Communication and Creative Process Between Musicians From Different Cultures

A report of travels, experiences, exchanges and encounters

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction, aims

1.1 What does it mean to communicate between musicians coming from different cultures?
1.2 My initial questions
1.3 My aims

2. Background

2.1 Classical music
2.2 Folk music
2.3 Studies in Ireland and the discovery of new music genres
2.4 Traditional music sessions
2.5 New skills

3. Important concepts

3.1 The function of music
3.2 Verbal and visual communication
3.3 The music system
3.4 Coded systems and oral traditions
3.5 Instrumentation
3.6 The Flow

4. Method

4.1 Encounters with musicians from other styles and cultures
4.2 The uncomfortable zone
4.3 Recording and analysis
5. Music performance and practice

5.1 Ear training

5.2 Technique and exercises

5.3 Oud lessons

6. My experiences: Travel diary

6.1 My India: Introduction
   6.1.i Music classes
   6.1.ii Concerts
   6.1.iii Jam sessions / events / weddings and religious celebrations
   6.1.iv Travels

6.2 Nepal: Introduction
   6.2.i Session at the New Orleans Café
   6.2.ii Personal connections, nature and cultural preservation

6.3 Amsterdam

7. Ensembles, projects

7.1 Laya Bazaar

7.2 Studio work for singer songwriters

8. Recordings and analysis

8.1 Laya Bazaar album

8.2 Lesson with Jonas Knutsson

9. Results and reflections

10. Conclusions

11. Appendix

12. Sources and references
1. Introduction, aims

1.1 What does it mean to communicate between musicians coming from different cultures?

During my master's degree at the Kungliga Musikhögskolan i Stockholm (Royal College of Music in Stockholm) I had the opportunity to connect with a wide range of musicians from different cultures and backgrounds. My research consisted of placing myself in situations that were musically and communicatively ‘uncomfortable’ and unusual to me so as to analyse my approach and reactions in such situations and hopefully to reach a better understanding of the dynamics involved in communication through music. I needed to push myself and to develop skills and tools that could be useful when musical communication between myself and another musician was difficult and unfamiliar.

Musical communication between musicians from different cultures is a vast territory that must take into account multiple aspects. The main aspects I identified when starting out are: different musical language; verbal languages different from those known to me; the concept of music (its development, direction, meaning and function); a musical system different from that of Western art music (rhythm, harmony, melody and so on) or rather no knowledge or application of a recognised musical system and instead knowledge of one's musical culture through empirical experience and oral tradition; different personal cultures; different personalities; use of uncommon musical instruments, for example with atypical reference pitch, tuning, sounds, etc.

So, what does it mean to communicate between musicians from different countries and cultures? Of course, the individual experience will be different from one musician to another but what I will attempt to explain in the course of this report is my personal way of doing it. Is it necessary for a musician to try and create some form of a shared identity, while still being connected to his own, in order to create a meaningful communication? What sort of compromises should musicians be ready to make so they can enjoy and take satisfaction from an effective musical communication?

With this narrative analysis, I hope to provide both some interesting insights and some practical suggestions to musicians and artists who would like to experience a connection with musicians they do not regularly play with. This is a report of my own travels and encounters, my musical and personal exchanges and my learning path and approach to practice and performance.
1.2 My initial questions

When setting out on my master's, I began with some questions and aims:

• How can I create a musical product that satisfies myself, the musicians I play with and potentially an external listener if the musicians don’t share the same understanding of music?

• How can I use the tools I possess to “challenge”, “stimulate” and play music with different kind of musician, no matter the music genre, style, etc.?

• How can I experience with unfamiliar musicians what I define as a moment of ‘transcendence’, a spark of emotion all artists should aim for because it is in such moments that we can feel a deep connection and understanding with the other person through music?

1.3 My aims

• I wanted to develop skills and achieve new tools that would allow me to expand my possibilities to communicate with various musicians.

• I wanted to be true to myself and my own style, knowledge, personality and skills but still be able to play music with a jazz musician without knowing jazz, with an Indian musician without knowing Indian music, with an African musician without knowing his tradition and so forth.

• I wanted to force myself to work and make music outside of my normal comfort zone, test my limits, learn more about myself as a person and musician.
2. Background

2.1 Classical music

I come from a family of classical musicians who introduced me to the study of classical violin from the age of five. After years of private violin lessons I entered the A. Vivaldi College of Music in Alessandria, Italy at the age of 12, graduating with the highest grade at age 19. I then decided to continue my classical studies and graduated in viola at the age of 21.

During these years I had the opportunity to explore a wide classical repertoire, studying music of various composers and periods. I also collaborated with musicians in a number of musical ensembles, duos, trios, quartets and engaged in an intense orchestral activity.

Besides enjoying these experiences and my studies, I always felt there was a missing piece from my life as a musician. This missing part was the freedom to decide for myself, to perform music as I wanted, to compose in my own way without following rules, to close my eyes and let go. My personality needed me to explore other ways and possibilities. Folk music, especially Irish traditional music, presented itself to me as an opportunity to realise these wishes.

2.2 Folk music

My first contact with folk music took place around the age of 10 when I listened to a band performing Irish music in a small square in my hometown, right beside the college of music where I was already attending a course in ‘Introduction to Conservatory Studies’. I noticed a violin player using his instrument in a different way, playing by ear, jamming, looking for contact with the other musicians. The music was different, the rhythm was highly involving and I remember I felt a connection with this music stemming from folklore, the roots and the past traditions.

I spent the following years cultivating an interest in Celtic music, buying albums by various Irish, Scottish and Galician artists. At first I would listen just out of curiosity; I wanted to explore these sounds and styles, melodies and rhythms with my ears and mind.

At the age of 14 I had the chance to go to Ireland for two weeks and attend an English language summer school near Dublin. It was during that time that I first heard live music in pubs and started to become familiar with traditional Irish music sessions.

When I came back from the trip to Ireland I decided to start learning Irish music repertoire and styles, so I attended different workshops with Irish fiddle players in Italy and learned a lot from them, as well as from listening to albums and transcribing tunes by ear. It was also the beginning of a long and intense participation in jam sessions, which played and still play an important role in the development of my musical career.
2.3 Studies in Ireland and the discovery of new music genres

The passion and love for folk music from Ireland and other Celtic countries led me to move to Ireland and undertake a Bachelor of Arts at the World Irish Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick. I spent four years there and attended many classes and workshops with renowned fiddlers as well as started music projects with musicians from Ireland, Scotland, Austria and France, among others.

Before going to Ireland I had never heard of or listened to folk music from countries such as Quebec, the United States, Shetland Islands, Nordic countries or Eastern Europe. Even less from African countries, the Middle East, India, Asia, etc. It was during my studies in Limerick that I expanded my interest towards these other traditions, as a result of listening to recordings and meeting musicians from those countries. It was not only my encounters with musical traditions similar or connected to the Irish one, but also the discovery of those belonging to other cultures, that stimulated my curiosity and passion for folk music from across the globe. I therefore started a process of learning different styles and techniques, which would eventually lead me to become a more flexible musician.

2.4 Traditional music sessions

During my studies in Limerick I exposed myself to the traditional music session scene both in college and in town. I had to learn and respect the unwritten rules - the etiquette - of the sessions and adapt to them, as well as respecting the senior and experienced musicians and not “disturb” their playing. That was the most relevant first attempt to place myself outside of my comfort zone. I would use a mute on my violin, sit in a back row, close my eyes and try to recognise notes, learn the tunes, the dynamics, accents and phrasing. I would attempt to immerse myself in this flow (see 3.6), try to comprehend it and feel to be part of it.

When I first moved to Stockholm to attend the folk music course at the Kungliga Musikhögskolan as an exchange student, I wanted to get involved in the session scene in order to learn tunes and styles of traditional Swedish music. I soon discovered that the concept of a regular jam session in a venue was not very common, and I felt a need to change that where I could within the music scene in Stockholm. I began to organise jam sessions of Swedish and Scandinavian folk music in 2011 (and they are still going strong!) and attended many of them. Initially, I had difficulties in learning rhythms and accents/phrasing of the tunes. Working with my teachers in college as well as attending the sessions helped me to overcome these problems and achieve a better phrasing and general playing style.

I adopted similar behaviours and methods to those I applied in Ireland, placing myself amongst the other musicians and absorbing information by observing and listening to them. However, that was not enough simply on its own. I still had to approach the performers with an open spirit and feel the musical flow in order to really meet at a higher level of connection and affinity.
The experiences I accumulated through the sessions and the process of opening my senses to the environment and other musicians became essential during the course of my master’s studies in Sweden and is still vital for my ongoing musical growth.

2.5 New skills

Every musical tradition has a different language and within every language there are many dialects with defined and distinctive features, accents, expressions. If we translate this concept into playing music, we can say that these features are produced by different kinds of instrumental techniques, phrasing, dynamics, ornamentations, etcetera.

Learning the Irish fiddle style could be considered by some to be a narrow approach to instrumental practice, but it is in reality very wide. In fact, within the ‘Irish fiddle style’ there are many different ones, and they are all very much distinguishable and diverse. Irish traditional musicians often speak about regional styles such as West Galway, Sligo, Sliabh Luachra, Clare and Donegal style of playing. Even within each of these regional (or county) styles there are big differences due to the personal style of every player. I had the chance to discover and learn a wide range of different styles and their related techniques, which I then directed towards what became my own personal style.

I had to significantly change the approach to my instrument in order to obtain diverse sounds and other features. For example, I focused on the use of the bow, trying out different phrasings and effects, as well as left-hand techniques, ornaments, etc. I also paid particular attention to the way of producing sounds with the bow and how that can emphasise and assist left-hand ornamentations. In addition to that, I experimented with various ways of holding the bow depending on the style of the piece and musical genre.

Lessons with musicians such as Natalie Haas and Laura Cortese in Limerick and later Mikael Marin in Sweden introduced me to the technique of ‘chopping’, which I still use a lot to provide a rhythmical support when jamming with various musicians (see section 8.1).

Exposure to many new music genres, easy access to information with the development of the internet and social media, the skills I obtained by placing myself in uncomfortable situations and the guidance of professional teachers all influenced my decision to explore in more depth the overall process of communication between performers which led to my studies at the Kungliga Musikhögskolan.
3. Important concepts

3.1 The function of music

‘Music is often conceived as an autonomous form of art which acts freely from social, political, technological, and cultural developments. However, music does not simply passively represent society and its values. Rather, it is an active and dynamic entity which is influenced by and influences these trajectories simultaneously. Music is a universal and omnipresent feature of human life and a carrier of culture-specific contents and expression. - It fulfils multiple functions, such as to communicate, to silence, to influence and calm emotions, and thus provides parameters which may shape experiences, perceptions, feelings, and behaviour.’

