

EXPLORING THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING AN IMPROVISATION CONCERT WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF INTENSITY OF INTERACTION

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Abstract

This project views musical performances as collaborative practices, within which intensity is a relational phenomenon. The study is in one part a search for and an elaboration of various means of identifying, analyzing, and unveiling the elements, the variety of tendencies and tensions within musical performances. At the same time, the focus is on the musical communication in detail and as a whole. Therefore, the study speaks about the *Intensity of Interaction*.

The presentation demonstrates the method of double stimulation, which is based on the work by Vygotski. Therefore, the study uses intensity ratings as part of the stimulated recall interview. This means that video recordings of the naturally occurring events provide data for investigating the visual and vocal aspects of human conduct, and the ratings in figures from 0% to 100% signify momentary intensity based on personal experiences. In the stimulated recall interview of the performers and the audience, the researcher also use questions in order to stimulate discussion as they watch the video.

Video examples of improvisation performances with summary of the collected data constitute the presentation.

Keywords: intensity, improvisation, collaboration

1. Introduction

The present study is a report and an exploration, in which a trio: a singer, a cellist and a pianist, improvised in front of an audience. Moreover, the audience participated as a constituent part of the process of elaborating the performances. The collaboration and problem solving among performers and with the members of the audience constitute the present interest. The following questions specify the aim of this study.

- How did the trio develop their performance?
- How did the performers and the audience perceive the improvised musical performances of the trio?
- What kind of problem solving did the process of developing a musical performance presume?

Before explicating the preparation process of the improvisation concert, I will shortly present the underlining theories that guide this exploration.

2. Theoretical background

In her thesis on organ improvisation Karin Johansson (2008) specified that in improvisation the internalized musical knowledge and experience can be transformed and externalized in the form of new music. For her, improvisations happen in real time and they are always authentic. As Anto Pett (2007) formulates, the temporal intertwining of the past, present and future musical dimensions are possible for conscientious musicians. Therefore, improvisation manifests the cul-

tural and historical background of the musicians with their acquired musical competences. In this study, the improvised music has its roots in the Western European history of music. More specifically, the two participating musicians, a pianist and a cellist, come from the classical tradition. The singer specializes in folk music.

If the cultural-historical aspect of improvisation would serve as the vertical dimension, the horizontal aspect deals with collaboration, communication, and development (Y. Engeström, 2001). According to Small (1998) the activity of music making, musical performance, functions by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or by practicing, by providing material for performance (composition), or by dancing. Music is then situational and done together rather than consumed as fetishism. Leech-Wilkinson (2009) emphasizes that thinking about music, listening to music and performing music are closely connected. He points out that music is not so much a thing 'out there' as an interaction between sound and a hearer (who may also be a performer); music happens in the hearer, not in the score. Like-minded, the present research project is based on the assumption that the core process of musical performances happens within the performed music and hearer's mind.

This connection is emphasized also elsewhere. The pragmatist music education philosophy perspective (e.g. Alperson 1991; Elliott 1995; Westerlund 2002; Regelski 2005; Väkevä 2006) considers the shift of focus from 'musical works' to performing music as a shift from aesthetic experience (Reimer 1968, 1996) to praxial understanding and experiencing of music. This project acknowledges that musical performances have different contexts, purposes, and ethoi, within which the participants interact. This means that the present study shifts from musicology on composed music to musicology on performing music.

3. Aim of the study

The study is in one part a search for and an elaboration of various means of identifying, analyzing, and unveiling the elements, the variety of tendencies and tensions within

musical performances. At the same time, the focus is on the musical communication in detail and as a whole. Therefore, the study speaks about the *Intensity of Interaction*.

While this project examines and articulates the process of performing music through intensity, the interest is also in encouraging development within the activity of musical performance. Any attempt, however, to develop performing practices collides with the established value systems. This means in the context of improvisation, that tensions between two discourses of music, music as a means and music as an end in itself may emerge (Westerlund, 2002; Johansson, 2008, Heikinheimo, 2009). Theoretically, this tension can be associated with the emerging obstacles or contradictions in a process of development, which can be, according to the cultural-historical activity theory, CHAT (Vygotsky 1978, Leontiev 1978, Engeström 1987), basically resumed as tensions between perceived use value and exchange value in performing music.

