Mats Dimming

Exploding One´s Belly
Exploring Free Improvisation Through Minimalism and Composition

Written reflection within an independent, artistic work.

This independent, artistic work is documented in KMH’s digital archive.
Abstract

This thesis discloses how I explored free improvisation through minimalism and composition.

My initial aims were to merge minimalism with free improvisation. I wanted to combine the hypnotic and meditative effect of the former with the co-creative aspect and element of surprise of the latter. In continuing experiments together with fellow musicians, I tried out different kinds of composing for improvisers, focusing on for instance repetition and motivic development. Experiments were recorded and reflected upon throughout.

However, halfway into my studies I wanted to focus more on co-creation in-the-moment and therefore left composing behind, but instead used my compositions as practice tools for free improvisation. At this pivotal part of the process, new challenges regarding “improvisation vs. composition” emerged. These were overcome thanks to a change of mindset.

As a result of these studies, I expanded my vocabulary as improviser, for instance a creative use of repetition, a broader range of interaction and a deeper understanding of free improvisation in general.

Keywords: free improvisation, minimalism, composition
Preface

It happened during a rehearsal with the local symphonic orchestra, sometime during gymnasium. On the other side of the orchestra the violins were working on some difficult part, over and over. I guess I lost focus. Very quietly, I started to play around with the sul ponticello\(^1\) technique, which I recently had discovered. After a little while I was completely immersed in creating this very special sound. I didn’t know it then, but I was on the verge of finding a different path, other ways of creating music. When I looked up, 40 pairs of eyes belonging to the now entirely silent orchestra were looking at me. I still don’t know what they thought in this moment, but I know what I thought: “Damn, that was fun!”

Flash-forward. Today - two decades later - I still find myself hunched over the double bass, exploring the sounds this beautiful, mysterious, and sometimes quite challenging instrument can make, and experimenting with how these sounds can relate to other sounds, for instance those made by my friends and colleagues on their respective instruments.

Before we begin, I would like to say how grateful I am to the Royal College of Music in Stockholm for making wonderous creative meetings between wonderous creative people possible. It surely has been very, very valuable to me. To mention just a few people; Erik Blennow Calälv and David Bennet for recurring musical meetings and mind-blowing discussions, and Klas Nevrin for out-of-this-world supervision. Much obliged!

Rain arrives in the afternoon. The storm begins as a sprinkle - slow taps on a woodblock mimic fat, lazy raindrops, a contrast to the pop-up downpours that pass transiently through endless Georgia summers. This shower builds rhythmically, as more members of the band take up percussion, developing into a torrent, amplifying a timberland cacophony. The sounds of running water, mouth clicks, and pops, whistles and tuneless humming drift through the space, amplifying the sense of vast, unexplored nature. (Ross 2021)

1. Introduction

1.1. Intro

In this thesis I will try to describe my process of working with free improvisation in tandem with composing for improvisers. I will discuss how these two concepts might relate to each other and what they mean to me. The reader will find a background of myself, the origins of this master’s degree project. How it all began, and how my focus shifted from one area of interest to the next, but always closely related to my heart of the matter, which in this case is free improvisation.

\(^1\) Sul ponticello means playing with the bow close to the bridge, which brings out a lot of overtones, giving it a nasal, “icy” or maybe even “spooky” sound.
In short, my initial idea was something I called a “concert installation”, where musicians would improvise for a long time together, to “see what could happen”. I wanted to explore music that evolved slowly, allowing for zooming in on details. If the music could stretch out for longer than a usual set (let’s say, one or two pieces in around 45 minutes to an hour), new things could emerge, I thought. A sense of rest, but a curious one, knowing that there was time to develop things slowly. And out of this, without the (maybe subconscious) stress of creating some sort of narrative. Slowing down the stream of ideas, I thought this would instead make room for other ideas.

This led me into studying minimalism and trying to merge it with free improvisation, using for instance different kinds of limitations, cycles, and loops (“manual loops” as I called it, and “human loops” as Ivar Grydeland (Grydeland 2017) called it, meaning using repetitions, but without using electronic devices). This in turn, paved way for composing scores, for instance graphic ones. Then I came up with the idea of having a “hat” filled with small paper slips, each with some sort of instruction how to play. This could be something concrete, for instance concerning how to deal with interaction or just a limitation of pitches, or something more poetic, meant more as inspiration.

But slowly I realized that something was a little off. I noticed that when playing my compositions together with others, I was missing something from free improvisation, and that was the creating-together-part. I concluded – slowly – that I enjoyed improvising together more than structuring or governing the music beforehand. I was also missing the spontaneity and surprise of free improvisation, that the music could start anywhere and then go anywhere.

