

Essay written by Didrik Ingvaldsen

Improvisation, as being the core of jazz music.

Creating a personal sound.

Key musical qualities.

I have been asking questions: «How do I improvise?» «What are the differences between composing and improvising?»

Since my main focus is on jazz after 1960, (Ornette Coleman's album «Free Jazz» was recorded this year), I have been concentrating on free jazz and music related to this style. One of my challenges has been; «How do I, as also being a composer, relate to free improvisation?» Improvisation can be understood as spontaneous composition. «What happens when I improvise freely?» «How free is it?» Are there any limitations in free music? I think there are, and what kind of limitations are we talking about?»

There are two:

Internal and external. «How much, and what, is saved in your musical memory?» «How much of it can I get up front at the right moment while playing an improvisation?»

External limitations can be the instrument, technique and to relate to a composition. Freedom can be the biggest limitation; in having every possibility in front of you, and in how to make «the right» choices.

The understanding of the use of free improvisation inside a structure became deeper after having reflected on this. Free improvisation can under the right circumstances become even more significant when put into a musical architecture, or when it reacts with or against a loose or defined form. As a composer, I realise that I wish to have some sort of control of the music. At the same time it is important to let go of this control in order to let the music develop into something that I cannot predict. My musical architecture has to be flexible, it has to be able to handle other improvisers' need to go on their own discovery in my «building», and the «labyrinth» has to be made in such a way that the improvisers can communicate.

Jazz music is an expression of an artist's inner voice spoken through his or her instrument. Many of today's musicians learn jazz in colleges and universities which is good, but there is also a downside to it. Everybody studies more or less the same famous solos, templates and patterns. Therefore it is hard to tell one player from another, and there is in many cases a lack of creativity and individualism in the playing of today's young jazz musicians.

How is improvisation taught in schools?

Why is the common methodology in teaching improvisation so much focused on harmony and chord/scale relationships? Or actually overly concerned about chord/scale relationships.

John Coltrane created a perfect vehicle for teaching improvisation. He started practicing improvisation in a very theoretical way that could be written down. It became notebooks of patterns and theoretical concepts which is quite accessible to a music department.

The system focuses on harmony and neglects all other aspects of improvisation such as development of advanced rhythmic use and individual tonal expressions which are unquestionably the most creative and vital aspects of improvisation.

The need for institutions to grade students has made it necessary to emphasize on correct and incorrect execution of music. To quote John McNeil, jazz trumpet teacher at the New England Conservatory in Boston: "If a player is operating at the far frontier of his or her ability, pushing the envelope so to speak, it seems to me that a certain amount of failure is inevitable. Maybe even desirable. A performance that is too clean and immaculate of execution doesn't necessarily speak to me on a human level." Or to quote Miles Davis: "Don't be afraid of mistakes, there are none."

It is easier to judge "right notes" over the harmony than timbre techniques or rhythmic nuances. Therefore this is often over-emphasized in teaching improvisation.

Students must be encouraged to experiment with non-conventional tonal techniques. False fingering, growls, swoops and scoops, and other tonal inflections, as much as note choices, are what give jazz musicians a personal, identifiable voice.

Improvisation is combining the talents of individuals together as a collective whole, and should be taught both individually and collectively.

Teaching should include:

Strict organized classes, and the freedom and expression of individual ideas.

Rhythmic approaches to improvisation.

Lessons from teachers who do not play the same instrument as the students.

Sound

Sound is personality. Especially on wind instruments. The sound in these instruments is personal in the way it is created, because of the fact that the physique of the player shapes the sound. When talking about specific wind instruments, the sound can more or less be shaped to the player's preference if the quality of the instrument can answer to the demands. The sound is in the

imagination, and can therefore be created the preferred way on any specific instrument. This paper is not dedicated to go into details, but speaking about the trumpet: About the effects of different shapes of mouthpieces, bores and shapes of trumpet tubes. It is important to be aware of the impact this can have on your playing. Special setups and combinations of these will make it better to play in different settings. Personal sound is a combination of your physics, imagination and instrumental equipment. The use of vibrato and tuning will to a certain degree decide your sound. Vibrato has a strong effect in altering the sound/tuning, and it is easy to forget that it is quite common to use it unconsciously.

Ornette Coleman once said: «You can play flat in tune and sharp in tune». This not only a funny remark, but it also tells us that anything goes as long as we are conscious about what we are doing.

In the last part of this presentation I want to discuss key musical qualities.

In jazz, personality and individuality are key qualities. How to find your own voice is one of the

key questions in becoming a jazz musician. It is dependent on the instrument. Sound, phrasing, voicings and articulation are key issues. Creating musical individuality can also be done by the way phrasing is made, how chords are voiced and by inventing personal phrases.

I will not now discuss specific details on all instruments, but will stress the importance of having an individual expression whether it is articulated with sound, phrasing, voicings or in other ways.

Communication skills are a necessity when being a jazz musician or improvising musician. It is important to know the different roles a musician should have when playing in a band or ensemble. Independent of instrument, there are at least three main roles every musician should be aware of:

- 1) The soloist who stands out making a major statement, and being the focal point of the sound coming from the band.
- 2) The accompanying musician who supports, communicates and makes remarks and responses. This role will always try to get the best out of the soloist, and make him/her sound the best possible.
- 3) The silent musician who knows when not to play. It creates a certain energy in a band when someone is not playing, and the important skill is to know when this is needed in a band.

When performed well, these roles can make the band sound good. It creates changes in the texture of the music, it creates energy, and it makes

communication flow better. It will shape the music, and be important tools to know and to use in all musical activity. In collective improvisation these skills are a necessity to be able to make music together at all.

Communication within a band is worth a study. A good dinner with the band can be as good a rehearsal as any. How the musicians communicate and relate to each other in general can be an important factor in how they play together. A big part of the game is by intuition be able to understand and figure out how other musicians in the band will play. In many ways it is comparable to an intimate relationship; knowing, but also be able to surprise. The idea that the output, (in this case the music), will become bigger than the sum of each individual's input, (synergy), should be supported. Key musical qualities such as the relationship to the instrument, musical memory, reading skills, to know when to be or not to be a leader, and to have the knowledge to arrange and compose music are all valuable musical qualities.

It is all in your mind and imagination. Inspiration for being creative can be found everywhere; e.g. in visual arts, architecture, dance, food, travelling, and in noise.

A dangerous place for an artist to be, is when the solution is found, and thinking that this is it. Then, the music, is going to be recreated again and again.

And finally: Maybe the most important issue about education on a higher level is to open people's awareness of what already exists, what has already been done, and what possibilities there are. It is about how to make people think and listen without telling them exactly how to do it. To open up there minds, so that they can create something of there own.