

Pedagogical Styles for Melodic Improvisation: Comparing the Effects of Music-Theoretical and Dramaturgical Instruction

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogical literature on improvisation in jazz and related genres is chiefly concerned with scales, chords, and other music-theoretically defined elements. On the other hand, the literature on freer forms of improvisation emphasizes a “dramaturgical” approach, with focuses on expression and personal commitment. The present research aims at assessing the relative merits of these approaches. In the study, 36 students of professional music pedagogy, most of them with little or no improvisation experience, took part in a week-long improvisation course during which part of them were given music-theoretical and part of them dramaturgically oriented instruction. The students’ melodic improvisations over a chordal accompaniment from the beginning and the end of the course were subjected to evaluation according to ten descriptive scales by a panel of expert judges. Irrespective of the instruction given, most of the scales showed a highly significant change in the participants’ improvisatory styles during the course. However, the theoretical instructions lead to a more significant change towards improvisation judged as “dissonant” and “independent of the chord changes”, whereas dramaturgical instructions lead to a more significant change towards “rhythmically varied” playing.

I. INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, improvisation has received an increasing amount of interest among researchers of music education. Some pedagogues and researchers see improvisation as a key to a new kind of approach to teaching music. It has even been suggested by Keith Sawyer (2008) that improvisation should be given a place at the core of the music curriculum, instead of just introducing some improvisational practice beside other, non-improvisational activities. But how would this be done in practice? True, there are loads of textbooks on the market that are suited as starting points for improvisation pedagogy in various musical styles. What is less clear, however, is how the various methods, exercises, theories, pieces of advice and “philosophies” of improvisation that are found in the literature should in practice be packaged as a working curriculum. A common view, and very possibly the right one, is that improvisational skill is best furthered by exposing the learner to a variety of different activities, exercises, and improvisational situations instead of concentrating on limited number of exercises (see, e.g., Schlicht 2008; cf. Burnard 2000a). A related view encouraging the plurality of improvisational approaches is that, especially for young

children, it may be fruitful to allow pupils themselves to invent and explore their own ways of improvising (cf. Burnard 1999; 2000b). However, it would be a mistake to leave it at that and let the curriculum itself be formed in an improvisational manner. This is particularly true for professional music education which in any case should prepare the students for a number of already existing musical practices that cannot be solely determined by the educators. Despite some studies comparing different teaching methods, it seems that there is still a lack of systematic research concerning the effects of widely differing pedagogical methods to students’ emerging improvisatory styles. This may be partly because even if the typical pedagogical approaches to, say, jazz improvisation and free improvisation differ from one another, so do also the styles of music in question, which makes the comparison between the respective pedagogical approaches difficult. As noted by Tafuri (2006, 141), not enough attention has yet been paid in the literature on improvisation pedagogy to the relationship between the teacher’s proposals and the processes activated, in order to reach conclusions on teaching strategies and their consequences for musical creativity.

What are, then, the main alternatives for approaching the teaching of musical improvisation? In the present paper, we will not attempt to answer to this question in full; rather, we will concentrate on two different pedagogical approaches, both of which seem to have appeared in a broad range of publications on the subject, even though typically in slightly different contexts. Briefly, we will call these approaches the “music-theoretical approach” and the “dramaturgical approach” to teaching improvisation.

The music-theoretical approach to improvisation pedagogy puts the principal focus on musical elements, or “building blocks”: scales, chords, rhythms etc. In traditional Western musical contexts, this approach is by far the most common, and has clearly dominated in practical manuals and textbooks of various qualities concerning improvisation in tonal classical styles (e.g., Wehle 1925; Kaye 2006; Chung & Thurmond 2007; Stefanuk 2008), jazz (e.g., Levine 1995; De Rosa 1997) as well as ecclesiastic improvisation (e.g., Johns 1987; Overduin 1998).

On the other hand, there is a growing literature on freer forms of improvisation that emphasizes a “dramaturgical” pedagogical approach, with a focus on expression and personal commitment (see, e.g., Ford 1995; Huovinen & Kuusinen 2006). In a wider sense, such an approach is often evident in *aesthetically* oriented handbooks or self-help books that deal with improvisational creativity in music (e.g., Green & Gallwey 1987; Nachmanovitch 1990; Watson 2005), as well as in established improvisers’ semi-philosophical accounts of

improvisation (e.g., Rothenberg 2002). It is no coincidence that the “dramaturgical” ideas and attitudes expressed in this literature often resemble those that one may find in handbooks of theatre improvisation (e.g., Hodgson & Richards 1974; Zaporah 1995; Spolin 1999).