(Kutzer, 2017: p.7)

I would like to start with this introduction from Evelyn Kutzer on the function of music in society. She writes that music is universal, omnipresent and holds various contents and expressions belonging to one culture or another and I agree with her here. I had to take these aspects into account when approaching musicians who think about music and its function in a different way from me. In India, for instance, I had to perform at a big wedding along with Indian musicians, as well as religious celebrations in a temple. In those situations, I first had to be open and attempt to understand what the community was expecting from me. The social aspect was too important to be set aside. Secondly, I had to play unknown material with unknown musicians and in a musical genre I was only slightly familiar with. In such situations, the challenge becomes greater because we can not simply talk about ‘music’, for example in terms of its form and technicalities, but we need to consider its function in the particular context. The other musicians were also likely to be playing different repertoires and styles to what they would be playing at other times in their musical life.

What a music performance means to a musician in a certain situation is therefore an important aspect that has to be taken into account when approaching that musician. Is he thinking of playing to celebrate something or to simply have fun and for his own personal enjoyment? Does he relate music to a religious or a specific social event associated with his customs or is he less concerned about that aspect and simply wants to share an experience? These are questions I had to ask myself before approaching musicians from other cultures.
3.2 Verbal and visual communication

As Kathleen Marie Higgins (2012) suggests in her book The Music Between Us,

‘Verbal languages varied from place to place, so the reasoning went, and speakers of
different languages could not usually understand each other; but music moved
people across linguistic boundaries.

Germans who spoke no Italian could still understand Italian music. In fact, they could do
more than understand it. They could embrace it as speaking of their own inner life. They
might not understand the words someone sang, but they could feel the emotion
expressed.’ (p.2).

During my master's studies, this point has been very important. The English (as well as the
French and Spanish) spoken by some musicians I met was not fluent and led to
misunderstandings and confusion when we would attempt to describe musical aspects
and the directions we wanted to take in performing. We had to overcome this problem by
focusing on an approach based on senses, trust, being open and receptive. A spoken
language has advantages only if the skills between individuals are equal and the subjects
have a similar background, culture and education, otherwise it could potentially become an
obstacle. What I find works instead is the expression of emotions. This often has to be
directed through visual communication.

If we consider an orchestral conductor, he needs to move his body and highlight the
starting point for an instrument line or a section in a composition, or he must guide the
orchestra to follow him in different dynamic changes. Such explicit visual communication is
not always necessary, however, when improvising music with a small group of artists. A
musician who keeps his eyes closed and his movements to a minimum can still
communicate certain feelings that help a specific moment of music creation. He could
transmit a sense of confidence, trust, calm and enjoyment in listening to the other
performer/s. In other situations, it may be preferable to exchange very clear signs (body
movements, eye contact or a combination of both) to each other, particularly to make
some transitions smoother within a performance, whether live, in a studio session or in
another setting. In my opinion, there are few universal rules for visual and verbal
communication other than those of communicating respect, openness and interest in the
present moment and in the musical creation that is taking place. The rest depends on the
personalities of the artists involved and if, for example, there is a need for a strong leading
figure or if each musician can somehow both lead and follow at various moments in the
musical conversation.
3.3 The music system

Another important aspect to consider is the music system. Does a musician always refer to a music system or not necessarily?

Musicians hailing from a Western country would likely share a common system or may think about music in a similar way in comparison to a musician from the East or from Africa. However, a ‘common system’ or a similar way of thinking about music does not always exist, at least when it comes to folk music from various countries. For instance, between a classically trained musician like me who plays Irish music and an Irish musician who also plays the same music but did not receive a classical education, there are very profound differences. I would think about tonality, harmony, possibly rhythm and dynamics in a totally different way from him. I would likely write down a tune or transcribe a tune in standard notation while he may write it in the ABC notation system or if he was a wind instrument player in a numeric system that recalls the fingering used on his instrument.

We can mention many more examples, which could include a diversity in thinking about a single note and frequency, when a note is flat or sharp, or which time signatures are used in a composition, etc. The examples are many and each can be analysed and explored but when approaching spontaneous improvisation, performers often do not have the time to consider all these options and differences. It is therefore important to use other ways to describe music, moments and directions rather than by following the rules and patterns of a specific system. When playing Indian music in situations described in detail further below, I had to learn their way of defining notes and rhythms, the vocabulary they use to describe certain parts of the music piece and other elements. There, it was me who had to take steps towards a system I did not initially comprehend. In another situation, also detailed below, when I made music with Shyam Nepali, I found it was easier for everyone to explain things with practical examples. For instance, he would introduce a tune or a melody, the others would quickly analyse it in their own way and come up with a general idea of which notes, harmony and rhythms were part of the tune. We can say that using one’s own system, i.e. something familiar, and applying that to analyse material presented by someone who uses a different system (or refers to an oral tradition - see section 3.4) may be an effective approach to decoding information at least in the first stages of a musical communication. Although, I must mention at this point that this worked only in that specific context since the material presented was minimalistic as well as somehow related to other familiar folk traditions.
3.4 Coded systems and oral traditions

This point is directly related to the previous. Here I want to mention the possibility not only that two musicians might not be sharing the same music system or they do but with major differences, but that one of them might not relate to a well detailed system. A ‘coded’ music system could be described as a system that is analysed then written down, catalogued and where many rules are clearly set. Whereas a musician who learned a genre/style “by ear” (being he self-taught or taught by a relative, his community etc ) could sometimes be less aware of the features of his musical tradition and do things more as he hears them. He would of course know and feel what is legit and right to do and how the music should sound like, but he might have not taken the time to ask himself why music is created a certain way and what are the relations between the elements that make music. He would be a rather “instinctive” player. I find that it is sometimes easier to perform with such musicians because there is no need to discuss things orally or in a technical manner and because they are so accustomed to using their senses that it is sufficient to listen/follow/suggest in order to obtain an instant action and reaction that quite often works. They also do not know anything about my own system or my perception of it, or how I see and relate to music, so they do not have particular expectations about what I can or will do. It is more like a constant surprise, which is often beneficial to the communication flow and is less subjective to labels, prejudice and expectation.

3.5 Instrumentation

I also want to point out here the importance that instruments used in the process can have. When approaching the creative process with another musician we must take into account the natural possibilities as well as the features of the instrument he plays. How is it tuned? What is the range of notes it can play? Which keys are more comfortable to play in? Even just defining a key could also be a challenge sometimes! Is the volume produced by the instrument well balanced with mine? These are questions I had to ask myself on a few occasions during my experiences. However, the main issues I encountered were only related to a different reference pitch of some instruments (harmoniums in particular) or sometimes a specific note which was deliberately played slightly flat or sharp, for ornamental or stylistic choices, compared to the tuning we are used to in the western system, and that caused some minimal problems. Also not being able to hear some instruments properly had an influence on the improvisation process. For instance, when playing with Shyam Nepali both in a live setting and in the studio, the sounds of the fiddle and the sarangi were very close in terms of quality, features, volume and range. That caused some issues for the other musicians because at times they could not distinguish who was playing what. In my experience these were not insurmountable problems, but it is nonetheless important to mention that instruments and their features can be an issue in certain situations for some musicians.
3.6 The flow

The flow is a unique phenomenon and it is difficult to describe it in physical and logical terms. It is the performance part of the entire process of communication between musicians and it requires the consideration of many of the concepts I have described.

My conception of the flow is as follows. It starts when one or more musicians begin to produce music, then settles into a certain atmosphere and it continues by having all the musicians involved, whether by playing or by giving space to others, which is also a form of involvement. Of course, this is not only a purely emotional concept, and it can be studied and various elements and qualities, such as mode, key, tempo, time signature, character of the music, genre and others, can be pointed out. However, when describing the concept of flow I mostly refer to something closer to a meditation that involves inspiration, creativity, opening oneself to others, following and being followed, detecting a change of direction in music and mood.

“The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times . . . The best moments usually occur if a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile”

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990)

Csikszentmihalyi describes eight characteristics of flow in psychology:

1. Complete concentration on the task;
2. Clarity of goals and reward in mind and immediate feedback;
3. Transformation of time (speeding up/slowing down);
4. The experience is intrinsically rewarding;
5. Effortlessness and ease;
6. There is a balance between challenge and skills;
7. Actions and awareness are merged, losing self-conscious rumination;
8. There is a feeling of control over the task.

In occasion of an impromptu creation of music I would agree with the psychologist that the participants need to be focused and concentrated on the common goal of making music in a positive and mutually satisfying way and obtain an immediate feedback. I also agree on the use of dynamics during the process, the need of the musicians to feel rewarded by what they are creating and that the importance of a sense of ease and lack of efforts. It’s easy to make music, alone or with others, if we feel less or no pressure. If we feel supported and appreciated. One other important point Csikszentmihalyi makes is that there should be a balance between the skills that are in play and the level of the challenge itself. A musician should have a certain knowledge of his instrument and a number of skills and experiences in order to be able to improvise. Improvising with others is always a challenge and the skills to face it must be well established in order to succeed.
The goals of the participants in the flow could be many - as many as the personalities and backgrounds involved perhaps - but one true aim should always be there as a source of inspiration and energy, and this is the moment of transcendence, a moment of unexpected connection that cannot be easily described by words but only by a mixture of feelings that come, are noticed and immediately change shape into something else because of the continuation of the flow.

This concept and its phases will be described further in the results section.
4 Method:

I have focused primarily on organising various meeting with different musicians from a number of musical cultures and styles, pushing myself out of my comfort zone and then recording and analysing the music creation process.

4.1 Encounters with musicians from other styles and cultures

The method I followed has been fairly straightforward and simple. I met various musicians both in Stockholm's music scene and through the Kungliga Musikhögskolan or during my travels and found the time and space to create music with them. Of course, I was particularly interested in musicians that did not have many things in common with my background, musical styles and knowledge. The idea was always to push my own limits, analyse both the musical product of a jam session and my emotions and reactions during it, as well as those of the other musicians involved.

Most connections I made during the years in college were spontaneous and unplanned. I was convinced that just by being open to meeting musicians and engaging with various music scenes would give me a lot of occasions to create an artistic communication and exchange. I had the chance to meet many different artists mainly in Stockholm, the Netherlands, India and Nepal, artists that came from various countries and belonged to disparate music scenes and genres. I submerged myself into pop, rock, indie, different European folk traditions, Indian classical music, Nepalese and Indian folk music, jazz, electronic music, blues, etc. The outcomes of some of these experiences would be recorded professionally in studios (such as the Laya Bazaar's album and single tracks that featured on albums of different singer song-writers). Other collaborations would not be documented in the same way but would still belong to my path and play an important role in gathering ideas and concepts for my master's studies.

