

Expanding horizons – Ensemble improvisation on 20th-century classical music.

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In this video I'll present two examples of pedagogical applications of the artistic research project "Expanding horizons – improvisational explorations of 20th-century classical music" for ensembles with adult music students of different musical orientations.

The project in question is centered around musical explorations of Western art music from the 20th century from an improvisational perspective. Although there is an emphasis on improvisational approaches that are rooted in the performance practice of jazz musicians, the project also presents other perspectives on musical improvisation, and features performers that are rooted in other traditions, mainly classical music and folk music.

The ensemble experiments presented here are carried out with an emphasis on this wide spectrum, to examine the extent to which approaches and methods taken from the project can be applied to ensemble situations with performers of different musical orientations. Through working with students, the experiments also strive to connect the practices of artistic research in music and music teaching. One aspect of this is that methods, knowledge, and insights from the project can inform the work with student ensembles. In return, these encounters also contribute to the project by providing opportunities for experimenting, trying out things and assessing musical potentialities together with the students. So, ideally, this exchange can be valuable from an educational perspective as well as for the advancement of the research project.

Example 1. Cortège - working with a mixed ensemble with students from jazz and classical music

In the first example I worked with a 7-piece ensemble consisting of students at a Swedish university. The students all attended the same bachelor programme in music performance, but with different orientations; 3 of them with an orientation in classical music, and 4 of them with a jazz/pop orientation. Through suggestions from teachers, I had invited the students directly, informing them that we would work with the repertoire for two sessions and then present the result at a project presentation, as a sort of live demonstration. The instruments were; flute, clarinet, saxophone, piano, keyboards, electric bass and drums.

Preparation

The piece I chose for this experiment was Lili Boulanger's *Cortège*, a composition for solo piano written in 1914, that I had already performed and recorded in a jazz piano trio setting, and that I experienced to be flexible enough for various reconfigurations of the material.

Some musical properties that made the piece seem suitable:

- a main theme that is mostly diatonic, with a singable quality
- different musical sections with strong identities
- harmonic movement that may potentially be rewarding for harmonically advanced players

I paid a lot of attention with creating a sheet music that would capture the character of the piece while still being open enough that the music could turn into something different. Based on

earlier experiences, my feeling was that a so-called 'lead sheet' would work best for this purpose, which is a kind of sheet music where you have a basic representation of the melody together with chord symbols to indicate the general harmony.

One important aspect of this is that you limit the amount of material for the performer to take in, so that there is more space for interpretation and improvisation and, also, that the performers don't get overwhelmed by all the information from the original score. Another aspect of this is that this kind of score and its 'stripped down' appearance, in comparison with the original score, doesn't create the same expectation that the sheet should be performed in a literal way, but rather that you're expected to find your own musical solutions to 'fill the gaps'.

As I sent out the lead sheet, I also attached the original score (for solo piano) as a reference for the students, with a link to a piano recording of the piece.

Working with the ensemble

With this group we worked together for two sessions. Initially, I gave the students some ideas about things to try out, with a list of things that we could try, but I also encouraged them from early on to come up with their own suggestions and ideas.

The process went through the following stages:

Playing the melody. This involved getting used to hearing it in the new constellation, and also making adjustments for the ensemble if needed.

Establishing a groove. This was carried out in a way where the rhythm section simply tried out different alternatives that we then assessed together.

Working with musical details. This was done in relation to different parts of the music. First, we added dynamics to enhance the dramatic contours of the melody. This was partly done in realtime through me "conducting" the ensemble. We also added musical breaks in different places, to accentuate some of the melody phrases.

Improvising over different sections. This was the main focus of our two sessions, and was carried out one section at the time;

'A' section

The first thing we tried was to let all the musicians try solo improvisations over the 'A' section, one at the time. To make things easier, and reduce the potential risk of students feeling exposed when doing this, I pointed out that they could start by playing the melody and gradually deviate from that.

'B' section

We then tried a drum solo over the 'B' section, shortened to 8 bars, with the melody played in a low register. To create space for the drums, I told the ensemble to leave out bars 3-4 and 7-8 of this section.

Open section based on whole-tone scale

One of the students then suggested to try improvising over the whole-tone passage from the original, simply by staying in that scale instead of moving on to the next section. This turned out to be an open collective improvisation, where the ensemble gradually left the pulse and went into a freer improvisation. To return to

the theme afterwards, we decided that one of the melody instruments could simply start playing the melody and that the others would then join in.

Call-response improvisation around melody

Another idea that came from the students was to do a kind of call-response version of the melody, as we entered the 'C' section. The way we did it was that two of the horn players (flute and clarinet) played the melody in unison, with the tenor saxophone filling the gaps with a free interpretation of the melody.