Viewing the practice of a performance as an activity system allows a thorough articulation of the multilayered details and the system as a whole. Crucial in activity theory is to define the object of an activity system. Therefore, the analysis of the activity of performing music questions what is the purpose or the aim of the performance, why and how does the musical performance communicate. This articulation is the result of the proposed analysis.

To study processes usually considered as mental requires, in CHAT, a unit of analysis which corresponds to people's activity. Therefore, the concept of activity has a key role in the methodology. In CHAT, it means a collective object-related complex, which is transformed over a considerable span of time. Consequently, "music making is a collective activity, regardless whether it is done individually or in a group" (Folkestad 1996, 210).

Following this view, I have conceptualized the process of developing an improvisation concert as an activity that is based on collaboration of the performers and the audience. As an activity, improvisation is not conceived only as one event between the performers and the audience but rather a

culturally repeated way to organize musical performing. A performance receives partly a status of institution and is supposed to follow publicly accepted rules and division of labour, including performers' and audiences' obligations and rights.

In this activity framework, intensity of interaction is conceptualized as a joint achievement of the participants. This choice started the thought process of considering the manner of appropriate data collection and analytical tools for the research object (intensity).

4. Research design and data collection

Participants

This exploration focused on a process, which was the second part of Sirkka Kosonen's doctoral project. As a folk music singer, her concerts focus on improvisation with musicians from different backgrounds. This time she invited two classical musicians to play with her; Elina Heinonen, piano and Tapani Heikinheimo, cello. The instrumental variety included later also the African finger piano, fabulous artillery of effect tools for the piano, and the Mongolian Morin Khuur, Horse head violin.

Before the final stage of the preparation process, which covers the present data collection, we had practiced several times together and under Anto Pett's supervision in Tallinn. His method for practicing contemporary improvisation (Pett, 2007) was already familiar to all of us for a few years' time.

As emphasized earlier, the audience was a constituent part of the process of developing the improvisation concert. The members of the first two doctoral seminars (N=11, N=8) shared their perceptions of the performances with the performers through intensity ratings combined with their written and aural comments. Similarly, I asked four listeners to fill in the rating paper during the improvisation concert. In addition, two persons commented and rated the performance by watching the video. As an official assessment, the jury from the Folk music department shared their comments immediately after the concert.

The data cover video recordings and intensity ratings with comments of three performances of improvised music. The two first performances in the Folk music doctoral seminars were at January 30th and February 13th 2012. The public improvisation concert was the third data source. The performances varied by length: the first was 10, the second 30, and the third was 43 minutes long. The video recordings included the entire performances.

Video recording

The choice of an analytical method in qualitative research depends on the data and how the data are collected. Video recordings and their analyses are valuable as an analytic tool for the study of learning activities because video provides a shared resource to overcome gaps between what people say they do and what they actually do. Video provides data when one is more interested in what "really" happened than in accounts of what happened (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). Video recordings of naturally occurring events can also provide a methodological foundation for investigating the visual and vocal aspects of human conduct.

The stimulated recall interview

The data collection included stimulated recall interviews by which the performers were invited to produce their interpretations on video-recorded performances after each session (see also Hultberg, 2008; Heikinheimo, 2009). For the first session, the audience and performers watched the video immediately, while the audience gave their ratings and comments during the second and third performances. An open discussion with the members of the audience and performers followed each performance.

This process of recall demonstrates the method, in Vygotsky's terms, of double stimulation, which uses intensity ratings as part of the stimulated recall interview (Vygotsky, 1978; Heikinheimo, 2009). While video recordings of naturally occurring events provide a methodological foundation for investigating the visual and vocal aspects of human conduct, the ratings in figures from 0% to 100% signify momentary intensity based on personal experiences. In

the stimulated recall interview of the performers and the audience, the researcher also use questions in order to stimulate discussion as they watch the video. The following guidelines directed each participant for the intensity rating process.

