalty to it from the composer himself? What is more authentic; the composer's performance, or the composer's score?

Roger Scruton questions the wisdom of attempting to recreate a performance so that it is the way that the composer heard it, arguing that many seventeenth century performances would have been quite inadequate (using inferior instruments etc.) He also point out that this practice

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<sup>105</sup> Keaton, "Improvisation in the Arts."

<sup>106</sup> Bailey, "On the Edge - Episode 1."

discounts the “historicity of the human ear” – the idea that works will be perceived differently by a contemporary listener than a listener who had only heard Bach and his predecessors. Scruton adds that that since all we can physically see is a “pattern of pitched sounds” this is all that can be reproduced by a performer, but argues that this does not mean a musician should reproduce the specified notes with no consideration “whether the life of the music is heard in them.”<sup>107</sup>

### **An Authentic Performance Should Consider Improvisation**

A musician seeking to perform a seventeenth, eighteenth or nineteenth century work with “the life of the music” heard in their performance, should not ignore the vibrant tradition of improvisation that existed, the undoubtable influence it had on the way performers interpreted music and on the way that composers thought about how their music should be performed.

Bailey presents a view contrary to this, suggesting that since improvisation is by definition something that is constantly innovative and inventive, it doesn't have a place in a performance that is striving to recreate something from the past.<sup>108</sup> However Thomas Dart is very critical of musicians who perform Baroque music containing figured bass or ornamentation with no consideration of the tradition of extemporisation. He argues that without extemporisation, Baroque music lacks spontaneity, brio, drive and variety. Dart supports this idea with an example from J.S. Bach's 3<sup>rd</sup> Brandenburg Concerto, making the observation that the chords at the end of the first and the beginning of the second movement are quite meaningless and will only make sense if the performer extemporises a slow movement which will lead from relative minor to the tonic.<sup>109</sup> Salter would agree, arguing that performances of Handel

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<sup>107</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 1997).

<sup>108</sup> Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, 12.

<sup>109</sup> Dart, "Extemporisation."

sonatas which strictly adhere to text end up being something that Handel would “probably have laughed uproariously at because he never expected it to be played cold-bloodedly like that.”<sup>110</sup>

Hamilton questions whether a nineteenth century recital can claim to be “historically informed” without the presence of an improvised prelude before a piece. He also remarks on the fact that many pianists performing nineteenth century works strive for authenticity by using period instruments but “steadfastly ignore” the improvisation that featured so heavily in Romantic performance practice.<sup>111</sup>

Levin claims that exaggerated loyalty to the score is not reflective of how performance was thought about in the eighteenth century and the limitless repetition of many of the pieces in the classical repertoire has led to a situation where the average concert goer of the twentieth (and twenty-first) century has “undoubtedly heard every work of Mozart not only twice as many, but arguably hundreds of times more than the composer himself.”<sup>112</sup> Levin laments the fact that the modern classical musician will be shunned for adding “even the most tasteful of embellishments” when embellishing pieces was common practice in Mozart’s time. He emphasises the fact that Mozart’s audiences were known to break into applause if they particularly appreciated part of his performance and compares this to the jazz scene of today, arguing that today’s classical music scene has unfortunately become very rigid. As José Bowen argues, we create “work-based” performances as opposed to what he calls the “event-based” performances of the eighteenth century.<sup>113</sup>

### **Possible Scenarios for Historical Improvisation**

Perhaps a reason for improvisation ceasing in the contemporary classical piano performance scene, is that performers in their pursuit of loyalty to the composer’s wishes feel as

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<sup>110</sup> Salter, quoted in Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, 20.

<sup>111</sup> Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*, 31-32.

<sup>112</sup> Levin, quoted in Bailey, "On the Edge - Episode 1."

<sup>113</sup> José A, *Finding the Music in Musicology: Performance History and Musical Works*.

if they will compromise the standard of the music by inserting their own voice. As Bailey argues, European music possess an obsession with “its geniuses and their timeless masterpieces.”<sup>114</sup> For example, a performer may feel uneasy about adding in their own cadenza in a Mozart concerto, feeling as if it might appear that they are considering their improvisation to be the same standard as Mozart’s composition. I would argue that if a musician can speak the harmonic language of the composer and has a deep understanding of how the music is constructed, they needn’t be intimidated at the idea of performing improvisation within the works of the great composers. Woosley supports this idea.<sup>115</sup> In fact the classical musician should be conscious of the fact that many of the composers expected improvisation and a typical eighteenth century piano recital would certainly have included it.<sup>116</sup>

As well as the improvisation of cadenzas, a musician interested in performing Baroque, Classical or Romantic repertoire should consider performing extemporised ornamentation, figured bass, cadenzas, fantasies or preludes. Robert Levin, Gabrielle Montero, Uri Caine and, David Owen Morris are examples of modern pianists who are known for improvising in some of these way. Montero’s encores of improvisations on themes selected by the audience are reminiscent of the habits of Liszt and Hurler. It would be pleasing to see more classical musicians engaging with performed improvisation in a similar fashion.

There are a number of manuals available for the classical musician interested in learning improvisation. Michael R Dodds describes Andreas Werckmeister’s publication *Harmonologia Musica* as being indispensable for the musician seeking to learn contrapuntal improvisation.<sup>117</sup> Handel developed a series of *Exercises in Figured Bass* which have been converted into a manual

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<sup>114</sup> Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*, 12.

<sup>115</sup> Kevin David Woosley, "The Lost Art of Improvisation - Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists " (The University of Alabama, 2012), 11.

<sup>116</sup> Dart, "Extemporisation." Woosley, "The Lost Art of Improvisation - Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists " 11.

<sup>117</sup> Michael R Dodds, "Columbus’s Egg: Andreas Werckmeister’s Teachings on Contrapuntal Improvisation in *Harmonologia Musica* 1702," Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

and commented on by David Ledbetter.<sup>118</sup> C.P.E. Bach devotes a chapter in his *Essay on the true art of playing keyboard instruments* to free fantasia improvisation and extemporizing embellishments.<sup>119</sup> Carl Czerny's Opus 200 treatise *A systematic introduction to improvisation on the pianoforte* guides the beginner through extemporizing preludes, fugues and fantasies.<sup>120</sup> Brian Chung and Dennis Thurmond *Improvisation at the piano: a systematic approach for the classically trained pianist*<sup>121</sup> gives the pianist a series of exercises to practice using different scales, rhythms and chord progressions, teaching the musician to improvise in large range of styles.

Improvisation is not beyond the reach of the classical musician who sets themselves the task of studying these manuals and practicing the exercises within them on a daily basis. For musicians not used to improvising, knowing where to start and how to practice it can be rather daunting. The next chapter provides a brief overview of the basics of learning how to improvise.

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<sup>118</sup> David Ledbetter, *Continuo Playing According to Handel - His Figured Bass Exercises* (Great Britain: Bookcraft (Bath) Ltd, 1990).

<sup>119</sup> Bach, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*.

<sup>120</sup> Czerny, *A Systematic Introduction to Improvisation on the Pianoforte*.

<sup>121</sup> Brian Chung & Dennis Thurmond, *Improvisation at the Piano: A Systematic Approach for the Classically Trained Pianist* (U.S.A.: Alfred Publishing Co., 2007).