Open ending with collective improvisation

Since the mutual exploration in the "whole-tone section" went so well, I wanted to try more collective improvisation based on the composition. As a simple way of achieving this, I suggested that they could repeat 8 bars where the bass plays a pedal point, to create a buildup where the improvisers' voices are gradually taking more space and adding to the intensity.

Introduction with collective improvisation

To continue exploring the potential of collective improvisation with the group, I suggested them do an open improvisation together based on a so-called vamp over the first two chords. The idea here was that the students could play around with fragments of the melody, in a way where the actual melody would emerge gradually.

Open section based on diminished sound

We also tried a section based on a diminished sound that I had picked up from the piece, where the students before the melody was introduced.

Establishing a form

I then wanted to create an overall form where everyone would have their spot for solo improvisation based on something from the piece. The way I did this was by simply asking each one of the students which section they wanted to improvise over, and wrote out musical forms on a Whiteboard based on that. Since we had already tried various sections, we had a general idea of what could be used. However, instead of putting together all of the solo improvisations in the same version *and* the ideas for collective improvisation, as well as the theme, we created two different versions and distributed the sections over them.

During the presentation, the performance went really well, with improvisations that felt fresh and with a high degree of musical communication. Afterwards, we discussed the project and assessed the way that we had worked with the piece. One of the students commented on how useful it was to have a set of clear guidelines to work from, in that it provided a frame for the work processes while there was still a general openness for things that happened in the room.

One of the students with a classical background made the point that this way of approaching classical repertoire could also add something to working with interpretation of a piece, seen that you get a deeper understanding of the building blocks and the role they play in the piece seen from a larger perspective.

Another student mentioned a potential challenge in that instructions from the beginning weren't so explicit on how faithful they should be to the original music, making it unclear at times how far they could deviate from the original piece.

The general feeling was, however, positive from the students' perspective, and they mentioned feeling inspired by the processes. One of the students also expressed how valuable it would be to have an ensemble working with this kind of approach to repertoire on a regular basis.

Example 2 – workshop with multiple ensembles

In this workshop I visited a Swedish 'folkhögskola', a kind of institution for adult education in preparation for higher education (that is specific to the Nordic countries). The school in question hosts music programmes with many different orientations; jazz, classical music, folk music, music production, totaling a number of around 50 students on different levels, from introduction years to students attending their 2nd – and last – year of the regular study programme. When discussing the workshop with the coordinator for the music programmes, we agreed that it would be a good thing to try this with all of the students in mixed constellations, to get them to work together across the different genres and orientations.

The piece I chose for this was the 2nd movement of Maurice Ravel's *String quartet in F*, from 1903, a piece that I hadn't performed myself, but that I was curious to try out.

Some of the musical properties that made this piece seem suitable:

- a main theme based on one general scale (A aeolian), based on musical sequences and a clear contour that seemed conducive to ear-based learning and improvisation
- a distinctive rhythmic character, with cross-rhythms based on 2 against 3, that still seemed open enough to work in numerous rhythmic adaptations
- harmonic movement; modulations between sections, different harmonizations of the main theme

Preparation

As I prepared the piece, I tried to make a scaled-down version of the score that would be similar to a lead sheet, but with some additional information that I considered important for the character of the piece; rhythms, harmony parts, bass lines etc. This can be described as an "extended lead sheet". Another aspect is that I kept most of the information related to dynamics, although written out on a general level rather than individually for the different parts. The reason for this was that I wanted the groups to focus more on what could be done with improvisation, given the limited amount of time that we had.

I also shortened the form considerably by removing the slow *trio* section of the original but still preserving the ending of the movement. To make it possible to follow the sheet music while listening at the same time, I also did an edited version of the recording that I attached as a reference.

In the initial instructions that I sent out, I explained that we would mainly try to open up the

piece and create our own thing out of it, and that they shouldn't get too caught up in what they see in the score – or hear.

Rather, think about things you can add to your own version (e.g. improvisation, chords, sounds, beats, grooves, taking in audio from the original, etc.), or if you come to think of sections that can be looped/extended, etc. It may well be that we focus on one or more of the sections.

I did, however, ask them to check out the piece from their different instruments/approaches to music making.

I then worked out a more elaborate set of instructions and guidelines. Given that there wouldn't be so much time for me to do much hands-on work with the groups, I paid a lot of attention into making these instructions as clear and usable as possible. I also made use of the insights from my previous ensemble experiment, to the extent that I nearly modeled the instructions from how we worked with Cortège. I also made sure, however, to add questions that would spur the students to come up with their own approaches.