I decided that, in order to gain the most from future experiences and collaborations, part of my method would be to develop a 'musical toolkit', and so I arranged to take lessons in jazz and general improvisation with Jonas Knutsson and Tim Kliphuis, as well as in Persian music and oud with Mousa Elias. I will elaborate more on this in chapter 5.

Below is a list of musicians I collaborated with in many ways (concerts, sessions, composition, studio work, etc.), their instruments, country and style they belong to:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Instruments</th>
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<tr>
<td>Shyam Nepali</td>
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<td>Nepalese traditional music / fusion</td>
<td>Sarangi / Song</td>
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<td>Gambia</td>
<td>Gambia / Senegal traditional music / fusion</td>
<td>Kora / Song</td>
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<td>Tim Kliphuis</td>
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<td>Jazz / Swedish folk music</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Indie Rock</td>
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<td>Hindustani classical music / folk music</td>
<td>Song / Harmonium</td>
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<td>Charango</td>
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<td>Artist</td>
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<td>Ashish Maharjan</td>
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<td>Hindustani classical music</td>
<td>Song / Harmonium</td>
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4.2 The uncomfortable zone

The path I decided to pursue from the start was to push my limits, to experiment and to reach conclusions by placing myself in what I describe as the *uncomfortable zone*. I believed that only under pressure I would discover more about myself, what I could do at the beginning of my two-year course, as well as things I didn’t know I was able to do. I wanted to create an environment full of actions and reactions that could then be analysed. I believed that if I didn't place myself in such situations, I would never experience all I could to enable me to grow as a person and musician.

I wanted to learn how to push myself without affecting the natural *flow* of the process. The discomfort can happen in many ways, and I decided to summarise them into four main categories: *personal, technical, musical and environmental*.

**Personal**: The other musicians might be hard to work with on a personal level, especially if they are not as open as you would wish, they might be overly confident, demonstrate arrogance, or feel they should be the leaders in a specific circumstance. They could relegate you to a secondary role, confine you there for the entire length of the performance and that would affect deeply the *flow* and the final result.

Soon after the beginning of my research, I decided that if I would experience something like this, perhaps I had made the wrong choice of musicians and I should have moved on, or perhaps I had not been clear with them regarding my initial intentions and the purpose of the musical exchange.

In this second case, I would try to explain myself in a different way and attempt again to establish a new personal and then musical contact. The original discomfort due to personal differences could then be resolved by changing the way I approached the other musicians on a personal level.

**Technical**: I wanted to try to perform things and place myself in an uncomfortable position in order to assess my original abilities in terms of extemporary performance and how I could develop them in an effective way. It has been and still is frustrating not being able to control my body in the way my mind would like and play the notes, phrases, dynamics that my mind can ‘sing’ and conceive, but the only way to stretch these limits is to go through moments of discomfort followed by analysis, understanding and focused practice. I wanted to find out which elements of my technique could be improved and could be relevant for improvising. They have to be simple but effective and not necessarily related to a specific music style.
**Musical:** The genres on which we or the other musicians believe we should base the communication could vary and be significantly different. This poses a potential issue, but could also be a source of interesting developments. A mix of styles could be perceived as a disturbing element in the flow at the start but could also push the musicians to find proactive ways to react and to continue the process. Besides genres and styles, musical choices - change of key, rhythm, dynamics, melody - coming from one performer could create discomfort and cause a loss of direction and motivation in the mind of the other musicians. I cannot foresee someone else’s decisions in the communication, as they cannot foresee mine, therefore my methodological approach was to act in a subtle way and direct my decisions without pushing things too much, so as to challenge the other musician in a proactive way that couldn’t be seen as invasive.

It is a fine balance and we can learn to control it, but we first need to experience the unbalanced moments in order to be able to adjust in future.

**Environmental:** The physical environment could affect the communication process in a positive or negative manner. Sometimes it can be hard to hear the other musicians, sometimes external elements can disturb the improvisation or simply being in a dark or bright room can be upsetting or not. Again, the environment - or a combination between this and the three other categories mentioned above - could be far from ideal, but the only way to overcome such issues is to experience them first and discover what is the best way for us to react.

Empirical experience, knowing my own body, using my ears, senses and emotions in the right way as well as instrumental practice, would help me to become better at dealing with various issues. The method of being affected in many ways by the exposure to the *uncomfortable zone* would reveal itself to be useful for moving forward and making the necessary corrections in my overall approach to the communication process.

I also decided that the *uncomfortable zone* should be a personal condition only and it should not affect the other performers.

It is the passion and curiosity that led me to pursue this path that also made me avoid the easy route - I could have decided to play what I already knew with musicians who ‘speak my language’ - and explore myself further and the new possibilities that are out there.
4.3 Recording and analysis

The last part of my method would involve audio and video recordings and the analysis of them. This report focuses mostly on the story behind and analysis of the album *Laya Bazaar*, recorded as an improvised music album with Shyam Nepali, Isak Bergstrom and Moshtagh Feizyabi in 2012 at the recording studio of the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory. This is the core and principal expression of my research, however I will also mention other projects and collaborations I had the chance to take part in and analyse an improvisation recorded during a lesson with my teacher Jonas Knutsson. Links to other examples that reflect some of the improvisation experiences I had in studios in Stockholm can be found in the Appendix.

The analysis process will consider technical aspects, as well as extemporary performance choices, communication between musicians, direction of the music *flow* and creativity. Ultimately, the analysis of this recorded material provided a number of tangible examples of elements and directions that can take place when improvising outside of a comfort zone, highlighting both technical aspects related to the music performance and the personal interaction between the persons involved.
5. Music performance and practice

5.1 Ear training

The main tool at my disposal to learn new concepts and acquire new tools for greater improvisational skill is to use my ear in any situation. Of course, learning rudiments of Hindustani classical music, Nepalese folk tunes, basics of jazz, gypsy jazz and other styles can necessitate a variety of methods and approaches. According to Peter Keller (2014), ‘structural knowledge is essential to the integrity of shared performance goals’, suggesting that successful ensemble communication and performance requires that the individuals already have a level of mutual structural understanding. Although for some musicians it may be helpful to have a good foundation in the theoretical knowledge of a particular musical genre or of the structure of the individual work to be played, I generally do not find that this is necessary for me to achieve positive outcomes in unfamiliar musical structures. As will be discussed further on, I was able to enjoy a powerful shared musical experience with a group of musicians most of whom I had only met that same day, in an entirely unfamiliar country.

The practice on the instrument can be supported by a theoretical approach but sometimes it can be enough to use a more instinctive way of learning. Over the last 15 years I have learned various musical styles purely by ear and that also goes for the English language, French, Spanish and a little Swedish.

This is a clear example that our brain and ears can assimilate a great deal of information just by engaging ourselves in various creative processes and learning how to distinguish and assimilate this information.

I have trained myself in reproducing notes and phrases on my instrument by ear since I started to play folk music and have continued to work in that way whenever I wanted to learn other genres. Since the beginning of the master's studies, I have been listening to a lot to various jazz musicians playing different instruments and styles and have forced my ear to distinguish what each instrument was doing and when, which notes they were playing, when and with which dynamics and phrasings, how they used the harmony, etc. I also listened to a lot of African music, particularly from Senegal and Gambia, to South American music from many different countries, as well as to Persian and Indian music. All this gave me a large amount of ideas in terms of composition and tools that I could use when improvising alone or with others.
5.2 Technique and exercises

One of the goals I gave myself was to become faster with my fingers to follow ear and brain inputs, leading me to work on various exercises, which were of significant help in enabling me to develop certain skills. When we improvise there is a very limited amount of time to react, and I wanted to become quicker at it. I primarily used three books of jazz saxophone studies and one Indian music exercise to achieve these improvements.

I would repeat the exercises multiple times, sometimes for hours, as in the case of the Indian pattern below, and try to be accurate while increasing the tempo.

![Indian exercise notation](image)

*Figure 1: An example of an exercise in Indian notation that I would play for hours every morning during my stay in Delhi. It is a series of note patterns starting from a ground note and developing from it. The ground note 'Sa' can be any note, but it needs to begin in the low register of the instrument.*

The jazz books I used were *Practice Techniques From Fundamentals of Jazz Improvisation: What Everybody Thinks You Already Know* (Watkins, 2010); *Jamey Aebersold Jazz Handbook* (Aebersold, 2000) and *Oliver Nelson's Patterns for Saxophone* (Nelson, 1966).

Besides the exercises and studies, I practised various ragas given to me by my guru Ustad Hamid Hussain Khan and my teacher Ellika Frisell. I would play over a tempura sound in different pitches and improvise with the basic material (scales) that belonged to a specific raga. I found it very hard to use only a few notes to improvise and to prevent myself from using any other pitch, but it quickly became a very good exercise that I could use in any musical genre and a technique I could add to my ‘toolkit’.

I also used extracts from some books of the *Aebersold* method to improvise on blues and various jazz standards with the help of a backing track (piano, drum and bass).
Sometimes I wouldn’t follow the chord progressions with my eyes but would force myself to simply respond to what I could hear. I wanted the process to be as natural and instinctive as possible and I didn’t want to think in terms of right or wrong. In fact, every aspect had to be taken into account and consequently helped my growth as performer.

Generally speaking, my entire approach of acquiring knowledge - whether related to jazz, blues, Indian music or else - was to learn by “doing” rather than by assimilating theoretical notions. All of my teachers adopted this system and structure, they would play with me, let me try and make mistakes, push me to express myself and make me realise naturally what I had to work on. Suddenly, playing a certain element in a precise moment just started to make sense even without knowing the theoretical reasons for it.

The empirical and active approach to learning became an essential part of my method and not following any specific structured system in depth (for example, studying music theory books) became the structure that suited my way of making music as well as my personality.

To conclude this section, I can say that certain exercises and practices gave me more agility in both my mind and body to react quickly to external inputs, but the main parts of me I had to exercise were my ears and my ability to comprehend and then develop ideas that felt in symbiosis with the surrounding environment and musicians. I had to learn to trust myself and accept that mistakes were better described as ‘welcome accidents’ that contributed to the development of my abilities.

5.3 Oud lessons

During the two years of master’s, I fell in love with an instrument called oud which is common in many Middle Eastern and Northern African countries. I was lucky enough to learn the basics of the instrument with Mousa Elias, whose approach to music was very inspirational because of the way he talks and thinks about music. Through his playing and teaching I learned more about using various maqams (modes) to improvise and developed more skills by using a minimal amount of melodic material to create phrases and give interesting directions to the improvisation.
6. My experiences: Travel diary

6.1 My India: Introduction

In 2012 I organised a trip to India after being invited to spend a period of time in New Delhi by an Indian classical singer called Amrita Bera, whom I had met at a festival in Mauritius Island in 2010. My initial aim was to have a life experience in a completely unknown and radically different environment, meet other musicians, make music with them, listen to concerts and be exposed to the community daily life and cultural activities, and especially to find a guru and receive lessons in Hindustani classical music.