In addition to this more aesthetic (or even “spiritual”) literature, a distinctly dramaturgical approach may often crop up in otherwise music-theoretically oriented textbooks. Instead of an exclusive concern with musical building blocks expressed in the language of music theory, one may also pay attention to what is expressed by using these means – how various types of dramatic successions or developments are constructed, how tensions are created or resolved, how non-musical imagery may be applied etc. To take one example, Hal Crook’s books on jazz improvisation present, among other things, discussions of musical impact and models of handling long-term dramaturgies in terms of felt intensity (Crook 1991, 144; 1999, 202–204). As the focus in the dramaturgical approach is more often on expression than on the exact musical materials chosen for this purpose, the techniques suggested in such literature often resemble ones that might be applied in music-therapy improvisation, as well. For instance, the music therapist Tony Wigram’s (2004, 41) example of a “musical play rule” that can be applied as a starting point for therapeutic improvisation is clearly a dramaturgical rule: “Let’s start very softly, get extremely loud and then go back to being very soft.”

Many improvisation pedagogues of course acknowledge both the music-theoretical and the dramaturgical approaches. For example, Schlicht (2008, 4), covers both “basic harmonic-melodic musical elements” as well as questions of “how to create music; how to invent, shape and develop musical phrases; and how to improvise within a form.” What makes the relationship between the two approaches difficult, however, is that there are many contrasting opinions concerning how the two approaches should, or may, be combined in practice, and which of them is to be preferred. First of all, pedagogues of free improvisation typically contrast creative involvement in music making – and thus a largely dramaturgical, or expression-centered approach – to what they see as more conservative models of music education, requiring a mastery of formal material “as an end in itself” (see, e.g., Thomson 2008). Secondly, perhaps a more traditional opinion among improvisation pedagogues would be that “it is important for children to gain basic technical skills before practising creativity” (Koutsoupidou 2008, 325). In the same vein, the jazz musician and theorist Dave Liebman (1991, 13–14) suggests that the application of aesthetic concepts such as balance or tension makes sense first when the student already has acquired a relative mastery of the materials on the building block level so that there is no need to pay constant attention to them. A third view would be that improvisatory skill, at least in some stylistically restricted domains such as jazz, is a “single construct” in which the technical, theoretical, and expressive aspects all correlate with each other, and cannot really be separated either in analyzing performances or in planning musical education (May 2003).

Tafari (2006), in her study of children’s musical improvisation, identifies three types of instructions that are typically used by researchers when asking children to invent a piece of music: (i) “semantic” instructions that suggest an

extra-musical meaning for the music to express, (ii) “rules” that refer to the structural features of music, and (iii) instructions concerning “materials”, which means that the children are simply asked to invent a song or a piece, without more specific instructions (*ibid.*, 142). In Tafari’s own research it was found that

the ‘rules’ tasks stimulated more structured but less varied improvisations in that the procedure was already established, while the ‘semantic’ tasks stimulated the use of different procedures to a much higher degree, even if they were a bit less structured. It would therefore appear that the former type were less useful in promoting creative thinking, partly because of their lesser appeal to affective mechanisms. (Tafari 2006, 151.)

In Tafari’s research, we thus see how largely dramaturgical (“semantic”) and largely music-theoretical instructions (“rules”) may easily lead to differences in creativity and structuredness. Implicitly, such an approach shows that different approaches to teaching and learning musical improvisation may be possible, and that they will lead to different results. This is in contrast to views such as that of Kratus (1996) according to which improvisatory skill typically develops in a more or less fixed sequence of phases. In Kratus’ model, “exploration”, for instance, is a characteristic of the lowest skill level, whereas “structural” and “stylistic” improvisation occur only at the very highest levels. Without going into the details of the model, it may be questioned whether such a sequence presents the only possible developmental relationship between the affective and the cerebral aspects of improvisation. Clearly, more information should be gathered concerning the effects of various types of instructional focuses, for beginning improvisers of various ages.

II. AIMS

The concrete pedagogical problem motivating this research was how to incorporate some improvisatory skills into the musicianship of classical music students with little or no prior experience in improvisation. In our study, we wanted to address this problem through an experimental procedure which would allow the direct comparison between the effects of music-theoretically and dramaturgically oriented approaches to teaching musical improvisation, as characterized above. Of particular interest was to see whether such different pedagogical styles would affect the development of beginning improvisers’ skills with respect to those musical features that are not explicitly addressed in the instructions. For this reason, it was decided that the instructions given to the students in the study to be described would not address matters of rhythm.