Instructions sent out to the students:

Ravel's string quartet in F major, second movement, suggestions for things to try:

- Play the piece a few times to get the melody in place (suggestion – start with the first page, sections 1, 2, 3). Find ways to play the melody with the instruments and sounds you have in the group.
- Establish a groove, e.g. from the first section. Can you think of things to add? (sounds, beats, riffs etc.)
- Play more over the same sections – are there things that you want to change? Dynamics, character, rhythm, harmony, etc.
- Try the same for section 4
- Try improvisation over different sections:
 - Repeat the first two bars as a vamp
 - Section 1 (loop 8 first bars)
 - Section 2
 - Section (loop 8 first bars)
 - Section 9 (loop 4 first bars)Can you think of other sections to try?
- Play the rest of the theme, or make a shorter version based on the sections you have.
- Put together a whole form (with improvisation)

Additional ideas:

Open intro where the groove/melody is gradually established.

Open outro with ending on cue

Improvisation simultaneously with melody

Call & response - having someone "answer" the melody in the gaps.

Bring in audio clips from the original

Workshop

When meeting the students, around 40 participants, I did a general introduction to the project. I then played the recording and went through the instructions. Once again, I stressed that the groups should try to look beyond the score, so that the focus was more on what can be done with the music, rather than just playing the piece. I also reminded them that they could focus on a couple of the sections, or even one section, rather than feeling like they had to play the whole composition. To give an idea of how the piece could be turned into something else, I played a clip of an adaption for 8-bit sound that I had found incidentally on Youtube, "If Ravel's String Quartet Mvt. 2 was an NES game". I then assigned six different groups, first by distributing drummers, bass players and chord instrument players, and then simply assigned different numbers to the rest of the students, creating six more or less random constellations with 6-7 students per group.

As the groups were working in different ensemble rooms, I would visit them to check on their progress. I saw my role mostly as a facilitator in these situations, as someone that could help out if needed, but also to encourage them to try things and experiment with the material. I told them that they could play their version for the others if they wanted to, but that it was really up to themselves.

As we gathered once again to hear the different groups, it turned out that 5 out of the 6 groups had something that they wanted to present. I also asked them to say a few words afterwards, about how they experienced the process. When listening to their performances, it was really fascinating how differently the groups had solved the musical assignment; one of the groups had worked out an arrangement for beatbox and EWI, among other instruments, in a version that alternated between different time signatures and a "battle" between the drums and the beatboxing. Another group brought out a folk music character in the piece, with drums played with mallets and with improvisations that were done mostly in a collective manner, based on the melody, but with an electric guitar that added atmospheric sounds and sometimes took on a more solistic role. Yet another group did long improvisations over each part, starting off in rubato and gradually established a groove.

In one of the other groups, there were trumpet and voice improvisations over the first section followed by the second section in an open repetition where the theme was played in parallel with improvisation. They also achieved a nice effect by using a pizzicato violin in the first section, much like the original, which created an interesting contrast to the electric instruments in the group (guitar, bass). In the last group, there were collective improvisations over the first and second sections (mainly), in a way where the main musical motives were used as building blocks for collective buildups. This group even managed to bring in the more demanding 8th section from the piece, with its chromatically descending lines. The way they explained it was that they superimposed that particular section over the second section through approaching it with "open ears".

In general, the groups described the experience as fun, positive and rewarding. Besides the piece itself, one thing that was mentioned was the fact they were working in non-standard ensemble settings. The thing that some of the groups described as difficult was getting into the material and its particular musical language. One group mentioned the challenge of getting an overall

form in place that feels like a unit, and to make the different sections flow into each other in a natural way.

Musically speaking, one thing that united the groups was that they all used building blocks from the melody when improvising, mainly from the first section, but also the second section to some extent. Rhythmically, it was interesting that although they found very different grooves — jazz waltz, 'beat', straight folk, 7/8, even rubato — they still had the general '2 against 3' rhythm there to some extent, as a common denominator.

Conclusion

To summarize, let's look at the pedagogical considerations that went into these processes:

- *Finding the right repertoire*, with suitable musical properties
- *Preparing the material in an accessible way* for students with different musical orientations and approaches to music making
- Creating *improvisational frameworks* that work on different levels, from beginners to advanced improvisers
- Finding ways of working that contributes to *agency for performers* where they are encouraged to
- Finding a good *balance between instructions/openness*

Although some of the approaches to improvisation from this project are rooted in the practice of jazz musicians, I think the examples presented here show that one can formulate guidelines in ways that are open enough to be used by musicians from various backgrounds, and that it's possible to find common grounds for musical exploration, and, ultimately, that this kind of process can bring out a lot of creativity in the students.

Hopefully, these examples can provide some inspiration for others interested in musical cross-pollinations and music teaching across musical genres, or those interested in bridging the gap between artistic research and teaching situations.