For the purpose of assessing how music and musical expression interacts, is transmitted, and takes shape during the performance, please, fill in intensity ratings in the table below.

What kind of interaction did you experience in the performance? How did the music communicate and take shape? What percent would you say the intensity and musical expression was at each moment?

Would you kindly signify your ratings by numbers from 0 to 100?

The figures signify momentary intensity based on your personal experience.

Each figure signifies the realized intensity either potentially or actually.

The low numbers indicate the potential mode of intensity. (For example 30% means that 70% of intensity remains in reserve.)

The high numbers indicate strong actualized mode of intensity. (For example 80% means that no more than 20% remains in reserve.)

While marking down your ratings, please consider for example the following questions. Why did you, at that particular moment, give this number? Why did you feel in this way?

What happened in the music?

In introducing the rating method, I emphasized the value of personal experience of the music instead of an analytical standpoint. Our habit of analytical listening often seems to overwhelm the basic response mechanism (see also Elliott, 1995). Based on my previous experiences (Heikinheimo, 2009) of using intensity ratings, the breaking of the habit of analytical listening seems to be challenging particularly for professional musicians.

In order to use only one paper for the rating, I had divided the rating tables into units of one, three and five minute according to the length of the 10, 30 and 43 minutes recordings. These units seemed appropriate for the observation as well as for the analysis.

The ratings were produced in the form of numbers. While the ratings were true as such, legitimate, and concrete in the context for each person in the study, writing down intensity ratings and comments, as well as commenting verbally on the video was part of the stimulated reflection. Comparisons of good or bad were not the purpose of the ratings. Within each participant's scale, the main focus was on the difference between the ratings. Each row of rating had space for comments. These comments were descriptive and focused reactions confirming and explaining the figures besides.

After each performing session, the performers received copies of all of the rating papers. We shared this feedback in the following rehearsal. From the perspective of qualitative research, this collaborative form of interpretive practice is powerful for neutralizing preconceived notions on the part of the investigators, and discourages the tendency to see in the interaction what one is conditioned to see or even wants to see (Jordan & Henderson, 1995). For the purpose of developing a contemporary improvisation performance at the edge of the conventional musical traditions, the process of constant collaboration between the audience and the performers offered a collective journey through the zone of proximal development of the activity of performing music (Vygotsky, 1978; Y. Engeström, 1987; Heikinheimo, 2009).

5. Results

This project applied for the first time the method of using intensity ratings with stimulated recall interview as part of developing a musical performance. Therefore, the results focus both on how the application of the method functioned and how the process of collaborative musical development turned out. As an illustration of the procedure of gathering perceptions of the participants, the following figures depict results of ratings for the three performances. While analyzing the following figures, we have to keep in mind that they are locally produced multifaceted personal interpretations on the notion intensity, the musical performance, singing, musical style and tradition and others (Heikin-

heimo, 2009). The figures are not comparable as such. Their tendencies, however, with focused written comments seemed to provide detailed information of the performances.

Similarly, each rating curve with the provided comments was more informative than the plain average. The average figures provided only a general idea of the musical tendencies during the performances, which in its turn offered a comparable perspective for the individual interpretations.

As earlier studies have shown (see Madsen et al. 1989; Heikinheimo, 2009), we tend to sense even the slightest changes of intensity quite easily. One member of the audience commented that

- the intensity varied within each minute from seeking to solid and concentrated co-operation.

Figure 1 shows the differences of the average of the intensity ratings by the audience and by the performers and by one member of the audience (B). She pointed out the relationship between interaction and high and low intensity:

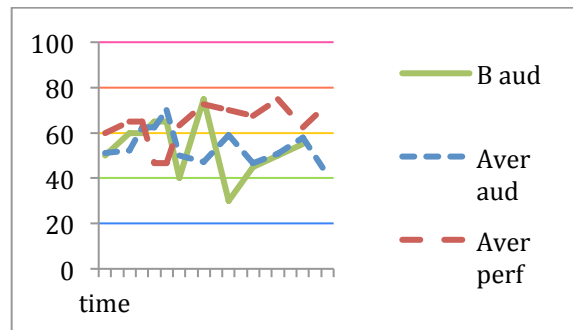


Figure 1. Improvisation on Jan 30,2012 for 10 minutes.