## 4. Practical Steps for Learning Improvisation

### **Incorporating Improvisation into Practice**

This paper has not argued that classical musicians should aim to become expert improvisers regularly performing their own extemporizations. That would be a worthy goal to strive for but the first step in this direction is to understand that improvisation is as a tool which is just as important as knowing scales and arpeggios or having the ability to transpose, transcribe or analyse music. In fact a musician can practice all of these techniques while improvising. This chapter will provide examples of how a classical musician might use improvisation as practice technique.

An important part of becoming a confident improviser is practicing it and understanding that it is very much a trial and error process.<sup>122</sup> Most tertiary level classical musicians possess a harmonic vocabulary that would allow them to create interesting improvisations but lack the experience and understanding to be able to improvise using that harmonic vocabulary.

John Kratus has very specific ideas about the stages that a musician goes through when learning how to improvise.<sup>123</sup> While it is likely that many improvisers don't pass through the stages in the precise order that he specifies, an investigation of some of these stages is beneficial to demonstrate the way that a classical musician could develop as an improviser.

### **Improvising with One or Two Notes**

Kratus describes the first stage of improvisation as "exploration," where the musician is performing an action to "hear what happens."<sup>124</sup> The principle can be applied to the average tertiary classical musician who although competent on their instrument, is not used to producing

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<sup>122</sup> Styles.

<sup>123</sup> Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation."

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

music that they are not reading or remembering. Styles sets students the task of listening to a CD with a drone of a single note and then to play a series of random notes around that drone. Styles states that the students will often play notes that don't sound right but points out that that is part of the exercise.<sup>125</sup> Pratt suggests that improvisation novices should start by playing one note and experimenting with different ways of producing that note. As a group activity, Pratt recommends that two performers select two notes each, sit with their backs to one another and improvise using those two notes. Pratt emphasises there should be no constraints on which notes to choose, which rhythms to use or even on how long the performers should carry out this activity for. He argues that structures will form as the performers listen to one another and that there will be a clear ending.<sup>126</sup>

The main benefits of practicing these exercises are addressing the “fear factor,”<sup>127</sup> encouraging musicians to analyse the sound that they are making; exploring the aural result of varied note combinations and discovering the effect of different types of articulation.

### **Using Patterns and Stylistic Devices**

According to Kratus, the next stage of learning to improvise is “process- oriented” where the musician is able to consciously use patterns and employ small elements of structure in their improvisation. (They are not yet able to see their extemporisation in the context of a large structure). This is where improvisation manuals are most useful for giving a musician patterns to experiment with. A typical tertiary level classical musician will have large harmonic vocabulary that they can draw upon when in this *process oriented* stage.

As an exercise, Styles has students play a scale, experiment with the order of the notes and then set themselves rhythmic targets (experimenting with different rhythmic patterns) using notes from the scale. This is a practical example of process-oriented improvisation. Styles

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<sup>125</sup> Styles.

<sup>126</sup> Pratt, *Aural Awareness: Principles and Practice*, 104.

<sup>127</sup> Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*.

theorises that when the student has rhythmic targets and a limited set of notes they are forced to keep playing and naturally extend themselves as improvisers.<sup>128</sup>

Pratt recommends students select an excerpt from a written out piece, observe the musical elements employed within it such as a phrasing, articulation or dynamic development and improvise upon the excerpt by experimenting with these musical elements. He states that the student might exaggerate, repeat, reverse, sustain or expand any of the aforementioned elements.<sup>129</sup> Styles has a similar exercise where he asks his students to create the most “ridiculous interpretation possible” of a piece they are preparing to perform. He theorizes that through this the student acquires a “bucked of interpretive ideas...ten percent of which might be absolute gold” Sifting through this “bucket of ideas” gives the musician a large range of interpretation possibilities.<sup>130</sup> These kind of exercises can be employed when practicing scales or any standard repertoire and demonstrate the way that improvisation can be used as an interpretive tool for the classical musician.

### **Borrowing Ideas**

Kratus identifies the next stage of improvisation as being “product-oriented,” where the musician is more aware of their environment, more comfortable within a style and might imitate other musicians. Charles Beale advises students learning to improvise jazz to listen to as much as they can, transcribe ideas and to borrow them. This imitation is already quite familiar to classical musicians who obtain interpretation ideas by imitating aspects of the performances of other musicians. I believe that this could be developed further by imitating specific elements of compositions to assist in creating improvisations in the style of these compositions. For example, a pianist who enjoys Debussy’s unique way of voicing extended chords might

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<sup>128</sup> Styles.

<sup>129</sup> Pratt, *Aural Awareness: Principles and Practice*, 105.

<sup>130</sup> Styles.

memorise a particular chord progression and experiment with it by transposing it, adding a melody to complement the passage and exploring the different modulation possibilities of the progression. This exercise would help the performer to deeply internalise the chord progression, listen critically to their playing and it would aid them when they come to learn more of Debussy's music that is composed in a similar way. O'Halloran theorizes that the classical musician seeking to improvise in a certain style would benefit from isolating some of a composer's stylistic devices and then composing or improvising using those devices.<sup>131</sup>

### **Improvising Stylistically**

Once a musician is comfortable in the 'product-oriented stage,' Kratus describes them as being in "fluid improvisation" stage where they do not have to consciously think about the elements of their improvisation.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps the elements have been internalised.<sup>133</sup> This is where the musician is freer to express musical ideas and can begin to improvise stylistically with consideration of the structure of their extemporisation.

For the musician wanting to learn how to improvise in a specific style, the treatises available are numerous and just some of the manuals available for improvisation in classical styles were listed in the previous chapter. These manuals give the improviser a collection of ideas in a particular musical language and suggest ways for them to experiment with these ideas. Classical musicians can make these ideas relevant to their performance by experimenting with them in the context of their repertoire. For example, the student studying *Figured Bass for Beginners* by Helen Keaney<sup>134</sup> should apply the ideas within it to Baroque chamber music repertoire.

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<sup>131</sup> O'Halloran.

<sup>132</sup> Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation."

<sup>133</sup> See 13 "Internalising musical devices"

<sup>134</sup> Helen Keaney, *Figured Bass for Beginners* (Boston, Massachusetts E. C. Schirmer Music Company, 1981).

## Following the Learning Process of a Jazz Musician

The process that many jazz musicians go through to develop their improvisational skills is thorough and classical musicians could gain a great deal by engaging in a similar process. Even a classical pianist who has no interest in performing jazz, will find that following a method such as the ABSRM *Jazz Piano from scratch* by Charles Beale,<sup>135</sup> will develop their aural skills, and encourage them to practice performing intuitively, advance their rhythmic co-ordination and expand their harmonic language.

Beale begins with rhythmic exercises for students encouraging them to “consciously put aside inhibitions” and internalize the rhythms.<sup>136</sup> His exercises require student to work together in groups, subdivide a pulse and experiment with different rhythmic placement. The next step is improvising with pitch, and students are asked to experiment using a few notes and then are provided with left hand patterns which develop this into improvisation with two hands. Beale proceeds to extend the student’s knowledge of harmony with exercises, using chords and scales common to jazz. Once a student has absorbed these harmonies, they could be described as having reached what Kratus calls the “process-oriented stage”<sup>137</sup> – able to consciously improvise using patterns.