I wanted to explore their way of thinking about music, their way of making it and of course to learn new techniques and skills that I could then include in my own style.

I extended the invitation to two fellow musicians and KMH students, Isak Bergstrom and Moshtagh Feizyabi, who gladly decided to join me in this adventure. Together we went to New Delhi in October 2012 for a period of about two months and a half.

6.1.i Music classes

Before travelling to India, I had the opportunity to learn some elements of Indian music (mostly Carnatic, from the South of India) from my fiddle teacher at Kungliga Musikhögskolan, Ellika Frisell, who had previously spent some time in India and collaborated with Indian musicians. She gave me some exercises and tips on how to approach my future lessons and how to start learning such a different and complex genre.

When I first went to New Delhi, I had a couple of lessons with Johar Ali Khan who was the violinist of the ensemble of Indian musicians that I met in Mauritius in 2010. The lessons did not go as expected, mostly due to personality differences and what I perceived to be a lack of methodology in his teaching. My understanding is that he would normally teach experienced and advanced players and his career was mostly focused on performing. During the lesson, he would showcase his abilities and then play a complete piece expecting me to follow or reproduce what I heard. That was not the type of lesson I was looking to receive. Despite my experience as a violin player, I needed him to treat me as if I was a young beginner who still needed to learn the basis of what to me was a fairly new musical genre. I needed to understand and learn some rudiments of it and even simple things such as how to hold the instrument the Indian way and other technical aspects of which I had only a limited knowledge. Sitting on a mattress for hours took a long time to feel comfortable and the curved position of my back, neck and arm required weeks of adaptation (and pain!). Because of the ornamentations and the recurrent sliding/glissando of the notes in Indian music, holding the instrument much more vertically than normal seems to offer noticeable advantages to players. After a while I understood the physical advantages of sitting and holding the instrument in such a way, but it was still a huge change in my way of playing and of physically approaching a performance.

XXVI
I had to part ways with my first guru, so my friend and host Amrita found someone new for me. Ustad Hamid Hussain Khan was a methodical teacher and less of a performer. He was exactly the person I needed. He would come two or three times a week to Amrita's flat where Isak, Moshtagh and I were hosted and teach me the basics of Indian music, ragas for various times of the day, parts of the compositions, improvisations and variations, rhythms and theory. He would give me exercises to practise every day, even before and after a lesson day, and he would bring me papers where he would write Indian music theory and terminology, ragas and various notions.

(Complete selection of images of these papers and videos recordings of my lessons can be found in the support material folder. See example below)

We established a friendly and curious relationship. He did not criticise me for my mistakes or lack of understanding, but rather supported me and directed me. He loved to play my violin, not because it was a better instrument than the one he owned, but because it came from the other side of the world. The atmosphere in the flat was always interesting and motivating. All of us were committed to learn, to develop our skills and understanding of something completely new. There was music coming out from the different rooms of the flat all day long. Isak was learning harmonium from Ustad Nadeem Ahmad Khan and Moshtagh was learning percussions from Ustad Musarrat Khan.
6.1.ii Concerts

Our hosts Amrita and her husband Haru took us to see many concerts and performances of both Indian classical and folk music and sometimes they would invite fellow musicians to perform in their flat. A regular guest would be Amjad Ali Khan, a beautiful Hindustani classical singer (see videos in Appendix). Thanks to Amrita, who worked for the culture department of the Indian government, we were lucky enough to hear some of the best musicians and singers from various parts of India, from the North, South, Rajasthan and the mountain regions.

Some of the most mind-blowing performances were those of a group of singers and musicians performing traditional music from Rajasthan, the mohan vina inventor and virtuoso Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, violin masters Dr. L Subramaniam, his son Ambi Subramaniam and Dr. N Rajam (who became my favourite Indian violin player) and other incredible players of tabla, sitar, dholak, bansuri, jew's harp and sarangi, whose names I unfortunately forgotten.

We would listen to hours-long concerts in theatres, parks and small venues, losing ourselves in the intensity of the dynamics, the virtuosity of the players, the colours they conjured with their music, and the atmosphere so rich with emotions.

Most of the musicians were interacting with each other in a very deliberate and physical way with movements, eye contact, etc. Singers would “accompany” the melodies, improvisations, scales and ornaments with one of their hands. Amrita Bera describes the reasons for that as being “at times to emphasise the poetry and at times the natural flow of the performance. Sometimes when you throw your voice from your gut or in a certain way, your hands/head automatically moves in a certain manner” (April 2019).

Percussion players were amongst the most attentive to what the other musicians were performing. They would follow the melodies of the compositions and the improvisations with extreme care and showcase their skills in the few moments when the melody players had rests or kept playing some ostinato type of element.

All the musicians and singers we had the chance to hear showed a very close communication with each other, attention to details, to everyone else’s playing, to the direction of the music and its flow.

6.1.iii Jam sessions, events, weddings and religious celebrations

We were involved in a few events where we had the chance to play and improvise with Indian musicians, but these experiences were very difficult for us. In fact we were asked to perform at a couple of weddings and a handful of other religious celebrations where musicians were already performing and we were a curious and exotic addition to them. Of course, they played their repertoire and style to perfection, and we were supposed to ‘follow’ them with no strong skills in the style and a general lack of familiarity with Indian music.
It was obviously very hard to feel part of the musical process in these situations because we did not possess the necessary knowledge to perform their music properly with them. However, as this happened after a few weeks of lessons in New Delhi and given that I had already taken some lessons in Indian music with Ellika Frisell, I still managed to use some of the tools I had acquired to help me get through these performances.

It was not just a matter of being placed outside our comfort zone, it was simply not an agreed moment of communicative improvisation between us and the Indian musicians. We were very much not on the same page with each other; some were following their own habits, what they were comfortable with, and the others had to try to deal with that without knowing anything about it. In terms of a musical product, this did not satisfy any of the musicians, but it was a social occasion where our hosts and the local community could share their culture with us. Perhaps “musical satisfaction” played a less important role here. Potentially only the audience, which consisted mostly of regular people without in-depth musical knowledge, could have been satisfied by seeing a mix of western and Indian musicians playing together on stage, although more for the novelty of it rather than for what they were hearing. We were mostly trying to ‘blend in’ and feel accepted socially rather than artistically and we managed to enjoy the human exchange and gain insights into how they celebrated important moments in their lives. Overall, the experience in New Delhi has been important mostly for the personal learning process, the practice and for the great concerts we attended but less so in terms of a successful communication between musicians.

As a side note I would like to mention my participation as a trio with Isak and Moshtagh in various events organised by the Swedish embassy in New Delhi, where we were invited to introduce Swedish traditional music to a local and international audience that has never been given the chance to hear such a genre before.

6.1.iv Travels

Another relevant part of my experience in India is the trip to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal and another trip to Rajasthan, both along with Isak and Moshtagh. This time we didn't bring instruments with us, but we wanted to go on a holiday in the middle of our period of studies in Delhi, to explore the rural part of India and find new energy and inspiration. The Taj Mahal was more glorious than we could ever imagine, we felt lost in time and overwhelmed by the beauty of the environment and the historical buildings. The trip to Rajasthan was much more adventurous and included visits to the cities of Jodhpur, Jaipur and Udaipur. Three cities situated close to one another but each with a very distinguished feeling and so different from anything we had experienced in New Delhi. The colours, the street, the daily life of the people, wedding celebrations and parades, processions, monkeys and elephants, music in the streets, the ancient buildings and the temples provided a renewed energies that we used and put into music once we returned to New Delhi. Our travels didn't stop there though because we felt an irresistible call to visit Nepal for five days, which then turned into a longer period and affected our lives, careers and artistic souls in an unforgettable way.
6.2 Nepal: Introduction

The trip to Kathmandu was initially meant to be a welcome break from the intense life in New Delhi and also a time to rest from practising and studying every day. Isak and Moshtag were not very keen to bring their instruments with them but wanted to see the tourist sites and enjoy the change of scenery. I pushed for bringing the instruments with us because I had the feeling we would have regretted it otherwise. My instinct was right.

The flight was an experience worth having in itself. The view in the morning of the full Himalayan Range was one of the most impressive things I have ever seen in my life and seeing how nature was so prominent and present made me feel a strong connection with it, a connection which was felt again many more times during our stay in Nepal.

Once we reached our hotel in Thamel, the most touristic yet historically significant district of Kathmandu, we decided to have a look around the area. We immediately felt a relief from the street traffic in New Delhi and we enjoyed the small venues, cafés, wooden houses and temples, the colours and vibrant scene. For some reason, my mind was focused on finding an occasion to play music with local musicians and that occasion presented itself very quickly. I noticed two western men walking on the opposite side of the street and one of them was carrying a saxophone case. I stopped Isak and Moshtag and literally threw myself into the busy traffic. I introduced myself and the others to these two men who were part of an organisation called Mountain to Mountain - Cultural Bridge Switzerland/Nepal which helps children through music and culture and promotes exchanges between Switzerland and Nepal in different ways (see section 6.3.ii for further details). They told us to meet them in a venue that same evening and that we could play with some great musicians there. That venue was the New Orleans Café.

6.2.1 Session at the New Orleans Café

The New Orleans Café was ‘hidden’ inside a building, accessible through a main gate. Walking towards the entrance we could hear something that sounded like an amplified violin but slightly different, with a rather ‘metallic’ and ‘haunting’ tone quality. We walked in and the whole venue was laid out around a courtyard where locals and foreigners were sitting at tables enjoying the live music being played on stage. The musicians were very skilled and included a tabla player, a guitarist, a bansuri player and a sarangi player. The sarangi player was undoubtedly the ensemble leader, and his playing was outstanding. We decided to sit at the opposite side of the stage and our ears and minds became lost in the traditional melodies, improvisations and occasional wah pedal solos from the sarangi player, which gave a fusion-like sound to the entire ensemble.

The musicians took a break and the sarangi player walked down the stage in our direction, came to our table, addressed me in Italian and introduced himself as Shyam. I was shocked by this unexpected turn of events.

XXX
He was very friendly and invited us to step on stage with our instruments and perform something for them and the audience. We gladly accepted his invitation, we plugged in and performed some Scandinavian music. Shyam and the other Nepalese musicians didn't take long to like these new sounds that were somehow familiar to their folk tradition and joined us on stage.

We jammed for a couple of hours together without a moment of rest and I cannot remember what we played exactly but that wasn't the important part. The music was mainly based on simple traditional melodies and a basic harmony so the musical tools I possessed back then were sufficient to improvise comfortably, make rhythmical variations and give the music various directions and dynamics. It was something different from what we were used to but still a language based on roots and folklore, and therefore somehow familiar to us, like our music was to our hosts.