III. METHOD

Participants

The participants were 36 students of music pedagogy at the Turku Music Academy, Finland, with a mean age of 22.3 (sd =

3.0). 24 of them were first year's students, and 12 were studying for their third year. Their first instruments included piano (11), guitar (5), song (5), as well as nine different orchestral instruments (15), and they had an average experience of 12.3 years in playing their respective first instruments ($sd = 4.1$). According to the emphasis of western art music in their study program, all of them reported having experience of playing tonal art music, and 81% had also similar experience of modern art music. In addition, 69% of the participants had played popular music, and 47% folk music, but only 25% had experience of playing jazz. 47% of the participants reported having no previous experience in musical improvisation, whereas 28% had had such experience for a maximum of two years, and only 25% more than that. As become clear in the participants own descriptions, most of this improvisatory experience had been sporadic, occurring outside of their formal music studies, in various more informal contexts. The group of participants thus represented a fairly typical sample of classically oriented professional music students in Finnish conservatories and music academies, with little or no organized studies of improvisation behind them.

Musical materials

All of the improvisation exercises and performances in our study were played by the participants against a single chordal accompaniment, based on the following chord progression:

| C | | E7 | Am |
| D7 | | Dm7 | G7 ||

An accompaniment recording for the improvisation sessions was prepared by letting a professional organist (AT) play 3'35" minutes of simple chordal accompaniment on the above chord progression. The instrument used was an electric piano with a smooth, Rhodes-like timbre. The recording was made in 4/4 time, the organist listening to a metronome click at $MM = 60$ through headphones. The accompaniment consisted in steady quarter-note chords in the right hand and a free, chordally based but constantly changing bass line in the left hand that the organist improvised to fit the chord changes.

Improvisation course

All of the students participated in a week-long improvisation course which consisted of five individual instruction sessions on separate days. Before the course, the students were randomly assigned to two groups: a "theoretical group" ($n = 14$) and a "dramaturgical group" ($n = 22$). According to the division, part of the students received instruction on tonal-harmonic elements, and part of them were instructed on wider dramatic organization in terms of balance, repetition, variation, tension etc. The students were told to bring their own main instrument to the sessions; the singers were given the alternative opportunities of singing the exercises or playing them on an electric piano, and all of them chose the latter alternative. Each of the five instruction sessions lasted about 20 minutes and took place in a studio room in which the students' performances

could easily be recorded irrespective of their instrument. All of the improvisations played by the students during the sessions were recorded on a separate track in order to facilitate conversion to symbolic form (for purposes of computational results reported elsewhere).

In each session, the students practised improvising melodies while listening to the recording of the chord progression. To begin each session, the participant was first given the opportunity to freely improvise on the chord progression in order to warm up. Subsequently, the teacher (VK) introduced a topic for improvisation exercises and suggested the first exercise concentrating on the topic. The idea of the exercise was discussed briefly with the student before the student attempted the exercise in practice, by playing a single-note melodic improvisation on the recorded chord progression. The first exercise was followed by two others, each of which was introduced by the teacher, discussed with the student and then tried out by the student, as a play-along exercise with the accompaniment recording. Finally, the session ended with a freely conceived improvisation in which the student had no specific instructions to follow but was given a chance to draw on all of his or her musical knowledge and expertise. Each of the five sessions was governed by a single topic, and the five sessions were intended to result in a natural continuum beginning from simple, smaller-scale elements and principles, and continuing on to somewhat more elaborate topics for improvisatory exercises.

There were two different sets of instructions: one for the dramaturgical group and one for the theoretical group. Both sets of instructions were compiled on the basis of a single instructional book, *David Baker's Jazz Improvisation* (Baker 1988) that contains theoretical (*passim*) as well as dramaturgical ingredients (*ibid.*, pp. 73–83). Our purpose here was to create two coherent but contrasting sets of instructions based on Baker's various advices, with the difference that the first set would be governed by the so-called "chord/scale approach", and the other would be more "dramaturgical" in nature. Thus, some music-theoretical terms were applied in the latter set as well, but they were not tied to any reference system of scales and chords. During the sessions, the theoretical group also had the chord changes on paper in front of them, but the dramaturgical group did not, and the teacher did not address the chord changes in his instruction (or reveal the chords to the students of the dramaturgical group if they asked about them). The following is a summary of the two sets of compiled instructions, followed by the teacher during the course:

Resumé of instructions for the "theoretical" group (T)

Session 1: Triads

- (a) Use triadic arpeggios accommodated to the chord changes.
- (b) Continue in like manner, trying to employ small intervals as you move from one chord to another.
- (c) Experiment with reversing the registral direction of the triads and observe the possibility of leaps.