- The overall feeling was that when musical development moves to a climax or when there are loud sounds, the intensity is the highest, although interaction is less evident. Similarly, some quiet places have more interaction, although not much seems to happen in the music: a new beginning is under construction.

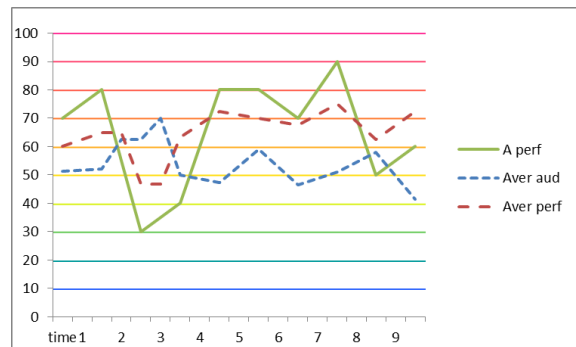


Figure 2. Improvisation Jan 30,2012 for 10 minutes.

Performer A, (figure 2), commented how awareness of time effected on the assertiveness of the musical colors and dynamics. Her sense of intensity was disturbed by consciousness of the limited time. This became also obvious in the comments from the audience:

- It may become ponderous to follow music with minimal repetition. Repetition certainly increases in a long improvisation.

More time also allows more space not play.

- More space for duos and solos.

Some comments focused on the balance of dynamics.

- The use of microphone would provide equality for the singer.

As a conclusion, we should develop the overall nature of the performance.

- The nature of the performance was discreet.

The second performance had still the same discreet tendency, which corresponds to the rather steady line of the average intensity ratings. Some of the audience reacted by confusion and disorientation to the maintained musical style.

- It was difficult to give intensity ratings, because the style of music was the same all the time.

In her comment at section 4 with 80% (figure 3), the participant B pondered between characteristics of discreet and boisterous. However, the reason for losing attention from the music was that she simply immersed into her thoughts. Her explanation for her rating at section 8 with 50% was that she found herself trying to remember the name of some singer she knew.

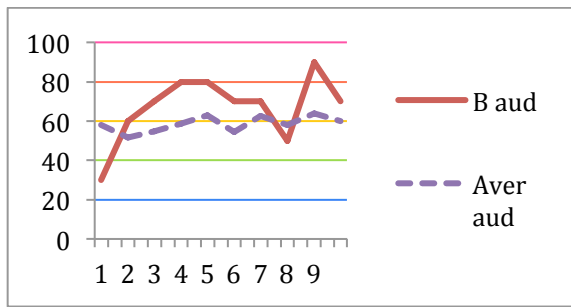


Figure 3. Improvisation on Feb 13,2012 for 30 minutes.

After receiving valuable comments and suggestions from the earlier performances and rehearsals, we finally improvised publicly in a concert. As an example, participant E aud (figure 4) described her ratings as follows.

1. 95%, surprising and capturing start with many different effects and ideas, powerful.
2. Change of feel, 75%, nicely emphasized with the lighting.
3. 68 – 80%, if someone seems to have a solo, maybe the others could give more space to him/her.
4. 50%, after the “chaotic” and effective start the audience is in need for something different.
5. 68%, the spoken text gives a nice and scary effect, which could be even more theatrical.
6. 85%, the laughing was good; we understood where it came from.
7. 45 – 89%, we want more! More communication between the people on stage. Also other than music since it is also a visual experience.
8. 80%, good that you took the audience in. Encourage the audience rather than stop playing when they are getting started with their screaming.

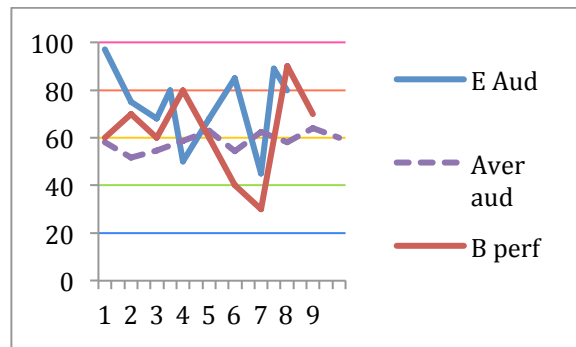


Figure 4. Improvisation concert on Feb 29,2012 for 43 minutes.