That said, the strongest memories I have from that night are the reactions and emotions felt by both the musicians and the audience.

The public stood up and started dancing and the musicians established a connection that became stronger while the musical flow developed. I remember my senses opened up trying to reach out to every input and source of sound and emotion they could grasp. I remember losing myself in these emotions and not having any doubts about what to do, what to play, what my fingers were or should have been doing. Any moment I looked up I would find Shyam's smile and that and his energy were a very strong force that helped the entire process. A photograph from that night can be found on the cover page of this report.

Time and space lost meaning and we all felt instinctive and natural to follow each other in this communication and creation process. It was the beginning of a strong friendship and musical relationship that continued in the following days and years. I remember experiencing some moments of ‘transcendence’ especially with Shyam who would look at me surprised at first and then would break into a laugh for not believing what just happened. That night made me realise how music in its most natural, primordial and instinctive form can be a powerful force of creativity, connection, inspiration and communication between human beings. The realisation of that truth was then confirmed in the following days and especially during the recording of the album.

As a result of that night, we ended up staying in Nepal for ten days rather than the five we had originally planned. During that time, we experienced so much from a personal, artistic and spiritual point of view. Shyam brought us to hear concerts of Nepalese traditional music, to his native village to experience the daily life of his people, up in the mountains to walk and feel the contact with nature and he introduced us to beautiful people and friends.

We would play a lot together and talk about life and music in a spiritual way. We discussed the need for going beyond the concept of borders and prejudices, the importance of communication, respect and understanding between people and cultures. We really had the opportunity to experience the local life and that also affected the way we see life in general as well as our playing.
Shyam introduced us to the owner of his record label, and we all decided to record an album together (see chapters 7 and 8). We recorded it in about three days at the recording studio of the ‘Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory’ and it naturally became the perfect synopsis of our experience in Nepal.

6.2.ii Personal connections, nature and cultural preservation

Shyam Nepali is not only an amazing artist but also a very sensitive and profound person. Here is how he describes himself:

I’ve enjoyed a 30 year long career making music with my sarangi. I have traveled all over the world as a cultural ambassador, sharing my sarangi with the world. I have worked with musicians playing all different styles of music across the globe, and I’ve been featured on over 50 recordings. I create music and songs and improvise in every style.

I started a school called ‘Himalayan Heritage Cultural Academy’ to keep the tradition going for the next generation of musicians in Nepal and abroad. The sarangi is a beautiful 4 string fiddle that is capable of representing every emotion with melodic soaring lines, making energetic music for dancing, or accompanying singing.

I am a fifth generation Gandharva from Kirtipur in the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. The Gandharva are the traditional musicians of Nepal, born to play music, and born into musical families. The Gandharva traveled from village to village with their sarangis, singing songs of life, love, community, storytelling, mythology, news, and were vital parts of society in Nepal. They brought news from village to village in the age before newspapers, radio, tv, or the internet. My father, Ram Sharan Nepali, and my grandfather, Magar Gaine, were the most notable sarangi players of their respective generations. They are legendary in Nepal and the world of Nepali music for their artistry and their contributions to the sarangi and to the tradition of music in Nepal. My songs, Prince and Preezol Nepali are continuing the tradition. This ancient tradition is over 5,000 years old and is mentioned in the stories of Mahabharata. But the sarangi is capable of playing any style of music. In the global world, the newest generation is creating innovative work, taking the sarangi in new directions while remaining rooted in the ancient tradition. (Nepali, S., 2019)

At the beginning of my report about the experience in Nepal I mentioned the connection with nature. Shyam is a deeply spiritual person, and he would often mention nature, animals, natural phenomena and the life in the mountains in relation to music, the preservation of his cultural heritage and musical traditions, as well as their innovations and the practice of the Nepalese sarangi. This instrument is one of the symbols of Nepal and it is made in a rather rough and simple way, carving a big piece of wood, applying a goat skin to the bottom of the sound hole and very thin steel strings. Some musicians use a traditional curved bow, others — like Shyam — introduced the use of a classical violin bow that works very well and gives more technical advantages to the players.
Along with the *Mountain to Mountain Project* and a series of schools and associations in Kathmandu and other parts of Nepal, Shyam dedicated a big part of his life to teaching his instrument, handing down his traditions to new generations. He was also extremely active in social activities and charities. He brought us to meet various groups of street children and orphans who didn’t have anything in life and little hope for their future.

However, he gave them something through music and musical education. He was part of an organisation that helped these kids to create musical instruments out of rubbish and other things they could find in the streets and then put them together in big ensembles and taught them how to create music. It was a small act, yet so important and meaningful to many.

Shyam’s music and approach towards it goes beyond any geographical border and this made him one of the most important artists and ambassadors for the Nepalese culture both in his country and abroad. He has performed and recorded with so many artists without knowing anything about their styles, genres or musical knowledge. He has simply offered a hand to walk together towards a common destination. He is one of the most inspirational people I have met in my life and a dear friend. He showed me how important it is to embrace one’s own passion, the emotions that music can create and the value of sharing this with people, in particular with young generations.

Shyam Nepali was one of the most positive and relevant encounters I experienced during my research and in my life in general. His example of musical communication between cultures and unfamiliar musicians was very useful to observe and to learn from. As mentioned, his career has seen him collaborating with hundreds of different artists from all over the globe and he has recorded a myriad of albums both in Nepal and abroad. Shyam is the perfect example of someone who truly represents his people’s heritage and culture and respects his traditions but yet projects them into the present time and the future. He is a complete musician who has learned how to open himself to others and how to create a meaningful contact with them.

In his playing he keeps a connection with his identity, repertoire, sounds and style but still manages to offer the other musicians a base full of elements and colours they can choose from and use to communicate with him in a functional and proactive way. He can stay true to his identity as musician, yet merge with other styles without distorting his nature. He does that by adopting an attitude that inspires confidence on both a personal and artistic level that the other performer can rely on. He chooses to use a limited amount of melodic material that can be easily shaped by everyone’s taste and need, while leaving space for improvisation, solos, virtuosity and more contemplative moments. He carefully selects which notes to emphasise and when, which dynamics to follow and when it is his time to accompany others or lead. He has developed a technique on his instrument that is a mix of bounces of the bow and left-hand pizzicato. This offers a steady rhythmic and harmonic layer over which musicians can play melodies and solos. His music and playing seems to speak to everyone and have no boundaries of space or time. It feels like he belongs strictly to a specific genre, style, tradition and repertoire, but at the same time he doesn’t at all. I have recently video called Shyam and had a chat about life and music with him, as well as discussed some aspects of making music together. You can get a feeling of
Shyam’s way of seeing life and music from it and I have attached an excerpt of the video to this work’s support material section.

Our trip to Nepal was full of big happenings, as well as small but precious moments, and it made my entire research and master’s studies more concrete and complete. Again, exposing myself to different situations in which I can be challenged has proven to be an effective method of reaching my goals as a person and as an artist.

6.3 Amsterdam

Thanks to the help of my department at Kungliga Musikhögskolan, which supported my artistic needs and gave me the financial aid needed, in fall 2013 I had the opportunity to take a few short lessons in Amsterdam with the gypsy jazz violin virtuoso and renowned teacher Tim Kliphuis.

Over a period of one week, Tim welcomed me three times to his house near Amsterdam and taught me some basic elements of jazz violin style and rudiments of theory mostly related to blues.

During the days between the lessons, I stayed at a friend’s flat in Amsterdam and spent my time practising and exploring the material that Tim introduced to me in each previous lesson. Similar to those of Ellika Frisell, Ustad Hamid Hussain Khan, Jonas Knutsson, Mousa Elias and other teachers, the teaching method adopted by Tim Kliphuis was mostly based on practice and playing rather than a deep theoretical investigation, which again suited me well and gave me some insights about how to approach gypsy jazz practice.

I also had the opportunity to listen to Tim Kliphuis performing with his trio (Vincent Koning, guitar, and Dion Nijland, double bass) and I was invited on stage along with another student of his, Karin Van Kooten, to join the musicians for two encores at the end of the concert. It was a pleasure to share the stage with such accomplished artists. On the one hand I felt very much in an uncomfortable zone, on the other hand I did not feel judged and therefore embarrassed. The other musicians knew I wasn’t a jazz player and they were nonetheless happy to share their music with me and let me improvise freely in a couple of moments of the tunes. It was an interesting experience but the communication process was obviously not meant to happen in an ‘ideal’ balanced way. As a guest in their world, an unknown one to me, I tried to adapt my style and communication to combine with theirs, but could only do so up to a certain level due to my limited familiarity with jazz language and technique, meaning I had a reduced ability to follow and to react quickly and effectively. I was still able to learn something about my weaknesses and which technical aspects I needed to improve, so I left Amsterdam with a wealth of positive experiences.
7. Ensembles, projects

7.1 Laya Bazaar

As mentioned previously, the main evidence and project within my research is the album recording that took place in Kathmandu in the fall of 2012 (see analysis in chapter 8). Myself, Shyam Nepali, Moshtagh Feizyabi and Isak Bergstrom decided to put our music explorations and artistic connection on a record. Prior to going into the studio, we had three or four occasions to play or jam together and we never saw ourselves as a band or a project that could have any solid future. We simply thought it would be a great opportunity and pleasure to record some music together.

We selected a few melodies and tunes that we liked, and we met at the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory to record three tracks. We had no sound separation between the four of us and the setup consisted in a few microphones and four chairs in a medium-sized room. A young sound engineer was behind the desk and was very excited to hear what we would come up with. That was our feeling too and we had no expectations but a total trust in each other and the will to discover something new together. Shyam would lead the beginning in most of the tracks and then we would follow, finding our space and giving space to the others. We recorded three tracks on the first day and sent them to Shyam's producer who then decided to finance the entire album. We went back into the studio for another day to record other five tracks and a third time to edit and mix them and to add some overdubs (mostly some singing by Shyam and Moshtagh and small details such as hand-clapping, my speaking voice on one of the tracks, etc.) and some parts performed by guest artists. The guest artists were Rajani Kayastha (singer), Heiner Grieder (saxophones) and Thomas Bertschi (jew's harps).

This recording experience meant a lot to us all and we saw it as the perfect ending to our experience in Nepal. We felt we managed to imprint the emotions of those days into a product that will remain there forever. We decided on the name Laya Bazaar for the ensemble and the album. Laya in Nepali means 'rhythm' but also 'melody' or 'tune' and bazaar is a typical Middle Eastern market. Together they mean 'market of melodies', or at least that's what we decided the name should mean.