Session 2: Seventh chords

- (a) Use arpeggios according to the chord changes, applying also the sevenths.
- (b) Continue in like manner, adding now also the major seventh to the tonic chord.
- (c) Observe the possibility of stepwise descending resolution of the sevenths within E7 and G7 chords.

Session 3: Chordal dissonances

- (a) Approach the chord tones occasionally from lower chromatic leading tones.
- (b) Approach the chord tones from both lower and upper chromatic leading tones.
- (c) Emphasize the ninths of the chords.

Session 4: Altering the diatonic scale material

- (a) Use the tones of the C major scale.
- (b) Alter the tones of the C major scale in ways adequate to the chord changes.
- (c) Intersperse the scalar playing with some arpeggios.

Session 5: Chromaticism

- (a) Use the C major scale and apply chromatic passages to connect scale tones.
- (b) Think now of chord tones as anchor points that can be connected with chromatic passages.
- (c) Begin in a consonant manner and try to increase the amount of dissonance.

Resumé of instructions for the “narrative” group (N)

Session 1: Balance between stepwise passages and leaps

- (a) Favor stepwise progressions with relatively few leaps.
- (b) Employ more leaps. Be aware of the technique of “filling in the leaps” by subsequent scalar movement in opposite registral direction.
- (c) Employ still more leaps. You can also use them freely.

Session 2: Individual features in melodies

- (a) Use deliberately tones that sound “wrong”. Resolve them stepwise.
- (b) Favor thirds as melodic intervals.
- (c) Favor fourths as melodic intervals.

Session 3: The use of repetition

- (a) Apply rhythmic repetition.
- (b) Use melodic sequences (phrases repeated on other pitch levels). The phrases do not have to be repeated exactly.
- (c) Use melodic sequences, and extend the sequenced phrases in various ways.

Session 4: Variation in phrase length

- (a) Use short phrases.
- (b) Use long phrases.
- (c) Vary the phrase lengths.

Session 5: Tension

- (a) Play in different registral ranges and acquaint yourself with the tensions that they yield.

(b) Vary the dynamics in your playing.

(c) Use the registral and dynamic features to produce a larger musical “arch”.

As far as possible, the exercises used in the sessions were introduced without a normative attitude, merely as ideas given for exploration. Likewise, the students’ performances were not in any way judged or evaluated by the teacher, whose function was rather to share ideas with the student.

Expert Judgements

In order to assess the students’ learning, the last recorded improvisations from sessions 1 and 5 were selected to be judged by a panel of expert judges. The panel consisted of the three authors (all males) as well as three other musicologists (all females). Of the authors, one is lecturer of music theory with degrees both in musicology and music education (VPK), one is acting professor of musicology (EH) and one is a doctorand in musicology with an organ degree from a music university (AT). Of the three other judges, one has a PhD on a topic in music performance as well as a conservatory degree in piano, another is a post-graduate student focusing on free improvisation, and the third has a master’s thesis on improvisation pedagogics as well as a conservatory degree in piano.

The six judges listened to the final “free” improvisations from all of the 36 students’ first and last sessions. The students were arranged in a random order, and each student’s two performances (with their accompaniments) were listened to successively. Concerning each of the improvisations, every judge assessed the performance on ten different bipolar, seven-point scales:

1. rhythmically precise / rhythmically free
2. rhythmically uniform / rhythmically varied
3. observing the chord changes / independent of them
4. motivically uniform / motivically varied
5. singable / unsingable
6. based on a specific musical style / stylistically free
7. dissonant / consonant
8. calm / tensed
9. predictable / surprising
10. relaxed / contrived

The judges thus first heard one student’s improvisation that had concluded session 1, assessing it on ten different scales; thereafter, they heard the same student’s improvisation from the end of session 5, again assessing the performance on the ten scales.