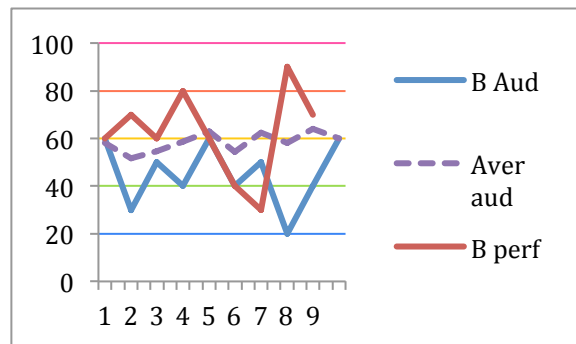


Figure 5. Improvisation concert on Feb 29, 2012 for 43 minutes.

As a comparison, figure 5 depicts variation of ratings by participant B aud in a quite different scale than in figure 4 by participant E aud. The tendencies of both ratings and ratings of B perf, however, seem to follow the same direction. This variation can also roughly be seen in the line of mean figures, however, with considerably lower range of the maximum and minimum level.

In order to understand the meanings and sense making behind the ratings and comments, the following discussion utilizes the conceptualization of improvisation and performing music as an activity. The following discussion encapsulates how the results of the present study indicate the emerging tensions.

6. Discussion

According to the previous studies, the activity of improvisation (Sawyer 2000, Johansson 2008) bears manifold tensions. The results of this study suggest and support the idea that as a flexible activity, musical improvisation

gravitates to trails with tensions. Furthermore, the processes at the edge of musical and practical solutions fuel and generate the process of sense making in improvisation. This, however, emphasizes the fragility of the musical encounter (Eisenberg, 1990).

As I concluded in the end of chapter 2, tensions fall basically into two major discourse of musical performing: the tension of music as a means and contextual communication versus music as an end in itself and individual expression. In her thesis, Johansson (2008) found tensions of improvisatory control versus spontaneity, longitudinal development versus instant expression, score obedience versus situational musical knowledge, and reproductive versus explorative approach to musical score

Based on the collected data of intensity ratings with comments and discussions, the present analysis specified the following tensions.

1. collaborate music making versus meaningful musical outcome
2. maintaining a long musical line versus giving space to others
3. spontaneity versus awareness musical substance
4. dynamic contrasts: pianissimo versus high intensity, forte versus low intensity
5. tonality versus dissonance, melody versus chaos
6. visual effect versus audio effect
7. eye contact versus inner contact
8. ethnic sounds versus classical sounds
9. discreet control versus spontaneity

In the first session, a participant offered two ratings: One for general intensity and the other for the interaction. This division can be seen as (1) *a tension between collaborative music making versus meaningful musical outcome*. In general, communication, listening and initiating of the trio was more intensive than the music he experienced. My experience as a player was that we were alert for the possible ideas, while our own musical lines were too short and the consistency yielded. This was related, as I explained in the introduction, to maintaining a long musical line. Through experience and practice

we gained confidence on our own musical initiation and line.

Another tension was (3) *spontaneity versus awareness*. As a major goal in Pett's exercises, developing a steady control of attention aims at hearing and knowing what is coming next. This practiced anticipation enables fast reactions and good timing. He says that you are already late if you don't take initiatives. All of the above mentioned tensions were connected to the power of musical expression in our performances. Some of the comments pointed out the tension (9) the discreet atmosphere and lack of extreme spontaneity, which encapsulates most of the other detailed descriptions.

While the trio and the audience articulated the tensions of producing musical improvisation, these tensions became objects of our rehearsal sessions. The purpose of practicing each topic as an object of our rehearsal by short exercises, aimed at preventing the tensions from becoming inner contradictions in the activity of improvisation concert. Unsolved tension can modulate to inner contradictions, which would severely block the flow of musical and emotional expression on stage.