So, this led me to diving deeper into free improvisation. This meant new interests and challenges. I started to think about how and what to practice to expand my vocabulary as improviser. How a change of mindset – the thinking while and about improvising - could help me in moving forward. To be as open as possible to as many inputs as possible. Then I went full circle, back to my compositions and etudes with a new approach, using them as practice tools for free improvisation. Through limitations expand the number of possibilities.

I kept conducting experiments (playing with other musicians) where we tried my compositions or ideas for structuring improvisations. These experiments were recorded and reflected upon, and then followed by new ones. Improvising, composing, reading, listening, and discussions were all very valuable parts of my process, leading to both new insights and new questions.

1.2. Purposes/aims/questions

The aims of this project changed over time. At first, I wanted to explore different approaches to structuring improvisation. I was curious about minimalism since elements of it had started to sneak into my music making, prior to the master’s studies. And improvising with a minimalistic approach was a bit new to me and excited me in a similar way as for example melody and harmony had excited me earlier (like in jazz and free jazz). The tension - and
maybe paradox - of trying to merge the openness and the-feeling-that-anything-can-happen I found in free improvisation with something as strict, repetitive, hypnotic and meditative like minimalism fascinated me. Questions that guided me through this part of the process was:

How can I merge minimalism with free improvisation?
How can I incorporate elements of minimalism into free improvisation, for instance “human” loops, cycles, repetition, and slow, gradual development?

How can I compose for improvisers?
How can graphic scores and instructions be used for structuring improvisations?

And then, as I halfway into my studies began to move away from composing and structuring improvisations, challenges when improvising freely emerged. I focused more on my own playing, than leading a group. Even though I had some sort of vague idea what I wanted the music to sound like (I thought of it as “abstract” - not so much focus on melody, harmony, tonality or rhythms on a grid), it was a shift from having a clear goal to more of an exploration of possibilities. Questions that guided me during this part of the process were:

How can limitations, instructions and compositions be used as a free improvisers practice tool?
What are my tendencies, habits, hang-ups or weaknesses, and how can I challenge these in order to expand my vocabulary, for instance roles, interplay and developing ideas and motifs?

1.3. Methods

“What happens if we…?”

During my master´s studies I didn´t really try to follow a straight path but instead took one step at a time. After taking the first step, I reflected upon where it had led me, and then I took the next one. “What if I go this way instead?” The process was that of a feedback loop of action and reflection.

One method that can be particularly useful in artistic research is the experiment-based method. This means that you design a series of experiments where you test different aspects or parameters, so that you can compare the experiments with each other and get ideas on how to design new experiments. (Nevrin 2019: 6)

This seemed to me to be a natural and inspiring way of working, and I thought it could be a fitting one, since I had some ideas about what to explore, but didn’t have a too clear goal. With this method I thought – hoped – the goal would appear somewhere on the horizon if I just kept at it, trusting the process. Letting a moving target to be just that – moving. The following words by Norwegian guitarist and improviser Ivar Grydeland served as inspiration throughout the process:

My project has been carried out in what, at times, have seemed to be of a random character. Put differently, I have strived at letting the music steer the project development. With active artistic aims, I have a list of things I left behind, a list of research tools and methods that I planned to use in order to back up my vaguely defined research questions and hypothesis. … I have explored, studied and jumped between randomly picked objects of desire. (Grydeland 2017)
I conducted experiments, something like rehearsals or jam sessions, where I tried out my (and others’) compositions and ideas for structuring improvisations (like borrowing elements of minimalism), as well as improvising freely without any explicit instructions.

These experiments were done mostly together with other musicians, but also in the solo format. The largest ensemble consisted of fourteen players. However, I worked mostly in duos and trios. It was something about the efficiency when experimenting. Everyone could largely influence the interplay and the musical outcome. I chose to work with a wide range of musicians with different backgrounds: musicians with and without a musical education, musicians with varying degrees of improvisation experience and musicians from different genres. Thanks to their perspectives, they could all contribute differently to playing situations, I hoped. With some musicians I met frequently, and with some only once. I found both ways rewarding. Meeting with the same musicians over and over made it easier to experiment and to compare both free improvisations and renditions of compositions. To dig deeper. But I also wanted to meet with as many as possible, since that meant having to be flexible, adjusting to new situations. Different experiences, different challenges.