Beale then gives the student a series of suggestions on how to use this newly acquired musical language: “play a fixed chord with no pulse,” “use a pre-set rhythm but with any pitches,” “keep to a given rhythm but vary the range of dynamics,” “play as softly as you can for ten seconds, then as loudly as you can for five” etc.<sup>138</sup> These suggestions would be useful for a musician learning to improvise in any style. Beale then devotes a chapter to ideas and exercises in how to structure an improvisation. The next half of the book proceeds in a similar manner but

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<sup>135</sup> Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*.

<sup>136</sup> *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*, 18.

<sup>137</sup> Kratus, "A Developmental Approach to Teaching Music Improvisation."

<sup>138</sup> Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*, 54.

gradually introduces more complex rhythms, harmonies and piano chord voicing. Learning the lessons Beale teaches in this book would help any classical musician develop as a performer and interpreter.

## 5. Conclusion

A classical musician who undertook improvisation workshops with David Dolan, described the way that learning how to improvise affected their approach to interpreting repertoire: “This work has provided a much needed link between extreme control and discipline and absolute freedom, even desire for anarchy and enjoyment and passionate ‘living’ inside a piece of music.”<sup>139</sup>

This dissertation has explored ways that improvisation can assist a classical musician in the interpretation of repertoire. A musician who is able to improvise within a style of music will gain a confident understanding of its devices which will enable them to gain control and perform in that style of music with authority. Practicing improvisation will encourage a musician to ‘audiate’ and pre-hear the music so that they can perceive a musical work in its entirety, perform ideas rather than “dots on the page,” analyse their sound and play intuitively with *flow* and freedom. Finally, practicing improvisation will provide a way for a performer to discover their own voice and play creatively (*“living inside a piece of music”*) while remaining loyal to the composer’s wishes. In fact for much Baroque, Classical and Romantic repertoire, having the ability to improvise will enable a performer to better reflect the wishes of the composer.

In addition to these interpretive benefits of improvisation, there are more benefits that could not be explored within the scope of this honours dissertation. Much could be gained from further research into the way that improvisation helps a musician physically relax (thereby avoiding injury)<sup>140</sup>, gives them access to music not available *“on the page,”*<sup>141</sup> and makes a musician

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<sup>139</sup> Dolan, "Back to the Future: Toward the Revival of Extemporisation in Classical Music Performance."

<sup>140</sup> Styles.

<sup>141</sup> O'Halloran.

more practically versatile – able to take requests from an audience, transpose music on the spot and better adapt to different musical situations.<sup>142</sup> Perhaps many classical musicians are limited because they are only able to perform when they have had time to prepare, the audience is quiet and they are reading or performing memorised music.

Engaging in improvisation is a particularly daunting prospect for the classical musician who is already accomplished and has spent years reading music and interpreting repertoire without it. This dissertation has not attempted to portray improvisation as something that such a musician must become an expert in. Rather, it is a tool that should be practiced and will greatly assist a classical musician in the way that they think about their repertoire and approach performance. Like many other musical techniques, it is not beyond the scope of any musician who practices it regularly, in a structured way.

“Push yourself as a musician, to find your own limitations and then conquer them, to make hundreds of mistakes and so to learn from them. The more you become aware of your own areas of strength and weakness, the easier it is for you to practice effectively, to solve the problems and to make swift progress. This is both an enjoyable and a frightening process and makes for music and learning that is always exciting, dynamic and on the edge.”<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Woosley, Kevin David. "The Lost Art of Improvisation - Teaching Improvisation to Classical Pianists" The University of Alabama, 2012. 12.

<sup>143</sup> Beale, *Jazz Piano from Scratch - a How-to Guide for Students and Teachers*,

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# Appendices – Interview Transcripts

## Appendix A: Interview with Matt Styles

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Matt Styles

Date: 1<sup>st</sup> August & 27<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Location: WA Academy of Performing Arts

### **RK: How did you learn how to improvise?**

**MS:** I got interested in it because I used to listen to quite a bit of 70s funk stuff and then my brother who was my first saxophone teacher, Simon Styles, started to take me through some improv stuff...and then from there I've always been interested in improvising and mucking around but not in just one style. Because otherwise... in simple terms I kind of get bored but it's more that I think there's more to be gained from improvisation than just doing one style for me. I did some in high school, some in with my brother and in jazz band and so forth and then I did a unit here at WAAPA. From then on it was mostly self-taught stuff. I played in WAJYO for three years so I was literally learning on the job.

### **RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

I don't practise it as much as I'd like/need to. I suppose, if I don't have time to practice I'm always listening. I probably listen to improvisation more than I listen to anything else. More than I listen to classical saxophone. Jazz, commercial, pop, funk, sometimes a little bit of contemporary classical improvisation but not usually much –most of my ideas come from the others. What I try and do is make sure that my technique is always good so that if I do have to improvise then whatever I think or hear that I want to do, I'm able to do it. It's a classical way of looking at it So my technique is good so I can play whatever note, whatever range whatever time and then coming to the music if I know I have a specific style of music coming up then I'll practice..like if it's a jazz gig I'll go through scales and progressions, play with *play -alongs* play with the metronome, play with drones, those sorts of things. Just to make sure my ear is in the right space and so my interpretation is right for that style knowing that my technique can properly handle it.

### **MS: Do you think being able to improvise helps you memorise your classical repertoire?**

I don't memorise a lot being a woodwind player – it's not really our bread and butter. However I find I try to memorise more things now as I've gone on. I play so much better when I do, which is kind of an obvious statement to make. But I think... it's an interesting connection that you've potentially made there because I think when you're practicing improvisation sometimes what you practice is patterns and sequences especially in jazz stuff so in a piece you recognise patterns and sequences so when I get to a part that I find very difficult I usually memorise that part. Then when I get to it I'm not bothering about reading the script so to speak. I can just sit back and think of it almost in improvisation terms so if there's a part that's based scales or arpeggios I think of them it's like a chord chart in my head, so I know that if there's a pattern there, a pattern there, a pattern there, based on a chord chart or a scale and I remember that sequence and then slot it in as far as interpretation goes with that style. SO I suppose yes it does help, I don't memorise entire pieces but there are sections I do memorise and improv absolutely definitely helps. Definitely helps.

**RK: What do you think classical musicians might gain from being able to improvise?**

**MS:** I think a lot of things. I think we are hamstrung by having to interpret the score as it was written and then as it's been edited assuming that it's been edited properly. I think for saxophone we are lucky, we don't go through as many editions as pianists do.....we don't have to deal with nearly as many mistakes in editing.

As classical musicians we tend to go to the score and we reference as many recordings as we can. But then the whole idea of making it your own. I think part of the problem about making it your own is that you don't know what is your own.