In the following I have conceptualized the musical practice of improvisation as an activity system (Engeström, 1987). Figure 6 illustrates how working, for example, on the object of (2) *the long musical line versus giving space to others* is connected to each corner of the activity system of rehearsing improvisation. The illustrated tensions within the corners, other than the object, are based on the application of previous analysis of musical practice (Heikinheimo, 2009). The trio worked on maintaining a long musical line by *the exercises of short pieces with different character* (Figure 6, tools). The point was that one musician should start with a musical character, which was different from the previous we had played, and maintain his or her idea and make a definite ending. The length of the music, however, varied considerably during the sessions, because we had in mind the goal of the coming public concert. The articulated tensions within other corners of the activity system of rehearsing are my interpretations of the conversations the trio had.

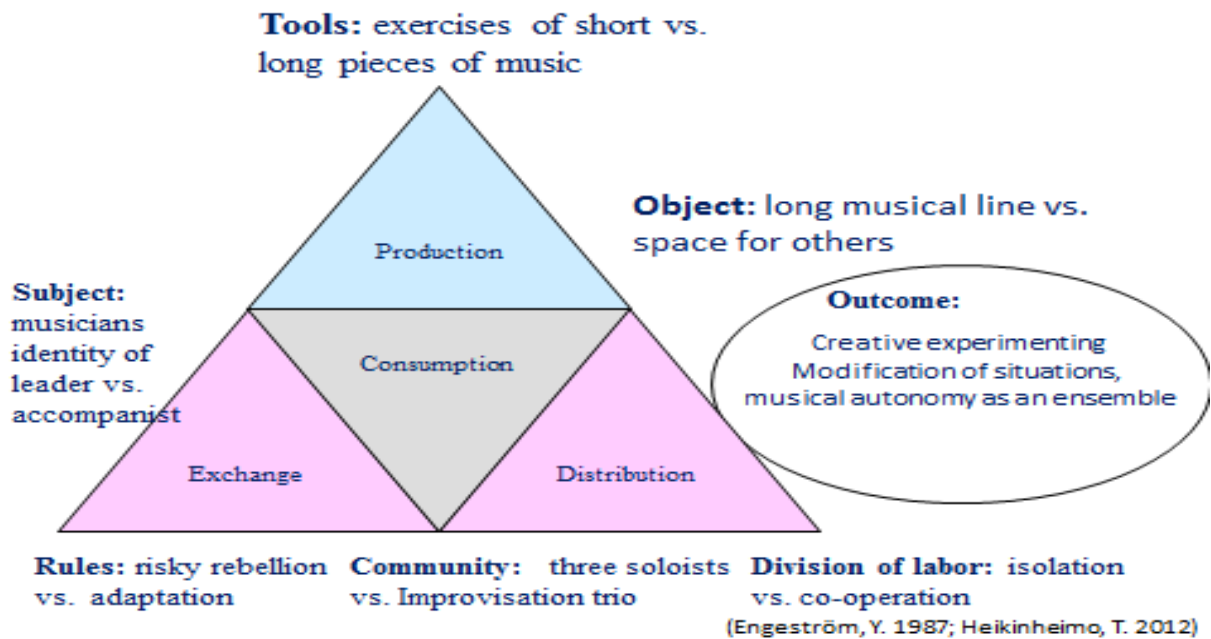


Figure 6. Model of an activity system of rehearsing improvisation

The pedagogical point here is to achieve an outcome (Figure 6), which would work as a tool of the activity system of performing by improvisation (Figure 7). Our work within the rehearsal activity generated, as Engeström (1987) calls it, the object activity, which in our case was the improvisation concert.