IV. RESULTS

The expert judgements revealed a significant change in many parameters for the whole pool of students, regardless of the instructions received during the course. Disregarding the division of the participants into two instructional groups, two-sample t-tests revealed highly significant overall changes for most of the descriptive scales. Thus, during the week-long course, the students’ improvisations became more rhythmically varied ($t = 3.15$, $p = 0.002$), independent of chord changes ($t =$

3.69, $p < 0.001$) motivically varied ($t = 4.10$, $p < 0.001$), dissonant ($t = -4.65$, $p < 0.001$), tensed ($t = 6.05$, $p < 0.001$), and surprising ($t = 4.83$, $p < 0.001$). One might interpret these judgements as saying that the students developed, in general, a tendency towards stronger musical gestures. At the same time, however, the students' playing was also observed to assume a more relaxed character ($t = -6.03$, $p < 0.001$). Together, these results indicate that regardless of the two very different styles of instruction, the five 20-minute sessions within one week's time were enough to help many of the students improve their improvisatory abilities in a notable manner. It may thus be that for the development of some kinds of improvisatory skill the specific style of instructions is less important than the mere fact that one takes part in a process of instruction and/or rehearsal.

After these general results, we may look at the differences in development between the two groups. For each descriptive scale used in the expert judgements, Table 1 gives the average change between the improvisations from the first and last sessions separately for both the dramaturgical group (D) and the theoretical group (T). For each pair of descriptive terms given on the left, negative changes are in the direction of the first-mentioned term, and positive ones in the direction of the latter term. For instance, the negative values on the last row show that the performances became more relaxed in the last session, although this happened for both instruction groups, and the difference of this change in favour of the dramaturgical group did not quite reach significance. In the table, the significance of the difference between the average changes in the two groups is accounted for by Wilcoxon rank sum tests.

Table 1. The average changes in expert judgements for the ten descriptive scales, given separately for the dramaturgical (D) and the theoretical (T) group.

DESCRIPTIVE SCALES	D	T	Wilcoxon rank sum test
1. rhythmically precise / rhythmically free	0.56	0.08	W = 6386 p = 0.052
2. rhythmically uniform / rhythmically varied	0.81	0.20	W = 6745.5 p = 0.006**
3. observing the chord changes / independent of them	0.35	0.94	W = 4128.5 p = 0.001**
4. motivically uniform / motivically varied	0.77	0.61	W = 5771 p = 0.606
5. singable / unsingable	0.41	0.29	W = 5529.5 p = 0.974
6. based on a specific musical style / stylistically free	0.41	0.24	W = 5897.5 p = 0.418
7. dissonant / consonant	-0.44	-1.19	W = 7275 p < 0.001**
8. calm / tensed	0.99	0.80	W = 5835 p = 0.505
9. predictable / surprising	1.02	0.65	W = 6213 p = 0.126
10. relaxed / contrived	-1.06	-0.79	W = 4750 p = 0.062

** = highly significant at the level $p < 0.01$.

In two cases, there was a highly more significant change in the improvisations of the theoretical group. On the one hand, the theoretical group showed a more marked change towards dissonant improvisation during the instruction period (scale 7).

On the other hand, the music-theoretically instructed students also developed a relative independence of the chord changes during the course as compared with the dramaturgical group (scale 3). It is of course possible that these results reflect a single phenomenon. A reasonable interpretation of these differences would seem to be that the participants in the theoretical group – given their possibility of inspecting the chord changes on paper and their explicitly music-theoretical instructions – could faster develop an ability to play at will somewhat “against” the given chords, whereas the dramaturgical group was still in the end of the course to some extent striving to play *according* to the chord changes. Supposing that a greater freedom to apply dissonance is a matter increasing expressive freedom in improvisation, such results emphasize the effectiveness of even short periods of music-theoretical instruction. That is, despite the brevity of the improvisation course, an explicit focus on the basic music-theoretical “building blocks” may have also allowed a broader range of expressive tools in terms of dissonance.

Even more interestingly, however, the dramaturgical group showed a more significant change towards rhythmically varied improvisations than the theoretical group (scale 2). This is interesting because, as noted above, neither the theoretical nor the dramaturgical instructions directly addressed questions related to rhythm. This result suggests that an explicit concern on the music-theoretical building blocks such as scales and chords may easily require such attentional resources that the rhythmic performance, in turn, turns out to be relatively “uniform” – or, in other words, stiff. Conversely, the dramaturgical instructions – instructions concerning balance between intervallic steps and leaps, individual features of melodies, the use of repetition, variation in phrase length, and tension – may have more easily translated into a tendency towards *rhythmically* distinctive gestures. Considering that the dramaturgical group also nearly reached a more significant change in rhythmical freedom (scale 1) and relaxation (scale 10), one may indeed see the result concerning rhythmic variety as a rather positive indication of the effectiveness of the dramaturgical instructions – even though it is a different kind of effectiveness than the one encouraged by the theoretical instructions.