In September 2013 we managed to obtain some fundings to bring Shyam to Stockholm where we had the opportunity to perform live at Stallet World Music Theatre and Musikvalvet Baggen. On the occasion of the concert in Stallet Theatre we were honoured of the presence of the general consul for Nepal in Sweden who appreciated the cultural exchange. Shyam also had the opportunity to give a workshop of Nepalese traditional music to the students of the folk music department at the Kungliga Musikhögskolan. Unfortunately, on that occasion Moshtagh Feizyabi could not join us and therefore we asked another brilliant percussionist, Davide Rodrigues from Portugal, to join us for these performances.
7.2 Studio work for singer-songwriters

During the two years of studies in Stockholm I had the chance to record music with many musicians within the pop music and the singer-songwriting scenes. I wanted to mention all these artistic activities because the process of making music in such situations was somehow similar to an improvisation and the communication process that happens in a spontaneous session. The main difference was that I wasn’t ‘jamming’ with someone live but with someone who had recorded music and songs prior to my playing.

I collaborated with singer-songwriters mainly from Sweden and Argentina residing in Stockholm. I was normally asked if I could record string parts on their songs and I would walk into the studio with no information about the style of music I would be recording. The process went through three main phases: free improvisation, selection of elements from the improvisation and development of these elements.

Before the first improvisation, the singer would play the track for me to give me an idea of its character and feature and gave me some rough indications of the ideas behind it, the different moments, dynamics, etc. After that we recorded the first improvisation. I had to react very quickly to the smallest or more obvious changes in the song while the track was playing and I had to trust my taste and judgement because through them I was selecting what to play, where and how. It was tough but exciting and often very rewarding. The communication process was initially uni-directional because the other musicians who recorded their parts before me could only expose their material but not interact with me. On the other hand, my improvisation was directly connected to their playing and what my ears suggested me to perform. After the first improvisation (or second or more depending on each case), the singers and the producer would select the elements they liked the most and the moments in the track where they wanted them to be. In this second phase, I would record the same elements again in an improved way and place them throughout the song in the moment they worked best.

The third and last phase involved again some more improvisation. I usually developed every single element by overdubbing the same pattern or phrase, harmonising it differently. Subsequently I would jam along to these overdubs so as to find parts complementary to those but different in terms of rhythm, register, character, etc. Because everything was happening in the studio and could be changed at will, I did not encounter particular issues other than that some songs took much more time than others to be recorded. Certain songs were written in uncomfortable keys, some had a lot of different moments that needed to be taken separately, others were very easy but repetitive and so the challenge was to be very creative and find a lot of elements that could help maintain a high level of interest in the listener and provided some variety.
8. Recordings and analysis

8.1 Laya Bazaar Album

I have already described how Laya Bazaar was born and the concept behind it. Now I would like to guide a listener through the album and highlight the points that to me are more relevant in the description of the communicative project and the creation of the final musical product.

I mentioned the four musicians were all sitting in one room facing each other. Moshtagh Feizyabi had some kind of acoustic panels around him which were meant to isolate the percussion sounds from the other instruments, however that had only a very limited effect on the recording quality. We could all see each other and feel the acoustic sound of the instruments. First, we wanted the main body of tracks to be authentic and natural, then we allowed ourselves to experiment a little by adding vocals and guest artists to certain moments of some tracks. The album starts with a track called Mountain Peak Equation.

The name wasn't chosen for a particular reason rather than we liked the sound of it and somehow we wanted to pay homage to the nature and the mountains surrounding us. Here is a picture of us on the rooftop of the building where the studio was located:

![Image of the four musicians on the rooftop of the building where the studio was located]

Before we started recording, Shyam told the others he would play a short two-part melody. The track started with the accordion holding long notes and some sarangi improvisation followed by a break. Shyam's singing has been added afterwards. In this first part of the song I noticed an intense visual communication between Isak and Shyam.
I was mostly waiting for the others to settle the atmosphere and a foundation, I felt I needed to give them space and time and then find my moment to join. I started playing some small elements and long notes over what I was hearing and the main theme but it is only around 01'50" that I made the decision to lead with some improvisation. It was something built around the basic material presented in the track so far, with the addition of other notes and some ornaments inspired by Swedish traditional music. Moshtagh and Shyam supported this improvisation with rhythms and percussive patterns. Here we can notice the accompaniment technique developed by Shyam I mentioned in section 6.2.ii.

After the improvisation we went back to the main melody and Isak took over the improvisation. In general it felt like we went back and forth between the main melody and improvisations until we slowly faded out with dynamics. The track was then cut to fit an ending. As I mentioned before, the endings were the most difficult part to make sound convincing and tight. Even if one person leads and the other try to follow, you can never know if everyone understands the intention of the leader or not and if he is going to stop playing at the same time as the others or carry on with new suggestions and ideas.

The second track has an Italian name because we wanted to present the multicultural aspect of the ensemble also this way. *Vie di Luci e Musica* means *Streets of Lights and Music* and I thought about this title because it reminded me of the colourful and vibrant streets of Thamel. I couldn't come up with any singing so the others suggested I would add some descriptive words in Italian in some moments of the track (that was definitely more challenging than making music!). The beginning was once more entirely led by Shyam, who started with an improvisation and continued with his rhythmical accompaniment technique described earlier and that here is very clear and defined. We added the hand clapping afterwards. Inspired by Shyam's technique, I also started to play some pizzicato arpeggios to support him and Isak. Isak also had a short melody he thought about beforehand and mentioned he would have performed it at some stage in the improvisation (01'44"). Shyam and I felt like supporting it with long notes and simple phrases that ended up into a rhythmical pattern suggested by Shyam and followed by the others. Here, Moshtagh took the chance to add some percussion improvisation above our rhythms which eventually led to a crescendo and an intensification of rhythms and number of notes and phrases, as well as the introduction of a bass line of the piano-accordion. At minute 03'27" we can hear Isak, Shyam and in part myself answering to each other with similar phrases, as a sort of small dialogue in the middle of a bigger conversation. As I already mentioned, my voice has been added after the main recording as well as Shyam singing. What is very interesting to notice in this section is the presence of the very first *moment of transcendence* that happened between myself and Shyam (min 03'53" - 04'00"). He matches a note I played and then we make a very similar ascending movement and reach to high notes that match each other perfectly. I still remember the feeling of surprise and happiness I experienced then and the joy in Shyam's eyes when I looked at him immediately after playing that phrase together. After that moment Shyam suggested a melody which I never knew if it was an actual Nepalese tune or something totally improvised and Isak reacted to it by introducing again the melody he played at the beginning. I accompanied them with some chopping patterns and then we fell into a sequence of questions and answers, which resolved in a diminuendo and an end.
In *Conversation* I came up with a small, improvised melody in 7/8 time signature and played it on my own, then joined by Isak. From this initial melody, Shyam developed another tune and Moshtagh joined in. Thomas Bertschi recorded the jew's harp afterwards. At min 01'39" Isak suggested a bass line that eventually took over the previous two melodies and on which Isak improvised some other phrases, supported by me and Shyam with some rhythmic patterns up to min 02'54". Here Shyam plays again the tune he presented earlier in the track. As in the case of track two, I don't know if that tune is a traditional composition or simply an improvisation. After this tune I saw some space where I could improvise and lead and that improvisation reached a moment of *transcendence* and synchrony when Isak "red" my phrase and joined in with an harmonised version of it at min 03'52". Here we heard Moshtagh increasing his playing and felt we should all leave him some space to solo. After the break we visually followed Shyam's who started to play his tune and we accompanied it with a bass line on the accordion and a melody in the high register of the violin. We had to cut the ending after recording the track because of a lack of similar intentions between us in finishing the performance.

The beginning of *Traffic Dance* was added after the main part of the track was recorded and featured Shyam and Thomas at the jew's harps, Heiner Grieder at the saxophone and the voice of Rajani Kayastha. For this track, Rajani has been recorded at the same time as us and she was located in the desk room.

Following the introduction the actual track started with various rhythmical patterns from which I started some sort of melody that could be similar to an Irish tune. Isak accompanied me with some short answers and bass lines. Overall I should mentioned that the breaks between different parts of the tracks have been 'cleaned' and 'tided up' during the editing in order to have cleaner endings and beginnings that could fit an album production. In the following parts, myself and Isak kept dialoguing with each other, following also Rajani, Shyam and Moshtagh. The saxophone, as well as the ending and other small overdubs, has been added after recording the main body of the track.

In *Folklore Jumps* we all followed Shyam's tune and added Heiner Grieder at the saxophone in different moments so it would sound like if he was sharing the solos with me. The saxophone has been recorded afterwards. At minute 01'15" I played some rhythmical elements that have been noticed by Moshtagh who immediately reproduced them on his frame drum, the daf. In the next section we can hear Isak playing more chords and rhythms that are followed by the others in different ways with rhythms, long and tensed notes, etc. Shyam goes from his rhythmic technique, long sliding notes and the main melody on which we then added Rajani and Heiner's playing. In minute 03'00" there is again a short dialogue between the sarangi and the accordion followed by the violin and the sarangi playing a part of the main tune in an intense way. At minute 03'31" everyone managed to drop what we were playing until then and followed me very carefully and precisely in a part where I improvised a riff with double stops. Then Isak and Shyam played various phrases on my riff. Around minute 04'30" myself and Shyam followed each other with fast bouncy scales and phrases. My latest one ended that section and we managed to go back to the main melody again which was introduced by Shyam. We added Shyam's voice at the end to emphasise even more the crescendo to the end. The finale wasn't perfect, especially my and Shyam's last notes, but we still decided to keep it as we played.
I believe *Aspakan* means horses or a type of horse. Moshtagh named this track also recorded his voice on it after we put down the main structure. Isak and Moshtagh started with an introduction together and myself and Shyam joined them. After a break, we all followed Shyam with a melody he suggested before started recording. Heiner Grieder recorded the saxophone after us in this case too. Around 02'05'' Shyam started improvising, Isak and Moshtagh deliberately stopped playing but I didn't realise that immediately and I badly followed him when I should also have stopped. We all went back to the main melody which was quite basic and simple to play around with and we developed it with different improvisations which ended up creating a perfect space for Moshtagh to add his singing afterwards. This time we also managed to stop and then follow Shyam into the main melody again to the end, making it work.

*The Yak, the Yolk and Hultklappen.* Shyam asked me and Isak to play a Swedish traditional tune him and Moshtagh could follow so we played a traditional waltz. Shyam and Moshtagh accompanied it mostly with rhythms. At minute 01'40'' Shyam took over from the tune and improvised a melody in a style close to the one of the waltz. At the beginning of minute 02'00'' I joined Shyam with similar long notes and then answers to his playing that moved to another part of the tune led by Isak and sustained by me with a harmony. We then followed each other into a more meditative improvised part where Shyam and Moshtagh let us play as a duo until the end.