We usually discussed what happened and how it felt. Sometimes we tried the compositions or ideas for structuring improvisations a couple of times, tweaking them a little bit. Reflections on experiments usually followed by me making plans for the next session. I took notes after each session about how I felt, and wrote down comments from the others. When listening back to the recordings I noted what I enjoyed listening to or not, and why I thought so. I wrote down ideas for the next session, what I wanted to try. Could be working with the same thing, maybe altering it in some way. It could also mean leaving it behind and coming up with a new one instead, for instance something contrasting. Discussions with fellow musicians were extremely valuable, leading to a couple of heuristics. More about that later. I also recorded informal jam sessions and wrote down reflections from these in a similar fashion. Listening to records and reading articles and literature also generated new perspectives and ideas for experiments.

The chronology looked roughly something like this: During the first semester I composed and played scores as well as both structured and free improvisations. The second and third semester I focused on structured and free improvisations, leaving scores behind. The fourth and fifth I used structured improvisations as practice tools for free improvisation and during the last I focused on improvising freely without any explicit structuring.

In short, a note app, a recording device and a handful of dedicated friends proved to be helpful from start to finish.

1.4. Background

As a teenager, I was aiming for becoming a bass player in an orchestra, completely absorbed with practicing sight-reading and all that stuff. Oh boy, I had Mozart for breakfast and Shostakovich for lunch. But then I went to a high school (Birger Sjöberggymnasiet in Vänersborg) with a pretty broad music curriculum and – maybe very important – committed teachers. Suddenly I had Miles Davis for breakfast, Bon Jovi for lunch, and Irish folk songs as a snack in between. A very impactful triumvirate of jazz, improvisation and contemporary music sparked the more creative side of my musicianship. Creating your own music, improvised or composed, was huge to me. So, future orchestra member went out the window. In through the door came somebody else. And this guy is still figuring out how to best serve
his place in the band. Since then, I have been immersed in jazz, free jazz and other kinds of improvised music, both as a student (at for example Musikhögskolan Ingesund in Arvika), as a teacher (at for example Malmö Kulturskola) and as a freelance musician.

Prior to my master studies I was working a lot with slowly developing improvisations, both in ad hoc jam sessions and recurring rehearsals with ensembles in which I was a member. We were often leaning towards working with an idea for a long time, meaning for instance repeating a few notes or letting the music stay in the same kind of mood for a long period of time. In these cases, it was rarely explicitly stated that we were supposed to do this, it just sort of happened every now and then.

*Here* (AAM 2020) is an example of such an idea with pianist Arne Forsén, drummer Andreas Axelsson and me on the bass. A highly rhythmic music, that to me resembled tribal drums from a southern continent, even though we rarely played a steady pulse. A thunderstorm of sounds, clouds of rhythm. The tonal material kept to a minor pentatonic, again reminiscing music from the south. Barren wastelands, a lonely tree in the desert, kind of.

Something else worth mentioning was a trio with vocalist Girilal Baars, reed and viola da gamba player Yann Le Nestour and myself. We experimented with what we called “duration concerts”. Different from the example of above, we were not aiming for working with a specific musical idea for a long time (even though it happened quite often), but instead we decided upon the number of minutes or hours for an improvisation. The first concert in this series lasted 90 minutes. The last one lasted 12 hours. This was interesting to me, since we were almost forced into another kind of approach to form. We were not able to create the same kinds of musical narratives as we otherwise would, but instead we could “rest inside the music”.

Around the same time, I was interested in and inspired by the music of Morton Feldman (the composer known for his soft and slowly evolving pieces of music, often with very long durations), minimalist composers such as Terry Riley (known for the iconic “In C”, made up by small motifs repeated over and over) and La Monte Young (known for his extensive use of sustained notes), the experimental chamber music group Skogen (playing slowly evolving semi-improvised pieces by Swedish composer Magnus Granberg) and The Necks (a trio making a music which to me is a hybridization of jazz, improvised music and minimalism). This had an impact on my improvising. Elements of minimalism started to sneak into my playing. And as an improviser with delusions of grandeur, I was looking for a way to merge all these influences into one music.

"Their paradigm is not the dance but the lotus seat” (Jost 1975: 158).

1.5. Free improvisation

Free? That’s great! I forgot my wallet anyway.²

Free improvisation, improvised music, free form, creative music; dear child has many names. One of the more intriguing ones I have heard is probably “exploding one’s belly” (Cobussen 2017: 32). I just had to use this as title of this thesis! When looking for an explanation of the

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² Forgive me. Just trying to be funny, but at the same time remind myself that words can have several meanings.
term, I found that it actually made a lot of sense to me and my degree project. In an anecdote from the world of Cantonese opera, the actors were asked to prolong their performance. In doing so, they improvised instead of following a script.