What can you bring to it? Of course you're going to bring to it what fabulous other pianists have brought to it. Part of bringing you is bringing what you like from them and putting it in your way. When you improvise, if you've done your practice and you understand the process of improvising. The moment you do you are playing yourself, you're expressing yourself so you're actually getting practice in your own voice. So if more people could do that then when they come to interpreting a piece they have more of an idea of what ideas they might have. Their voice has had practice coming out. So applying it is not easy but as least you've practiced doing something that is of your own. So I think it is really vital that people do improvisation. It doesn't have to be jazz improvisation. That's where I learnt improvisation from it but I recently did something with Just Sax the quartet where they did something that was done about 30 years ago – the idea of taking a Gregorian chant and I improvise over it. I've had to improvise over classical pieces and a whole lot of different styles because it's not just jazz because you're still creating melodies when you improvise in classical music.

**RK: Do you think improvising in jazz and in classical music is essentially the same thing?**

**MS:** That's a big question and thesis of its own. I think the idea of having to create something of your own based on what you're given is the same. So the principle of having to draw on whatever experience and technical ability and whatever your ear hears - I think that's the same. It's which approach you take to it. For example in a jazz chart you may look at a chord sequence and start seeing key centres you know one scale for each chord or a blanket chord idea - chords and scales ideas. That's the traditional way of doing things. Whereas if I'm doing something more classical I definitely access the harmonic progression. But because the harmonic rhythm isn't as fast and not as diverse as in others (maybe jazz) then what I try then to do rather than think of a vertical type of improvisation I think far more horizontally. So that I'm not always worried about the chord and its elements, its constituents but thinking about recomposing a melody in the style of a piece that I'm playing. So I think the idea of trying to create something of your own for me is the same. What you've got to then do is understand the performance practices of each style and apply it within that. That's the hard thing you have to understand the performance practice for example of a Gregorian chant. Even things like articulation things like intonation whether that's something that can't vary. Do you worry about bending pitches and so forth? In Gregorian chant you probably wouldn't. While you are still creating something you've got to be really mindful of the style and understand the style. People will have difference of opinions on how you approach it. It's still creating something of your own but within the confines of a style.

**RK: What are some ways that classical musicians could incorporate improvisation into their performance and practice? Should it be something that they perform, or would it be enough for them to just practice improvisation?**

**MS:** I think the first thing for classical musicians is that it's such an unknown quantity. For most classical musicians it's quite frightening. You're given so little visible information that you then have to somehow interpret and hope that it sounds good and you haven't spent a lot of time practicing this. Because what you're doing is composing in real time. As a classical musician in a very traditional sense that's not something that is automatically put in. I think the fear factor is something that has to be addressed as you are going along. So because of that I'd say you don't necessarily have to perform it but definitely practice it. Be confident in your practice room and in front of your teacher. That's probably enough at the very first step. Speaking quite specifically. I mentioned the idea of playing over drones. There is a CD that I get my sax players to get a copy of. It's called the tuning CD and it's one of the most annoying sounds on this planet.

*(puts the CD on)*

We've got this drone for every note. It's an annoying sound but it is rich and you can hear all of these partials. Now apart from working on intonation with that CD which I think helps sax players, what I would then do

is get them to, once they've played their scales and they've worked on intonations and their tone then use that as if it's a chord and play in that scale or in that tonality over this so then they can hear the interaction of when they play a phrase or a collection of notes and what the affect is aurally of that drone. They'll hit some really bad bung notes but that's part of it. I used to teach improve to the music education students at UWA. One of the things I'd do is get them to improvise on a second instrument. So they'd feel what it's like to be a student who's not that good on their instrument and having to improvise. You realise how many things you take for granted as a player. You can chose any tonality. For example play an E whole tone scale and then play any notes in any order then start attaching rhythm to it - give yourself rhythm targets. For example: I'm going to play just all quavers, I'm going to play all triples, now two crotchets a triplet and a quaver. So you start assigning rhythms to yourself. And that way what starts to happen is (especially if you've got rhythmic targets) that you can't stop playing and you have to keep playing and so you have to keep solving the problem. I find that every time I've done this exercise with any of my students they are always surprised with what they come up with. It's forced them to extend themselves beyond what they don't know how to do. That frees them up. They realise there is a creative side to them that they aren't using. When they approach a piece just something as simple as being more relaxed is one of the by- products. I encourage my students to mess around with their scales in any order. It also gets them to learn their scales better. Something else which I haven't incorporated which is a good idea is them playing a piece and using that style – so they've got something to hang on to, identify eight bars and identify the basic chords in there say “ok they're the chords that are being used, now improvise in the style of the piece you're playing.”

**RK: How does practicing like this affect their performance of the piece?**

If they know how the piece goes and they are drawing from it that's fine. So when that happens the piece doesn't sound like an improvised piece but it sounds a lot more fluid – it's hard to quantify in words. It sounds more open. I think that's one of the things that we could do more of and I don't do enough of. I've known the results for myself and the students I've had are really surprised by the results.

27<sup>th</sup> September 2013

*Following up on the question - Can you elaborate more on the idea of finding your own voice?*

One of the things with that happens when you are a performer or a teacher or all of the above is that you get a piece and a listen to a set of recordings of it, study whatever edition and try and find out what it is supposed to sound like. I think that almost any player who wants to perform something and do it correctly but for something to happen musically we have to perform our own version of it and find how *we* want to interpret it. With improvisation there is so much room for interpretation. In fact...well this might not be completely true but improvisation is almost all interpretation. Think about playing jazz for instance. You start off playing the tune, a particular chord

sequence and the style and the tempo etc. and generate improvisation from there. And you never play that tune the same way twice. You just wouldn't do it. There's so many factors, including whether you're tired, what your mindset is, if you can be bothered, what the musical foundation is behind you or what kind of rhythmic or harmonic or melodic information is being sent to you which you react to.

So what I'm saying is, there's nothing like improvisation that is so open to interpretation. It will help you to develop a pallet of colours, of ideas. You generate out of that a lot more colours and ideas in your performance that you would have if you were just practicing in a classical way. In classical music there is so much information given to you on the page and rightly so and there's freedom within it but there's a heavy structure. Once you play the melody in jazz or free improvisation, that's it... You can choose to play the melody, not play the melody play parts of it play from it, play against it, change the rhythms, alter the chord progression, muck around with the phrasing...it's almost taking you beyond what you need to do so that when you come back to classical you think "*I had an idea when I was improvising where I changed the rhythms and elongated that phrase, a pattern came back the same way twice and I did it differently each time.*" I always believe in taking people further than they need to go so it's easier to come back. Like with playing scales faster than you need to.

So that's what I think one of the benefits is. You develop a whole tonal palate of melodic articulation and rhythmic ideas.

**RK: So you're practicing ideas so that you have more interpretative possibilities?**

**MS:** Yes. When you practice improvisation- say it's a more traditional form of jazz. For example you might have a chord say Am7 and you think how can I approach this: I might be able to play a minor seven scale, a aeolian or dorian or phrygian with a flat nine, even just the notes of the chord. Then you think OK- How am I going to do this rhythmically, will I use large intervals, small intervals or Stravinsk's idea of spinning around one note or am I going to just be playing longer notes...- you can do anything. You actually spend time practicing ideas away from it. That's what people don't get about improvising. The amount of time spent formulating ideas. You are inventing and reinventing the music every time you play. You may be using a set language or someone else's ideas but when something grabs you - right there you've found something of your own voice. Does that make sense?