This is the last track of the album and we called it *Spiced* for its vibrant and hectic character. In this faster track we decided to let Moshtagh start with some rhythms and we then followed him with similar elements. Shyam had previously chosen a melody he wanted to play and he introduced it after the intro. At minute 01'07'' Isak played a line which I managed to identify quickly so I could answer to it and play some complementary phrases. At first I seemed to follow his parts, then I happened to play a longer phrase which eventually became the leading one. It was then Isak to reply to my phrase and therefore we eventually swapped roles in a very short period of time. Around minute 01'30'' I started playing arpeggios in a rhythmical way that felt consistent with Shyam's patterns and that resulted in a very nice and tight ending of that section with Shyam. We could notice here that for the last 15/20 seconds of the improvisation, Isak decided to stop playing and waited to see where the others decided to go. It was a good choice because this allowed him to enter the conversation again with a beautiful improvised melody at minute 01'53''. Myself, Moshtagh and Shyam accompanied him mostly with rhythmical patterns and some long notes towards minute 02'22''. After this section Shyam continued to leave me and Isak the chance to create more ideas by sticking to his previous rhythms. Myself and Isak could then introduce new riffs and arpeggios that helped increasing the tension in this moment of the track. We settled a mood with a clear character and features over which Shyam decided to play an improvisation starting with a double stop that changed completely the colour of the piece. That led to a stronger and intense moment to which everyone contributed and resolved into another part of 'trades' between me and Shyam. Here again Isak stopped and waited a short while before coming in with a bass line. At minute 03'47'' we managed again to make a nice break from which I started an improvised melody, beautifully complemented with Isak's bass lines and Shyam's rhythms.
Mohstagh and Isak let me and Shyam end the track but again, because it is very hard to know and feel if someone is intending to end or not, we continued to play for a while waiting for the others’ reaction or decision.

Luckily Isak came to rescue us with some beautiful, sustained chords which ended the track in the perfect way.

I haven’t mentioned much about Moshtagh’s playing but we can often notice how subtle it is and how much he listens to the others and what is happening around him. He always tries to follow, emphasise certain moments, play softly in others still managing to keep a solid ground and sustain for the melodic instruments.

After the description and analysis of what I believe were the main moments that occurred in the communication between the musicians in the recording studio, I can say that this process proved that a meaningful and satisfactory musical product can be achieved even without rehearsals, a common music system, a common background, style and culture. The personal connection was what mattered the most as well as exchanging human experiences and emotions prior, during and after the recording or performance. The musical product also made sense because given a context, a listener can imagine and feel emotions and relate himself to what created the music and what brought the musicians together. From listening to the different tracks we can definitely point out various “methods” used by the musicians to create music. The analysis of the music flow highlights how important it has been to pay attention to the dynamics and the intensity of a player in order to anticipate his intentions and feelings. Furthermore, the use of a minimalistic melodic material, helped all the artists involved to manipulate it with ease and to give it different directions. A complex use of harmony and intricate melodic lines, would have likely caused more issues and resulted in a lack of understanding between the musicians, no matter the level of technical skills possessed. We all selected carefully the notes we played in the moment and tried to support and allow the others to express their musical feelings, to lead or take a step back, to suggest a development of wait for someone else to do so. The improvisation should be considered as a colloquium where everyone is welcomed to contribute if the goal is to exchange and to be open to the others, to give and take when it is the most suitable time to do it, to give up some of the own identity to become part of a process and a common path where the individualities are respected and accepted but are not the most important thing.
8.2 Lesson with Jonas Knutsson

Track 1 - improvisation lesson:

During one of the lessons with J. Knutsson I decided to record myself and him while he would explain the use of pentatonic scales based on different keys and how I could apply that material to improvise. I was especially interested in moving away from a set key but still create something interesting and significant to the ear. As a classical musician and a folk fiddler, I normally hear melodies, tunes, phrases that are strictly connected to a certain harmony as if the melody suggests what harmony should accompany it. If I am playing with a folk guitarist, he would follow the tune I am playing with chords that best suit the tune. He might actually know the tune already and that would give him the freedom of placing chords, alternative to the most obvious ones, in various moments. If I am quick enough or focus on his playing, I might be able to follow him and change the melody depending by the 'unexpected' chord he played, otherwise I can simply carry on with the standard melody, play some variations of it and keep it straight and simple. What has always fascinated me in various styles of jazz music is the ability and freedom players have to move around a set sequence of chords with the melody.

In this recording, Jonas Knutsson is explaining how I can simply move a pentatonic scale above or below a specific key without 'sounding wrong' but rather adding some colour, tension and character to a specific moment of the solo. He showed me some examples and I tried to follow his lead, hear, repeat and in general understand by doing. I mentioned the folk guitarist can suggest a harmony movement by introducing a chord in the accompaniment and that I could try to detect it and play something functional to it on the spot. Jonas speaks about the piano player in a similar way here. The pianist held the basic harmonic material for a while and Jonas and me started experimenting moving the pentatonic scale from the version of it based on the key of the accompaniment, Bb minor, to its relative half tone above, so B minor. At a certain moment Jonas says "you see, even the pianist is doing it!". It happened that the pianist who recorded the backing track also decided to move away from the root key for a short moment and then move back to the previous one. I really wanted to get more insights about how to approach improvisation, any kind of improvisation, in this way which was new to me. I wanted to step away from the boundaries of melody/harmony relation that for long time were situated in my head and affected my music practice. Jonas then introduced the concept of moving around with minor thirds. The idea is the same, to go 'away' from the original material by suggesting something that at first might sound 'far from it' but in reality is still functional to create some sort of interesting tension.
Track 2 - saxophone, electric piano and violin improvisation:

This recording has been made during another lesson with Jonas Knutsson. He started off by playing the electric piano and suggested some initial harmony which was still fairly open in terms of improvisation possibilities on my side. I tried to apply some of the notions and patterns he thought me in the previous lesson (see track N.1) and moved around what I heard as the root key.

Then Jonas started to suggest some form of droning sounds which immediately made me decide to try different direction in the improvisation, something more folk or ethnic but still a little related to the previous elements. He then moved to something with a more defined rhythm, and I tried to follow that both melodically and rhythmically. We continued that way until we reached a more tensed and quick moment at minute 02'25".

That part followed but a sort of action-reaction phase which developed into a clearer and present rhythmic ground. Jonas introduced then some sort of high pitched sounds that I followed by playing high notes on the violin and creating a saturation/distorted sound with the bow. In the following phase, Jonas started to play his saxophone instead and we jammed around scales, arpeggios and sound effects as well as holding long notes and see how the other reacted. As it happened in many other situations, ending the improvisation proved to be fairly difficult. At the time of this recording I was also very unexperienced and eager to try out many things. In some moments, definitely in the end, I should have paid more attention to Jonas’ playing instead of focusing on my own. I still learned a lot by improvising with him and listening back to the recording so I thought it was an important example to give here.
Legend:

I.F. = Initial Flow
E.P. = Explorative Phase
ST. = Settlement Phase
C.R. = “Change of Rules”
R1 = Realignment 1
R2 = Realignment 2
R3 = Realignment 3
T. = Transcendence

XLIV
10. Results and reflections

This graph is not a ‘formula’ but rather a visual representation of how a communication process between two musicians could take place and develop. It is meant to offer a model and an array of points that can be considered in the analysis of an improvisation. I placed this graph in the current section because by illustrating it I want to introduce some of the results I reached. With initial flow I intend the beginning of the musical conversation between our two musicians. Musician 1 is suggesting something and Musician 2 is responding. We notice the first is leading and the second is reacting. This is normally the case in a group dynamic, at least one person should make a proposal and take initiative in order to begin a process. This element was well clear to me when improvising with Shyam Nepali, both in live situations and in the Laya Bazaar’s album. He rarely waited for an input from me or the other musicians, he would be so keen and full of positive energy that he would very often start playing something that eventually took shape and formed a ground for the others.

The initial flow is therefore set and from this point anything can happen and the possible directions are limitless.

In the specific example represented in the graph, the two musicians will go through an Explorative Phase. This is the time I refer to when the performers aren't sure about which direction will be taken, which character will the conversation have, if there will be a leading motive/melody or not. The musicians need to be extremely open to suggestions from each others and therefore it is a pivotal part of the process because it can set a solid mood and atmosphere that will result in a satisfactory product or undermine the entire process from its very beginning.

This phase will eventually be followed by a Settlement phase. Here the performers got enough musical as well emotional information from each other to feel they can direct their playing towards a specific style, colour, feature of what is becoming a composition through an improvised dialogue. This part can be fairly short or extremely long and that depends by the individual musicians' decision if to keep feeling comfortable in the Settlement Phase or if they prefer to move to another ‘chapter’ of the story. By experiencing and observing various examples of such process, I can say that this usually happens by initiative of one of the players and it could either be smooth or not. The chances for it to be a smooth transition are normally small, but it can happen especially if the musicians have a long experience in performing with many different artists, if they have a strong control over their own instrument/skills and if they are highly receptive and can nearly ‘foresee’ what is likely to happen next.

That said, as the graph shows, the initiative of one musician doesn't often end in an effortless transition but in a Change of Rules in the flow. With this term I intend a shift in the ‘rules’ that have been agreed upon during the Explorative and Settlement phases. One of the musicians attempts to change the course but isn't able to control it or to make it clear enough to the other. The result is unsettling, and it will take some time for the performers to adjust to the new situation.
This is some kind of new *Explorative Phase* that I decided to call *Realignment* and that might need more than one attempt to resettle into a new balanced version of the *flow*.

This settled condition might eventually end up in one or more moments of *Transcendence*. Of course, these moments may be reached much earlier in the process, it is impossible to know when and how they happen, and it is entirely related to how the musicians are, their personalities and skills and how much they managed to create a deep contact with each other. Moments of *Transcendence* are meant to be the ultimate goal in the musical conversation and to me they are elements that must be considered when analysing the process of music creation and communication and its results. The *flow* can then continue, possibly include more moments of *Transcendence*, or *Change of Rules, Settlement, Explorative Phase, Realignment* or end. As noticed in the *Laya Bazaar* album analysis, the ending is also a fragile part and requires a leader that has to signal his intentions to end in the most clear way. It is definitely harder to end the process smoothly compared to starting it.