The addition of an episode to the performance through bao tou (“exploding one’s belly”) was the only means to realize prolongation. As they explained, Cantonese operas were performed without scripts before the 1930s. Actors were invariably required to bao tou during their performances. A good performance would depend on whether an actor had enough “stuff” in his belly. Thus, bao tou, has a connotation similar to that of improvisation. (Chan 1998: 208)

But what is “free improvisation”? Even though it might often refer to a specific genre of music with some specific traits and qualities, I often think of it more as a way of making music, in this case “free” meaning both “free from beforehand-decided stuff like melody, tonality, form, roles etc. (but none of which necessarily forbidden)” and “free to be as spontaneous as you like, following one’s intuition”. For instance, if a tonality sneaks up in one corner of the room, I won’t – hopefully - raise an eyebrow. But it doesn’t mean that me in the opposite corner must play something that corresponds to this tonality, in the traditional way.

However, during my master’s studies I aimed for what I at times referred to as “abstract” music, meaning a music without a set tempo, a fixed tonality or pre-composed melodies, together with a dissolution of the traditional roles of the instruments in an ensemble. All of these are common to the style or genre known as “free improvisation”. So, to me the term means two things, and they are more than often intertwined. And ever so often that little word “free” seems contradictory.

The term is also dubious through its hyperbolic self-image of being free, implying on some level that other kinds of music are not free. The experience of freedom is all too subtle and unpredictable to be expected to be generated solely by the distance to previous styles. On the contrary, that presupposed differentiation can equally be perceived as jarring, with its implied character of avoiding rather than allowing. (Nordeson 2018: 25)

I might be free from sight-reading dots and arrows in a score or from keeping track of when the bridge in a jazz standard is supposed to come, but I might not be free from everything. Like from the limitations of the instrument in my hands. Or the limitations of my skills. Or of my imagination. And then, habits - known or unknown. And oh, what the others are playing (or doing), lest we forget! And maybe expectations from them? Or from the audience. What about memories from an earlier session? The acoustics? Hell, even the amount of sugar, caffeine and/or alcohol running through my veins in that particular moment probably matter too!

So, “free” is a word that might imply too much, or mean very different things to (very) different people. Same might go for “free improvisation” then. But surely there must be a better term for it out there, just waiting to be found? Many have tried.

Nope. No scores. No memorized tunes. Making it up as you go along, often in groups, sometimes alone. For our purposes, it’s easiest to start there. (Corbett 2016: xiii)

Making it up as you go along! That’s a good one. Which leads me to why I’m invested in this kind of music making. One important quality with free improvisation for me is the “here-and-now”. To be able to focus on communication and interaction. I can learn and draw inspiration
from previous experiences, but I don’t have to remember what I did yesterday. Creation, not recreation.

The practice of spontaneously creating music in real time without the aid of manuscript, sketches, or memorization. (Nunn 1998)

The adventure, the element of surprise, the collective creation. The minimum of (explicit, at least) rules, the possibilities for making your own choices, in the moment, is what I enjoy the most. The music is here and now, and we can choose to use as little or as much from the tradition(s) and previous experiences as we want to. Therefore, free improvisation is exciting to me. It is to me a fantastic mix of play and art.

A sense of discovery, a musical discovery in the moment. (Pavone 2019)

1.6. Area overview

During my studies I read a lot of literature that proved to be valuable for my explorations and experimentations. Particularly inspiring was:

- **Butcher, John (2011). Freedom And Sound - This time it’s personal.**
  - **Butcher, John (2020): le son du grisly.** Butcher’s two articles were highly influential to my views on free improvisation: it helped me realize what I think is so cool about it. I understood how unique every moment in an improvisation is, and how unique every playing situation is. It also altered slightly my perspective on the improvisation-composition-dichotomy: why I compose and why I improvise, and which one of these to focus on during my studies.
- **Grydeland, Ivar (2017): Ensemble & Ensemble of Me - What I think about when I think about improvisation.**
  - This dissertation really showed me the power of patience. Patience regarding form: not rushing or forcing the music but letting it unfold “by itself”. Patience regarding interplay: To make a sound, wait for a response, listen for what could follow.
- **Holiday, Ryan (2014): The Obstacle is the Way.**
  - This book, inspired by stoicism, changed my mindset about free improvisation. I understood how many expectations I always had about how the music should sound or how it should be played. Reading this helped me greatly to focus more on being present and enjoying whatever happened in an improvisation, including perceived obstacles or frustrations.
- **Nevrin, Klas (2019): Music in Disorder - Counterplay, Complexity and Collective Improvisation.**
  - An artistic research project report that inspired immensely my explorations in group improvisation and collective creation, foremost in trying to find new possibilities through pointing the searchlight towards the huge number of variable parameters, how they all are at play simultaneously and how they affect each other.
- **Zanussi, Per (2017): Natural Patterns - Music making with an ensemble of improvisers.**
  - A dissertation that presented relevant insights regarding putting together an ensemble (how many musicians, which musicians and what kind of instruments), composing for improvisers (how, and how much), dissimilarities between improvising and following scores as an ensemble, and finally the artistic process (how one thing might lead to the next, and that it is ok to leave initial ideas if they no longer fit your intentions.)
2. Composition