**RK: Yes it does. I'm wondering...how might you apply that practically?**

**MS:** That's the harder part...If you've got a phrase that comes back three or four times, you might change it each time. You've got to make the things that lead into that phrase work, it has to be in context. How many versions of the Liszt etudes have you heard, where sometimes the pianist places a note, and others just run through it. If you aren't thinking creatively then you may not realise there are other things you can do with it... it's hard to

find your own idea of what you can do. Some music and composers are very strict and that's fine but I think we sometimes restrict ourselves too much.

It is harder to do it than talk about it but once you start thinking creatively and you are opening to messing around with the score but understanding that performance practice is required. Then you can start thinking about interpretation I ask my students to give me the most ridiculous interpretation of a piece possible, "bring me something absurd that will make me laugh." Probably in what they come back with there is ten percent that is absolute gold. But you have to sift through a whole bucket of ideas to find that gold. The point is that you need to have that bucket of improvisational ideas and you wittle away through many things that won't work to find what you think does work.

In a performance where you do something and think I didn't practice my interpretation – that's your own voice. The more you experience that feeling under pressure you bring that back to classical... Sometimes it is intuitive and hard to quantify. And you think after the performance "what did I do there? And you have no idea but it sounded great."

Two other things I thought about with improvisation....there's the whole wellness idea. Once people get used to improvising, because it is something that is quite scary, once you get into it I find that it can actually help in relaxing. So because you're creating something and you are being creative and aren't in a disciplined box, it's like your body will relax a little more because you are the creative zone. And that may have other health benefits, like helping you get prevent or get through injury. It's the sort of thing I am looking at now...So many of my sax students are pushing themselves which is great but more and more are injured at the moment. You can be creative very easily... just pick a scale, start on any note and use it as a tonal or articulation exercise. Say, OK I'm going to move around the main note to try to access different intervals... and by doing that you think "I'm going to stay in this key but I don't know which note I'm going to play." And then you start moving through notes and begin forming patterns and melodies and finding out what you like...so you can use it as a technical exercise as well.

**RK:** These exercises probably take the pressure off so you don't feel so anxious about nailing that particular note or phrase...

**MS:** Yes, that's why I love playing music that crosses over – stuff that requires you to improvise and allows you freedom I did ten to fifteen years of hard core classical recitals and that was great to do but the minute I pick up anything that crosses over I knew it was for me. It is not for everyone but it might be something that could help.

**RK: Do you feel that you have freedom in your classical performance?**

**MS:** Yes but I have to allow myself that freedom and have to think through the barriers that I have. The audience thinks "such and such" expects me to play "this way," the audience is expecting a big climax so I'm not

going to do it— is that OK? It's a whole mental game. I think the big thing about improvisation is allowing yourself freedom to make mistakes if you play bung notes and the freedom to do something different or something out of the confines of what you are used to. Even free improvisation has structures that underpin it.

## Appendix B: Email Interview with David Wickham

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: David Wickham

Date: 20<sup>th</sup> August 2013

### **RK: How did you learn to improvise?**

**DW:** That's hard to answer. I think I began very early playing by ear, copying and probably filling in by trial and error what I couldn't remember. And of course, if I couldn't remember, the forward logic would lead me to different places – much less good naturally but different.

This was on classical themes – Brahms St Anthony Chorale was the first, at 4, which is why I began lessons. One finger, rough and ready.

By the time I was in the equivalent of year 10 I spent every break and lunchtime playing progressive rock music on the piano – all the Genesis, Yes, Pink Floyd that I loved.

I had a short series of organ lessons that led nowhere, but I did enjoy improvising, again often copying and going from there, and noticed that I could and had to do different things from the piano. So unconsciously I was adapting technique and invention to different music and acoustics.

Jazz began at that time too – playing bass guitar in a covers band that mostly did dance music – light standards, a few tame 60s tunes – but that was reading chord charts and improvising walking bass. I had also played bass in a rock band, playing quite technical fluid lines, so I was exploring the relationship of harmony and rhythm, and some melodic invention too.

Coming to meet real jazz enthusiasts at university meant that piano, and especially bass were pushed harder – I also heard much more music. My chord reading became swifter, and I began solo background cocktail jazz gigs. I'm still best when I know the tune by ear as I read the melody and chord chart – it takes, of course, several tries to get new songs up to scratch. I never played all the modes and scales, so perhaps I stick to well-worn ruts; I hope not. It doesn't extend my playing technique but I do have to be careful not to rush and get tense – both valuable lessons.

At Guildhall I began serious work on figured bass under David Roblou. Not enough, but still enough to improve and get a feel for the composer's position at the keyboard. Again, read carefully, see everything, build up from the bass to the treble, then refine and refine. listen to others, block out any written realisations and have a go.

As Samuel Beckett said – Try. Fail. Try again. Fail better.

**RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

**DW:** I don't practice improvisation – I improvise. Sometimes not well, sometimes better. It's important to remember that – you practice written music in order to approach perfectly the written score. Then you almost improvise it – playing it as if you just wrote it. With improv, let's say jazz, you listen as hard as you can to what the bass and kit would do, and lay the chords and melody over them. You play, repeat differently, try less, more, faster, slower, more dense, less dense, again and again. The best one might be with nobody listening. It's a mistake to try to fix that one forever and try to reproduce it.

I know I began by copying, and still do; luckily my memory isn't good enough to exactly copy a tricky solo, so I stick to the feel and general characteristics of it. You can still learn that way. But it's a mistake to try to reproduce your own efforts exactly, except for more fixed voicings or rhythms to set the song up. That's no longer improvisation and it loses the vital energy and sense of theatre, danger.

For free improvisation, away from a predefined melody or figured bass or tonality I'm still using memory. It could be of Stravinsky, Tangerine Dream, Ornette Coleman, anything – just a sound colour. It might have pulse, even a groove, or nothing at all. Film music offers the coupling of images to sound – just a flicker of a memory is enough to start the process. By now I can reach around the keyboard intuitively to match those fleeting impressions.

**RK: Does being able to improvise help you memorise repertoire?**

**DW:** Actually, I'm not sure. It helps me understand what's there, its character, direction and perhaps that guides the process but memorisation is again a product of slow repetition. Perhaps I get to own the music as the composer did more quickly by being quick and intuitive after so much glorified copying. I have certainly learned to start early and take my time, and luckily over the years that process has got quicker.

I don't use the teaching tool of improvising on music that I'm learning, but if I was teaching I might encourage that, say in a Mozart concerto. To be able to feel the kind of touch, figuration, ornaments, accompaniment figures is a great insight. To start work on one's own original cadenza is very valuable. of course it gets better with experience, but experience begins on day one and you have to start.

Perhaps people are discouraged by not getting quick results, as with everything in life. They're not the ones who will succeed, it might be said. As time goes on I think everyone tends to expect more, more quickly, cheaply. So improvisation might even be a Zen-like practice of meditation and patience. For example, jazz musicians don't earn heaps but are sociable and often happy.

