

## IMPROVISATION: GETTING FROM ONE NOTE TO THE NEXT

**BERT SCHILPEROORT**



### What is improvisation?

Improvisation is a creative process set within a defined context - a melody, a chord structure, a style of music, an emotion – and is comparable to an artist approaching a blank canvas. Within those constraints the musician has freedom to select from various options moment by moment. It is communication, like speech. When we think of improvisation in music, we automatically think of Jazz. However, improvisation has been a part of other forms of music too. Beethoven and Bach for example were renowned for their improvisational skills. Classical Indian music celebrates improvisation. It is a form of composition in real time without the possibility of erasing

anything! Stravinsky used to say “*Toujours avec la gomme*”, meaning that a composition requires careful correction time and time again until it attains timeless perfection. In a Jazz solo that luxury of correction is not available. Perhaps for that reason the potential is there in the moment of creation to generate some of the most powerful and exhilarating feelings of all. Sometimes, even a ‘going wrong’ leads to exciting discoveries. Having created something new and beautiful through improvisation, it may become the catalyst for subsequent improvisations, or can be captured to provide the foundation of a new composition.

### How do you prepare for improvisation?

When talking about improvisation, Lee Konitz - the famous Jazz alto saxophonist - said it takes considerable preparation to play unprepared. This apparent paradox captures the essence of improvisation. Deciding the content of such preparation is a personal thing: it will differ from player to player. I’m still experimenting with different approaches. Perhaps this will carry on for the rest of my life! When practicing saxophone, I play melodies, scales, and chords. On the drums I have to be more physically prepared, through warming up and practicing a few rudiments and rhythms, and making my own patterns. Most importantly, I listen to a lot of music hopefully with an open mind, allowing myself to be surprised and moved, visiting and revisiting particular players. With this awareness of possibilities in place, I try to listen to the shape, pattern, and form of the piece I am playing and both respond to and drive the music. Some people like to emulate other improvisations they have heard and admired, or have a few prepared phrases with which to begin, but I prefer to enter the improvisation as a blank space and see what happens. With my playing I hope to find an avenue through which all the preparation flows in surprising ways, with new doors opening on each side. To me this is the difference between a ‘show’ solo and real improvisation.

### Does improvisation always work?

It may not always reach the level you had hoped for. When I improvise I hope that there will be moments of magic, feelings of ‘wow!’ that can be shared by everyone. As Ginger Baker puts it – times when “the drums play me”. Then you have created a special happening, something memorable. But these moments cannot be anticipated or pre-arranged. There are parallels in science and other arts – long periods of effort may be required before the magic can emerge from this prepared ground. When you start to improvise you do not know where the journey will take you. If you did, then the journey would not be worthwhile. The same is true of scientific research. You are venturing into the unknown.

### Can you teach improvisation?

Opinions have changed – at first many believed that improvisation could not be taught. You could either do it or you couldn’t. Then, after the Second World War the Bebop style of Jazz with its more clearly-defined rules began to be used as a paradigm for the teaching of improvisation. It has characteristic ‘licks’ - sequences of notes - that can be learnt and built into solos. But I believe improvisation is a very personal thing. When I work with a group of students my first priority is to ensure that everyone is comfortable, not anxious – one already

feels so exposed! We select a piece we are going to play and I illustrate some of the musical possibilities. This is more of a technical demonstration, not a living improvisation. Then it is time for each student to find their own way of interpreting the piece to bring it alive. While we play, moments of beauty can emerge. That is what we look for. It is a group experience. It is process of discovery shared by the students and teacher. It is not predetermined. In a strong sense, Jazz music is speech. Drummer Max Roach and his group once played what was for me a very influential piece entitled "Nommo", which he explained was an African word meaning the "power of speech". It was in 7/4 time and had incredible ebbs and flows.

#### **What does it feel like when you are improvising?**

If I am playing well, I play with my whole being, there is no separation of mind and body. It all comes from feeling - there is a feeling of complete absorption and relaxation, blended with feelings of surprise and wonder at what is being created. I may be playing a solo, or facilitating other musicians as they improvise, but this is a shared experience - we are together in another space, a space where time is stretched and the feeling is huge. Musicians, instruments, and audience become one living entity and are the source of the music. For me, everything comes out of feel. Then all the other senses emerge from it. I am both reacting to and driving the events, interacting with my environment, not wilfully, but spontaneously while immersed in the music. I am experiencing moments of magic and wholeness. Then we all land again, with a musical high and memories of this shared experience.

*In conversation with Richard Dryden.*



**Bert Schilperoort** has been teaching music and performance studies along with playing Jazz for the last 16 years. People he has played with include top British and American Jazz and Blues artists. He is a son of the late Peter Schilperoort, founder of The Dutch Swing College Band. Bert is currently setting up a band that will play his Father's music. Bert teaches regularly on residential Jazz courses and day courses.

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