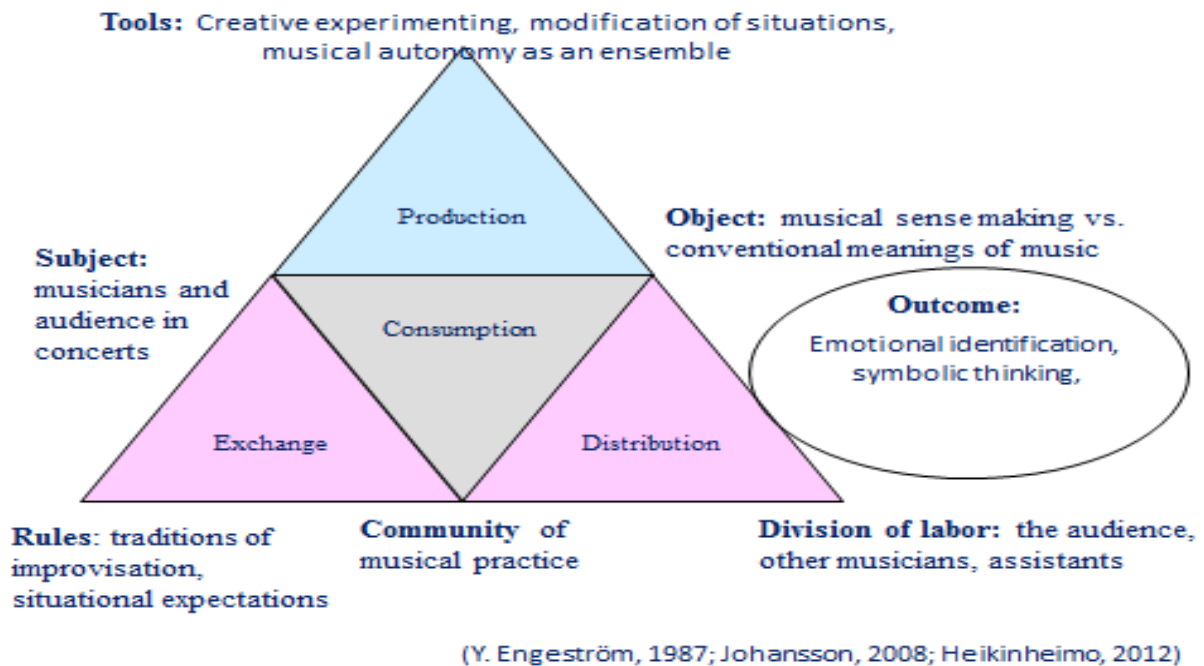


Figure 7. Model of an activity system of improvisation concert.

The interaction of the musicians and the audience was a constant search, elaboration and application of different kinds of musical knowledge. This search for musical and instrument specific knowledge, as the results of this study highlight, took the form of transitions within the process of musical expression. Figure 7 points out how the outcome of the rehearsing activity (Figure 6) became tool for the improvisation concert activity. The object was now musical sense making versus conventional meanings of music. According to the idea of collaborative music making (see chapter 2), the subject can be conceptualized to include also the audience. This is an expansion that improvisation highlights: the musical sense making presumes reaching out and interacting. The ratings and comments of the audiences during this project are concrete example. Moreover, in the end of our concert the singer started to lead the audience as part of the ongoing music.

One way of understanding the described process of developing improvisation concert, is by the notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978, Engeström, 1987). The ratings and comments seemed to position our work in the ZPD considering the culture and history of the activity with our potential of musical ideals. Therefore, as a pedagogical consequence, if thinking or listening in terms of intensity offer the listener and the performer an optional and deeper perspective to music, this method becomes relevant on the steps of musical growth and in development of a performance.

Furthermore, viewing the improvisation concert with all preparations as a whole, the adaptation and transformation of creative work means to expand into new zones of proximal development. Johansson (2008) found that creative processes are similar to the ones described by the theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 1987). Our improvisation expanded through various stages from not only 10 minutes to 43 minutes, but we discovered new dimensions to the musical expression with the help of the audiences and discussions. As Engeström (2005) states in terms of the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), activity systems may go through qualitative change and expansion, through cycles of expansive transformation.

This, however, would presume formation of an extended scope of possibilities in new versions of the activity system. For the present study, as applied for this rather short period of musical elaboration, the perspectives of CHAT offered tools for understanding the multidisciplinary features of musical collaboration and development.

For the trio, this process is only at the beginning, and we trust the work will continue through creative and organic stages in the future.

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