**RK: Do you practice improvisation in styles other than the one that you specialise in?**

**DW:** All the time. that might mean that I try to inhabit too many areas. In Australia we tend to; we were accused of being generalists by a movement teacher I met here. Certainly Americans make a virtue out of specialization, but in such a big market perhaps they can afford to. Here, especially in Perth, there are people who are good at many things and our music scene is pretty vibrant.

I'll try to sum my styles up; contemporary or free improvisation that may or may not have tonality, regular rhythm, imitation; jazz – I stick to the Great American Songbook style of standards for the gigs that I get, but I listen to plenty of jazz rock like Weather Report, Pat Metheny, Oregon... I play that for myself; figured bass for continuo; pastiche of styles of cabarets with DivaLicious and Femmes Fatales where Handel's Hallelujah chorus might segue into ABBA's Mamma Mia; or Kylie Minogue's Can't get You Out Of My Head is rendered in the style of Kurt Weill (surprisingly easy actually), or where a period of music neatly sums up a period of history for theatrical effect; keyboard based rock music like Genesis, Radiohead, The Doors, where rhythm and harmony are closely interlocked more subtly.

**RK: What do you think classical musicians might gain by learning how to improvise?**

**DW:** Authority. I don't think it matters much which style you inhabit – indeed once you get confident at improvisation the borders between styles don't seem to matter much. If you get under the surface to intuitively feel the stylistic rules you can adapt surprisingly quickly. Listening is the key – not highly ornate internal thinking – relaxation is a big part of it, but highly energized relaxation! That way I could hope to begin to appreciate what makes ragas, gamelan, death metal, dubstep or plainsong work. I'd have to read and converse too of course, but none of that would be of any use without the strong aural memory.

Once you feel like the composer, not in a vain way (I could have done that) but in the sense of seeing and feeling the patterns, relationships, tone colours, flow, you make life much easier. You're interviewing me 20 years too late for me to be able to accurately describe what it feels like for a student – I remember being much stiffer and more frustrated. Patience, time, slowness – but like someone learning sword fighting you start slow and end up fast and powerful.

This gives you time to listen, and the practice of it makes you better at it. I can now read a score as if I'm hearing it. maybe not first time – depends upon the score. Sight reading is almost improvisation – you intuit where the music is going and submit to the rhythm and acquire as much detail as you can along the way. To sight read in good style, sometimes at performance level, is basically improvisation in its processes. Of course, that doesn't

obviate practice – quite the opposite. It does make practice more efficient – surgical strikes on the obdurate difficult bits and saving the easy stuff for runs of whole sections or movements.

## Appendix C: Email Interview with Jangoo Chapkhana

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Jangoo Chapkhana

Date: 1<sup>st</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> August 2013

**RK: How did you learn to improvise?**

**JC:** By listening to the great scat singers like Ella Fitzgerald, Carmen Mc Rae, Mel Torme and Sarah Vaughan. Also by listening to the great jazz pianists like Oscar Peterson and Monty Alexander and guitarist Joe Pass.

**RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

**JC:** One needs to approach it with a fresh excitement each time. Improvise as if you are re-creating the line and harmony for the very first time. Treat the improvisation as a structured solo with a starting point, a defined climax and considered ending. It has to have a shape and life of its own rather than being thought of as a series of phrases which are seemingly unconnected with each other.

**RK: Does being able to improvise help you memorise repertoire?**

**JC:** Yes because you have to really know the line and harmonic changes you are improvising on. It is very helpful indeed.

**RK: Do you practice improvisation in styles other than the one that you specialise in?**

**JC:** No - I am a mainstream player. I only improvise on classical pipe organ for liturgical purposes.

**RK: What do you think classical musicians might gain by learning how to improvise?**

**JC:** It helps with the understanding of harmony, line and structure. It provides a platform for creativity and spontaneous music-making in a way that printed music doesn't. It should be encouraged at the earliest music lesson by way of improvising on a series of primary chords and then building from there.

**RK: Do you think that having the ability to improvise jazz helps you learn and perform your classical repertoire? If so in which ways?**

**JC:** Yes! It helps with the underpinning of complex rhythms and also helps when playing and teaching passages which are heavily syncopated, regardless of period or genre. For example, many of the Haydn piano sonatas written in the empfindsam style with its nervous rhythms and severely dotted phrases.

**RK: In your experience of teaching classical musicians to improvise, have you noted any changes in the way that they perform fully notated music once they are able to improvise?**

**JC:** They seem to play with a more precise awareness of rhythm.

**RK: If you were teaching your tertiary classical piano students to improvise, which form do you think they should take? Would you teach them to improvise in a jazz style or in the style of the classical repertoire they are studying?**

**JC:** It would be in a jazz style probably beginning with a basic 12-bar blues. Improvising in a particular period style requires much more experience - you need to have played a lot of the repertoire and listened to a lot of the period.

## **Appendix D: Notes from an Interview with Brendan Hanson**

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Brendan Hanson

Date: 16<sup>th</sup> August 2013

Location: WA Academy of Performing Arts

**RK: Have you always practiced improvisation since the beginning of your career? How has improvising benefited you as a performer?**

Brendan was originally resistant to the idea of improvisation because it wasn't set up right for him. He gives the example of improvising with a man who was constantly changing the story. That's not what improvisation is.

Once he got the hang of it – improvisation gave him the freedom to let his ego go and not take responsibility. He could let the story flow through him and he lost the feeling of having to get a performance perfectly right. He could let the text come through him.

**RK: As an actor or as a singer, can you describe the role that improvisation plays in the way you prepare for performance?**

Improvisation helps a performer to get to know the text intimately. It helps Brendan get into the head of the character and interact with other characters more realistically. It's about knowing the story inside out and having freedom to make it up but within the guidelines of the text

Many classical musicians have secure muscle memory of a piece and occasionally receive inspiration on stage but often their performances aren't original. Improvisation helps a performer to be original. *"I don't pay to see someone masturbate on stage. I want to see something original."*

**RK: What do you do to practice improvisation – do you immerse yourself in a 'sound world?'**

Jazz musicians can teach us a lot about how to practice improvisation – the way that they are constantly listening to recordings and transcribing etc. Brendan immerses himself in the world of the character and is regularly reading and listening to the text and watching performances.

**RK: How does this improvisation benefit you when you are on stage?**

It allows you to be brave enough to relinquish control at gives the performer the freedom to abandon the text. The performer can *"forget about their ego and let the story channel through them."* *"What is owning a work? Many performers don't deserve their positions because they aren't original."*

Improvisation helps the performer to understand what the composer was trying to say when they created the text. Brendan talks about his experience teaching improvisation to classical musicians. When musicians in his improvisation class started thinking of their music in terms of a story, the standard of their performance improved hugely

It's obvious when a performer is on stage and worried about their ego rather than being in the text. Satchmo is a good example of improvisation affects a performer's interpretation. There are accounts of him improvising crazily on a tune but when playing the actual tune was absolutely spot on... and it sounded improvised.

Everyone likes something different. The only thing a performer can do is bring themselves to the music. This idea of *"performing it right"* is very hard to define. *"Improvisation is not an excuse to be sloppy."* It gives you freedom once you know your text.