V. DISCUSSION

The music therapy researcher Tony Wigram notes that beginning improvisers are not often conscious of the possibilities to vary their playing, and thus

“the initial musical production can be quite flat, dynamically. This is because much attention is placed on what notes to play, and melodic and harmonic structures in the music [...]. Tempo often remains rather fixed throughout, with equally little variation in meter, intensity, pitch range and typically without the presence of pauses, rubatos, accents, accelerandos or ritardandos.” (Wigram 2004, 36.)

Wigram's observations are in line with the findings of the present study. The theoretical group, or group of beginning

improvisers who were instructed in music-theoretical terms, appeared to have less cognitive resources to allocate to achieving rhythmically varied melodic lines, in comparison to the other group of participants instructed in broader, “dramaturgical” features of improvisation. In short, concentrating on harmonic-melodic materials may easily lead the students to improvising that is focused on pitch organization and is rhythmically rather uninteresting. The “cerebral” (as opposed to “emotional”) attitude of music theory may, in other words, lead to an explicit focus on “what I’m playing” as opposed to “how I’m playing” (cf. Schlicht 2008, 14).

On the other hand, our study suggests that Wigram’s description concerning the typical subordination of dramaturgical features to music-theoretical ones in beginning improvisers’ performances may also be turned upside down. At least for young music students relatively inexperienced in improvisation, it even seems a possible alternative to start out the instruction with exclusive concern with dramaturgical features. This, in its turn, may result in more rhythmically varied playing, but possibly also in the lack of dissonance control due to the limited attention given to harmonic aspects of improvisation. In short, our results confirm some important aspects of a trade-off between the music-theoretical and the dramaturgical, indicated in the citation from Wigram.

Notably, our study imposed no strict stylistic norms on the students’ improvisations. The rhythmic styles of the students, for instance, greatly varied from simple quarter-note melodies or baroque-style successions of straight eighth-notes, through jazzy phrasing with a swing feel, all the way to more irregular and jagged modernism. However, no negative effects of such musical *laissez-faire* seemed to emerge during the improvisation course. The significant changes observed in the students’ improvisatory solutions thus indicate that improvisational skill may be substantially developed by letting the students themselves freely incorporate their musical backgrounds in the process. Another related feature of our study was the lack of any evaluative feedback given to the students. Refraining from any evaluative procedures has previously shown to work well in encouraging young children to improvise (Burnard 1999), but such an attitude may initially seem more suspect in the case of professional music education. The fact that the participants’ styles of playing were seen to evolve in various ways already within a week-long improvisation course without any kind of evaluative feedback suggests that a lot may be gained in letting the students’ own judgement guide the selection of improvisational techniques and materials. This may be one of the best ways of encouraging in the establishment of a personal “voice”, which is, after all, one of the most valued aspects in many improvisationally oriented musical cultures (see, e.g., McMillan 1999).

What has been missing from the present study of improvisation pedagogy is musical interaction or interpersonal communication between improvisers, which is often singled out as one of the most important facets of improvisation by musicians themselves (e.g., Burrows 2004), as well as by researchers in music pedagogy (e.g., Burnard 2002) and musicologists (e.g., Monson 1996). Concentrating on single improvisers in an essentially non-interactive musical environment may of course be seen as a step in the wrong direction, while we should perhaps concentrate our efforts to

understanding the interactive dynamics of collective improvisational situations. Our approach in this paper has nevertheless been to progress in smaller steps towards that goal, with the conviction that systematic research of simpler improvisatory situations may ultimately also lead to a better understanding of more complex and multidimensional phenomena in the world of musical improvisation.

Our results suggest that by simply feeding the students with ideas, many of them may quickly succeed in acquiring a stronger improvisational voice – a better capacity for producing distinguishable musical gestures – irrespective of the specific kind of instruction given. This is indeed an encouraging finding, not only because it indicates the possibility of progressing within a small amount of time, but also because it suggests the potential usefulness of guided solo practice for ensemble improvisation. It has been noted that the success and coherence of a group improvisation may rely on “the fact that each player in [the] group has a highly distinctive musical ‘signature’ and that each makes consistently strong and imaginative musical gestures” (Burrows, 2004: 11). Even though our results say nothing of the students’ capability of interaction with other musicians, they do suggest that the students may have quickly developed better tools for encountering such situations, equipped with a capacity for creating musical tension as well as more varied and surprising phrases.

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