Taking into account all these aspects and terms, I would like to consider the graph in relation to the improvisation which I made in occasion of one of the lessons with Jonas Knutsson (see 8.2 - Track 2). Jonas performed with both piano and saxophone. He gave me a first ground of harmonic and melodic material to base our creation from starting by playing the piano. The *flow* has begun and immediately we entered in an *Explorative Phase* where the first attempts are made and some of the harmonic and melodic material is used and developed. It's the beginning of a dialogue but the core subject is still somehow hidden. For about 1 minute and half the first ideas developed and my improvisation got the chance to be more and more free from an harmonic base as Jonas decided on holding more of an open drone rather than playing chords. That was a short *Settlement* which just had the time to begin when a sudden break occurs and Jonas stops the drone and goes into chord stabs. The *Change Of Rules* eventually happened as Jonas decided unilaterally and without notice to introduce a completely different element in the picture. That came as a surprise and unsettled my playing which eventually had to figure out how to adapt and find a new *Realignment*. This new phase sees myself and Jonas dialoguing with fast and sudden phrases, a circle of questions and answers which continued until minute 03.00. In that moment there wasn't a complete *Change Of Rules* but rather a second *Realignment* towards a slightly different and more rhythmical phase. Around minute 4 we can notice another sudden change as Jonas stops playing the piano. This unsettles my perceptions and affects my playing which had to find a new way to continue. The way was again suggested by Jonas who introduced a new element consisting in high pitched notes on the piano to which I reacted creating similar sounds on the violin. We can refer to this as a third *Realignment*. That part went smoothly into a new section where Jonas picks up the saxophone. Here we can hear more connection between the two players where phrases are more complementary to each other. We can describe this section as some form of higher connection and *Transcendence* even though an actual transcendence would also include a deeper emotional connection which was hard to recreate in the context of a lesson. The final part consists in a playful conversation between the two musicians which happened to end gradually, in a rather natural way.
At the beginning of my studies, I had many questions that I presented in the genesis of this work. One of them related to how music can be a primordial and instinctive language that can help musicians communicate without knowing each other or sharing the same system and concept of music. As discussed earlier, I found I did not agree with Peter Keller’s assertion that a knowledge of structure is necessary for ‘shared performance goals’. Is it necessary for musicians to truly know each other in order for their music to be instinctive? Schiavio and Høffding (2015) state that they disagree with conclusions drawn by Keller (2014) and also by Seddon and Biasutti (2009) regarding the idea that musicians need to be aware of their co-players’ ‘subjective states’ in order to perform together. Their research is based on interviews carried out with the Danish String Quartet and uses an example of one of the quartet members being unaware that another was crying while the four of them successfully played a piece together. I would also argue that it is not necessary to know the ‘subjective states’ of fellow performers or even to know them in person, as demonstrated by the extremely satisfying, constructive and, at times, transcendent musical experience I had with Shyam Nepali, the very first time we met.

Another one of my questions was about creating a satisfactory musical product for all parties involved. Every single experience I had was different from the others and needs to be considered as something that happened on its own. However, I could say that I managed to create various satisfying artistic products when I felt personally accepted and welcomed by the other musicians. I learned that the main thing was to surround myself with musicians that had a similar level of skills and musical knowledge but especially they had very similar intentions, curiosity and open attitude towards the meeting and conversation. In some occasions it wasn’t worth to engage in a proactive artistic conversation because the other musician/s weren’t interested in sharing but more in showing off, it was more of a monologue. This situations simply have to be avoided. On the other hand, the difficulties of creating music with someone from another culture/background are welcome obstacles because they are part of a learning and problem-solving process that will benefit the interaction and communication after some attempts.

A satisfactory musical product can have various forms, but it has to contain elements of identity, direction, clear communication, it has to suggest emotions and interaction, needs a good mixture of dynamics and colours in music and it needs to be genuine and instinctive.

Music can trigger so many emotions and instincts. As a result of my path and exploration of interactions between musicians I could agree that these instincts and emotions must always be considered in order to break the schemes we build inside of us as persons and artists. These schemes can be useful to reach a certain level of knowledge and skills, but they could clash with other musicians’ personal schemes. This is why we must try to prioritise instincts, emotions and senses when we are looking for moments of transcendence and integration with someone else. The schemes we constructed during our studies, practice and that can and should still be there and expanded, should give us a ground and a series of tools we can access at any time. They are useful and also part of who we are and what we can do as performers, but as a result of my experience I don’t think they are the main source we should refer to when improvising but simply parts of a bigger engine.
They are functional components and gears that make a system, but this system needs a source of energy, a fuel that is not mechanic and easily defined but a force that comes from another part of us. Knowing more about this force should give us the ability to communicate on a deep level with any musician, no matter the genre, style, background, etc.

Laurel Trainer, senior author of a recent study into body sway and joint emotional expression in musical ensembles, questions how musicians coordinate with other performers when playing expressive music with dynamic and temporal changes, and explains that, “This relies on predicting what your fellow musicians will do next so that you can plan the motor movements so as to express the same emotions in a coordinated way. If you wait to hear what your fellow musicians will do, it is too late” (Trainer, 2019). The researchers (Chang et al., 2019) used mathematical techniques to investigate how much the movements of an individual musician affected the movements of the others when playing both emotionally and unemotionally. They found that, ‘whether they were portraying joy or sadness, the musicians predicted each others’ movements to a greater extent when they played expressively, compared to when they played with no emotion’. My experiences particularly in Nepal demonstrated to me, however, that there is not always a need for the musicians to move so much their bodies and make their movements so obvious in order to predict each others’ playing. I agree when Chang et al. set out how communicating feelings such as joy or sadness can help the ensemble to predict each others’ actions and sounds, but I do not believe that physical expression is the only, or even the main predicator of successful and satisfying musical communication. Emotions can be felt in other ways that are not always well explicable or obvious. Moments of transcendence, symbiosis or synchrony can be achieved no matter if musicians make clear communication through movement or visual contact. Quite often musicians, me included, close their eyes and use their ears and other perceptions of the senses to “feel” what is happening around them. The visual connection could help in certain moments of the improvisation ( for instance, in my experience it helps a lot in case of conclusions of parts or of the entire performance ) but personally I don’t find it essential.

Placing myself in uncomfortable zones has been one of the most challenging parts of the process. From time to time, it has been frustrating not to get the right inspiration or being able to produce music at the level or with the quality I wished to reach. Also, I had to face moments in which my technique couldn't support what I wanted to do, and I had to make the decision to lower my expectations and diverge to something more minimalistic. Sometimes that was a big challenge, preventing myself from doing 'too much' and trying 'too hard' when I should have just chosen simplicity and functionality. That was a mistake I have made a good few times but I then noticed and work on so as to get better.

These and other cases that I mentioned earlier in which I felt uncomfortable, have been proven to help me overcoming certain technical issues and feeling more aware of myself and how much I can adapt and be flexible in general.
10. Conclusions

All I have learned and experienced was never meant to make me become proficient in other music styles (jazz, blues, Indian music, Persian music, etc). On one end it was meant to give me new tools, techniques and elements I could add to my own style when I play folk music or improvise, on the other it was meant to expand my horizon, suggest ideas and inspire me, open my possibilities in terms of communicating with other musicians and “find comfort in discomfort”. The two years of Master’s studies have been very important indeed and they led to a number of extremely relevant and exciting experiences in my life as a performer and human being. Immediately after the last semester of the course I was lucky enough to start working as a professional musician by joining a UK tour with the dance show “Riverdance” as well as creating and developing a number of projects with international musicians. As a consequence of the beginning of my performing career, it took a number of years to gather my thoughts and write this thesis and report. Many memories from the years are of the course still there, fresh, clear and they keep inspiring me on a daily basis. It is by taking the time and some ‘distance’ that we can analyse what happens to us in a critical and more objective way.

I am aware this work can only address a few aspects of what truly means to improvise and to connect/converse with other musicians and the outcomes are only in part clear and objective. Most aspects and considerations will always be instead fairly subjective and will relate to the personal essence of every single party involved in an artistic improvised creation. This research has however been useful to me to explore different ways of working and making music, self-introspect, be analytical and empirical yet philosophical and imaginative. We all know how difficult it could be to describe a feeling or an emotional state as we all are different and we all experience things diversely but, with some practical evidence and descriptions, I trust I successfully offered you some tangible examples of what to look for in certain situations and how to solve potential issues. That said, my project has been fruitful and gave me some answers but also leaves me with questions. How many of these answers as well as approaches would work and be helpful in the future if a situation is diametrically opposed to those I experienced in the past? For instance, how can the artistic process still function if the material introduced/performed/suggested by other musicians is far too rhythmically/harmonically/melodically complex? What other skills should I acquire to face such situations and how? Furthermore, how can I develop a better, defined and well explainable method and toolbox I can give to others? Of course, I will continue to try different ways and hopefully the more experience I gain the clearer some aspects will become.
The master’s studies and writing this thesis gave me unexpected and exceptional insights about myself as an artist and a person and all this can only add value to my life and career. My hope is that some of these experiences, their outcomes and the analysis and observation of them could be of some form of inspiration and could offer a humble guide to other musicians and artists that are attracted by the idea of placing themselves outside their comfort zone and experimenting with music and collaborations without predetermined expectations and judgement. In fact, judgement and expectation are some fundamental points that should be addressed and that can potentially unlock our true potential.

In these last years I have been performing both rehearsed/arranged material in a known style which I was comfortable with as well as improvised something in an unknown style with musicians I have never played with before.

The first type of performances can be very rewarding, especially after putting a lot of effort into creating something from scratch and building it up with others towards a predetermined and clear goal. The second type however added a different quality to the all experience. The reason was entirely psychological and related to the mindset of the artists involved.

Quite simply, not knowing each other, not understanding deeply the musical language and skillset of one other, not placing ‘labels’ on our music and not expecting anything in particular, gave me and the others freedom. This freedom is what brought us to a different level of acknowledgment and perception as there was not really “right or wrong” anymore. There was no focus on technique, on interpretation, on the features of a specific style/genre. It was purely action and reaction, tension and release, following each other in an instinctive way. This lack of pressure, judgment and expectations that are normally present in our lives, can empower us and facilitate a true connection leading to a natural creation of art.

I will leave you with one last consideration or advice which I often give myself. Don’t focus on the tiny detail, don’t get lost in expectations you have about your own performance and playing or what we might think we or others expect from us, but seek connection with your true self and the musical souls that are by your side. Ultimately we should all inspire ourselves and others in a simple and natural way, find our own flow and be happy with it.
11. Appendix

Link to **Support Material**. Available folders:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIA</th>
<th>LAYA BAZAAR</th>
<th>STOCKHOLM</th>
<th>NEPAL</th>
<th>AMSTERDAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
<td>Stockholm (Pics, Report)</td>
<td>Improvised String Parts</td>
<td>Pictures &amp; Video</td>
<td>Pictures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerts</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jonas Knutsson Audio Lesson and Impro</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music Lessons</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pictures Aifur Sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesson Material</td>
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Link to [Laya Bazaar Album - Spotify](#).