Opera performers need to realise that the audience won't like the exact same thing twice in a row. Be original and bring yourself to the music.

## Appendix E: Interview with Tom O'Halloran

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Tom O'Halloran

Date: 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2013

Location: WA Academy of Performing Arts

**RK: How did you learn to improvise?**

**TO:** I used to improvise a lot as a child. I also received formal classical lessons and kept that up while I was learning about improvising.

**RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

**TO:** Well it depends really - I guess sometimes its project based. A new project might have interval problems to improvise with or unfamiliar or new material or concepts. But that's different from improvising with the standard repertoire. In some ways the same they're the same in other ways they're different I guess I practice by transcribing, a lot of solos – a lot of listening. Using context to play on form. Practicing different scales and patterns and thinking about how they are applied to different harmonic situations and also just practicing improvisation by literally doing free playing and basically coming about it from an intuitive perspective.

**RK: Do you think intuitive playing is something that comes with time or do you need to practice it?**

**TO:** I think you need to practice intuition as well. You sort of practice being in the moment. A lot of people have written about how it is akin to meditation and all those kind of concepts of being in the now and being in the moment. That sense of letting the thinking disappear and finding self-two and turning off self-one. Rather than critically thinking "*what am I doing? Is this right? Does it sound any good? What are people thinking,*" it's about letting go to self-two which is more intuitive creative and free, kind of like being at play... like a child at play. Chick Corea speaks about composition and improvisation being like that as well. "*Come over here and do this and let's go over here and build this thing.*" On an intuitive level there are a lot of parallels there.

**RK: What do you look for when assessing improvisation? What makes a good improviser?**

**TO:** When we assess improvisation here, we are looking for specific techniques that we've been studying or looking at. Obviously creativity within it but essentially looking for particular styles and harmonic and rhythmic devices. It's like assessing any music. If you're talking about, what makes a great improviser...?

**RK: Yes, when you listen to a new artist what would make you think “this is great?”**

**TO:** I reckon they need to say something new, have an original kind of voice but also having that backed up by technique and by familiarity with what’s come before as an improviser. Knowing the style and knowing the language of bebop and swing so that it clearly evident but also that sense that they’re extending the music, extending that language. That’s what jazz has always done – constantly recreate itself.

**RK: Do you think that being a good improviser helps with other musical skills such as sight-reading, playing in an ensemble etc.?**

**TO:** Often a lot of good jazz improvisers aren’t good sight readers. Some of them will find it’s easy to learn a tune because they often have superior aural skills and I think that’s part of being an improviser too... having strong aural skills and also being able to manipulate those aural skills. It means you’re really in control of them and that often means that they can learn repertoire faster or understand the structures in a new tune faster. They possibly grasp things faster and play well in ensembles... Generally that’s true, generally the really good improvisers are the ones who play well in ensembles...in jazz they’re almost one and the same anyway. Having aural skills but also being able to make the jump between good aural skills and a real grasp of harmony and chord scale relationships. Being able to hear it - they’re the players who improvise well. Also being able to get through harmony intuitively.

**RK: Final question- what do you think classical musicians might gain from being knowing how to improvise? I’m investigating how it would help us perform written repertoire. For example, I’m studying some Mazurkas of Chopin at the moment. If I could improvise in his style, how would it help me perform these Mazurkas?**

**TO:** I think in that example; if you are studying Chopin and also practicing improvising in that style and then obviously you the best of source for that is the written music and then I think to make that jump to that transferral of being to be able to improvise in that style implies a deep sense of aural skills and internalizing the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic structures. And for that you need a lot of time and exercises to develop. Most people that improvise in a classical style tend to broadly do it. I’ve heard quite a lot of people do that – it’s an approximation kind of improvisation, not necessarily overwhelmingly informed by the repertoire or the devices in it. Quite different to how a jazz improviser improvisers. Most of the times it’s an idea of that style and all the devices aren’t necessarily correct, there’s a lot of approximation. I think if you really got inside of the music, transposed some of the Chopin devices, maybe wrote a study, or improvised a study, with those kind of devices I think you’d definitely bring a sense of your own way, you improvising and your own ownership of those devices based on the written score. You’d personalise it more and I think you’d have to go deeper with the music and with the score.

And in a general sense I think classical musicians have a lot to gain from improvising because there is a whole lot of music out there that is not on the page that they'd be able to access more, a whole new scene of players and musical situations that you'd have access to. I think you'd get different results as well because improvising makes you focus on different aspects of the music and gives you a different perspective. Focusing more broadly on gesture - it'd give you a different approaches to phrasing. A different approach to telling a story. I think you'd get a deeper sense of your own personality emerging. I think improvisers generally play like their personality and Being able to as a classical musician would help you get more in touch with that. I think it helps you listen more and analyse your sound. Improvisers are always asking, "do I like my sound, do I like my touch, is it saying what I want it to?"

## Appendix F: Interview with Stewart Smith

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Stewart Smith

Date: 6<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Location: WA Academy of Performing Arts

**RK: Can you describe the role that improvisation has played in your career? How were you taught to improvise?**

**SS:** Because I'm an organist improvisation plays a big part in my training and in my career so ever since I've been practicing and playing the organ in liturgical settings I have been an improviser. As a student I was taught it when I went to the Royal Academy - it was one of the best improvisation courses in the UK. I was always interested in it and so practiced quite hard and made sure that I listened to the right people. It is a case of working hard, being shown the basics by teachers but then really the rest of it is up to you to practice. There's a lot of technical things. So if you want to get good at these technical things you have to work at it and have to practice.

**RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

**SS:** You set yourself goals and if for example you want to improvise a fugue – (one of the goals of being a good improviser at the organ). You're not born with the ability to be able to do that. It's a technical skill and if you want to do it you have to work at it. It's about knowing how to approach it and breaking off certain things at a time. It depends on how ambitious you are. One of the things as a student that I found very difficult was to improvise an exposition to a fugue with a regular counter subject and the regular countersubject being in inverted counterpoint. You actually improvise the subject and the counter subject so that the melody becomes the bass and the bass becomes the melody. Then in the fugal exposition and the four part exposition you have to be able to put that into the key of the subject and the key of the answer and be able to produce any part and actually have it in the middle. That is a very difficult thing to do and it takes a lot of practice. So actually writing out those fugues- because you have to know out the write them and then a case of improvising them. It was something I was always quite interested in doing because there was someone who could actually do this in London at this particular time– he was a fabulous improviser and I watched him doing it and I asked him how he did it and he told me that it takes a long time and there was a method to actually be able to do this and I was very interested in.

**RK: Do you still have to think about these things when you improvise now or do they come naturally?**

**SS:** It is easier but still keeping the regular countersubject in exposition is still difficult even though I've been doing it for so long and sometimes I can't quite manage to do it. I try my best but it gets away.

**RK: What kind of contexts do you use improvisation in? Do you improvise in a range of styles?**

**SS:** In public I only improvise on the organ and really only in the context of church services – so I play the organ at St. George's Cathedral. I have in the past improvised in concert situations but I don't really do it now. I like to improvise in all sorts of styles so I'll use the modes of Messiaen, strictly modal counterpoint style, in the Baroque style and a whole bunch of things in between. A lot of the time it's about say making a prelude for a hymn or an anthem when the choir is about to sing or if they've just sung an anthem for example, there might be time at the end of a Communion so you extend that anthem and you have to be able to build a pastiche style very quickly

**RK: Does your improvisation experience help you when you are learning a new piece of music?**

**SS:** I think it does, yes. As an improviser you of course are just like a composer. You are in fact composing in the moment. It makes you understand the music you play in that you can see often the trajectory that the composer took and also see that in any one particular place there's other ways that the music could actually go and that sort of puts you into, say the spirit of the composer and you enter into the unfolding of the music and the unfolding of the structure, maybe in the same way the composer actually envisioned. Because I've got a deeper understanding as to how the music can actually work and how it does work it makes me a better performer and I can more follow the footsteps of the composer.

**RK: Does this help you when you are performing?**

**SS:** Yes, I think so because...well if the worse did come to worse and the music flipped off the stand I know I could keep going . Maybe it makes me a little less nervous on stage. I think also being an improviser and mucking around a lot on the keyboard or your instrument does give you the confidence and the ease to play not just improvisation but written out pieces- ease and comfort at the keyboard.

**RK: What do you think classical musicians could gain from being able to improvise?**

**SS:** The most significant gain would be as an improviser you are of course a composer and it allows you to understand how music ticks and as a performer you want to be able to convey that idea. The music is not just dots on the page but these dots are about musical gestures and musical ideas. And it's the role of the performer to be able to release those musical ideas and as an improviser that is what you are doing - you're actually playing around with musical ideas and trying to make a convincing argument and convincing musical ideas. So if that side of your brain is developed that would be transferable into the playing of standard repertoire I'd imagine.



## Appendix G: Interview with Jamie Oehlers

Interviewer: Rebecca Kossen

Interviewee: Jamie Oehlers

Date: 13<sup>th</sup> September 2013

Location: WA Academy of Performing Arts

### **RK: How did you learn how to improvise?**

**JO:** Roger Garrod was my first sax teacher and I was lucky that my first teacher was a jazz musician and an improviser. He taught me the basics of improvisation both from the technical perspective of the harmonic and melodic rhythmic, which scales to play with which chords, but then at the same time he said *“you’ve got to make sure that when you improvise you have to express yourself.”* I was twelve at the time and lucky because a lot of people only learn the nuts and bolts of improvisation but really it’s an art form – you need to express an idea when you play it. A lot of people don’t think so.

### **RK: How do you practice improvisation?**

**JO:** It depends on what I’m trying to achieve...If I’m trying to expand my harmonic and melodic range I’ll work on specific harmonic ideas and look at how I can improvise with them using different paths, and specific scale sounds that I feel that I don’t use a lot and I’d like to use. I’ll do things like just practice improvising with the scale itself and then I’ll put it into context and improvise over a piece incorporating that scale into the appropriate place. Or if it’s a rhythmic idea, I’ll work out what it is I want to achieve. If I feel like I’m putting all my phrases into the bar line or form I’ll figure out exercises that will get me using rhythms that go across the bar line or the form.

### **RK: Do you practice improvising intuitively?**

**JO:** There are elements of my practice that are purely intuitive; usually at the beginning of my practice sessions and then at the very end - it might be just stringing twenty five notes together really slowly but really hearing what I want to play next; not rapid improvisation but note by note. Like a composer – a real considered choice. In the moment trying to compose a melody.

### **RK: Do you transcribe solos?**

**JO:** I have done a lot of it in the past. I don’t do it anymore because I’m more interested in trying to explore my own ideas. I’ve gained a lot from other people’s ideas. I had a great lesson about twelve years ago with David Liebman and I’d been having lessons with him on and off for about a ten year period. I remember this lesson

vividly because he just kept yelling at me, saying “*stop playing everyone else’s shit, what have you got to say?*” and so we had a conversation after that and he basically told me that it’s time to stop transcribing, and time to work out what I have to say. It’s just like a painter will go through a periods of trying to mimic another painter to get techniques that they can use in the future and look at blending colours etc. In order to become an artist there has to come a time when you stop doing that and try and do something of your own.

**RK: What do you think makes a good improviser?**

**JO:** The answer to that will be different depending on who you ask. I want that sense that I have no idea where they are going to go next – they kind of keep you on the edge of your seat. There’s a lot of improvisation that I get bored with after twenty seconds because it’s really predictable and there’s nothing surrounding the notes that gives it any type of merit.

**RK: Does having the skill of improvisation help with other parts of performance?**

**JO:** Most of the good students are good across the board and generally because they are the ones doing the work. I do know some people (not just students) that are really natural improvisers and I tend to find that those people – who find it really easy, don’t tend to do the work. I myself really don’t feel like I’m a natural improviser. I’ve worked really hard to be able to do what I do and if I stop a few days practice now I go backwards dramatically. But I’ve got friends who might not practice for three weeks and then pick up their instrument for the first time and sound incredible. Just very natural improvisers. Yet a lot of those people don’t tend to do the work and after a while, they might go backwards because they’ve never had to work hard.

One thing that improvising does make you aware of is your aural ability- being able to really tap into hearing a pitch and playing it with the ability to hear the chords and hearing what works and what doesn’t. I listen to a lot of classical music and I can tell when a musician is remembering a piece of music and when a musician is hearing a piece of music. I’m a massive fan of Jacqueline du Pré She hears the music. You know that every note she plays she’d be able to sing while she’s doing it. Yet some other classical musicians – it’s almost like a mechanical process of learning and when they perform it’s like an accountant churning out the numbers.

I saw a documentary with a Polish violinist. I love the documentary because as he was playing, he was describing what he was doing. He was describing it in a visual kind of way. For example “*When I’m playing this section I think of a young girl in a red dress dancing but as she come across towards you, you can see that she’s evil*” or something, and as he’s playing you can really hear that that’s what he’s playing. It wasn’t just about “*I’m playing these notes now*”. I think that’s maybe an area that would really help classical musicians. To be a good improviser you have to really hear and pre hear what it is you are about to play and connect to the music.

**RK: What do you think classical musicians might gain from being knowing how to improvise?**

**I'm investigating is how it would help us perform written music. For example, I'm studying some music of Chopin at the moment. If I could improvise in his style, how would it help me perform Chopin's music?**

**JO:** My initial thought is that maybe it would be confusing because as you try to memorise and internalize the piece, improvising with it might create a bit of confusion when it comes to performance. You're used to improvising with that sound so it might be a little harder to be specific with the notes... but I think the process of just improvising in general and really hearing it and hearing the chords before you play them would aid in memorising a complete idea. I was talking to a colleague about some of the students in ensemble that can never learn the pieces – they always forget them and I said *"I'll put my money on the fact that the people who don't remember the pieces are the ones with bad aural skills."* They have a memorisation process that is visual. They look at the music as dots on a page, whereas music is an aural art form. Learning it visually means it doesn't enter their long term memory of music. It amazes me – those musicians like Paul Grabowsky that haven't played a particular concerto for ten years can sit down and play it. And it's because they've internalized it aurally.