2.1. Intro

What follows in this chapter is a description of a detour of some kind. In short, I started out improvising with elements of minimalism as inspiration and composing scores that in different ways aimed for a minimalistic musical outcome. The compositions mainly had either a minimalistic approach or an experimental approach (or a combination of the two). The first one was about things like repetition, motivic development or gradual change. I was looking for ways of creating cohesive improvised pieces, each one focusing on some parameter or parameters. Compositions as tools for merging minimalism with free improvisation. The other one could for instance be about challenging one’s interplay habits, to see what might happen when one is forced to act or react differently to what one is used to. What I didn’t work with that much are for instance melody, harmony and tempo/groove. These I had already been involved with earlier and wanted to move in the direction of a more “abstract” kind of music (at least that’s how I thought of it), which was a little uncharted territory for me, and therefore both interesting and challenging. After a while I moved away from composing and structuring, and more towards improvising freely. But that’ll be dealt with later (see 2.7.).

2.2. Minimalism (cherry-picking)

That which is made with a minimum of means. (Young n.d.; quoted from Schwarz 1996: 9; quoted from Gann 2005: 300)

![Composition 1960 #7 by La Monte Young](image)

Minimalism is often based on building large structures of music through the repetition of small cells, and the use of cycles and patterns. Minimalist works are often limited to only a few notes or rhythmic cells, but can last for hours, using countless iterations. A focus on process is a thing in minimalism; if there are changes, these are often subtle. This can make the music seem static, staying the same, and one effect it often can have on the listener – at least on me - is hypnotic. It can create a focus on the moment, rather than a goal-oriented narrative which can be found in a lot of other music genres, from operas to rock´n`roll to free improvisation, and this can in turn make beginnings and endings unimportant, like the music could go on forever. It also differs from many other genres in that it rarely makes use of tension-and-release. Minimalism is sometimes referred to as “trance music”, “process music” or even “going-nowhere music”. (Gann 2015)

A process happening so slowly and gradually that listening to it resembles watching a minute hand on a watch — you can perceive it moving after you stay with it a little while. (Reich 2005: 305-306)
My duration approach to improvisation was heavily influenced by minimalism. As mentioned, I thought that not having the pressure of creating a musical story in “the usual” duration (for instance one or two improvisations in 45 minutes) could open up for other possibilities. Let things take time, stick with ideas and develop them slowly. But I actually left the duration thing (meaning very long pieces) at an early stage of the process, since I realized that experimenting with repetition, gradual development etc., really didn’t need improvising for hours on end. It was more “efficient” to work differently, with shorter improvisations (or not really aiming for any specific duration). Play. Discuss. Play something similar or something contrasting, and then compare renditions.

While leaving the long durations behind, I still kept a number of traits that to me are characteristic for minimalism. These were repetition of small cells, repetition in cycles (a “cyclic thinking”), loops (though made by hand, and not using electronic devices) small and/or gradual change and slowly tweaking motifs, phrases and ideas. I was after the hypnotic and meditative feeling I could get from listening to minimalism music. However, at this stage of the process I wasn’t sure exactly how to go about it, and in what way(s) the musical outcome would or could manifest. I hoped that while keeping the development strict regarding some parameters, it would mean some degree of freedom in other parameters, leaving room for each musician to make his or her own choices in the moment of music making.

Multi-instrumentalist Ola Sandberg and I met on multiple occasions and improvised together, often with a keyword like “repetition” or something similar, but not specified in more detail than that. This led to interesting discussions about for instance repetition. Like repetition on several levels. For instance, on a micro level, sticking to a limited number of notes. Or on a macro level, Ola switching back and forth between the piano and his electronics a couple of times during an improvisation. We soon found out that we both enjoyed slowly evolving pieces of music. Here is an excerpt of a conversation via SMS between the two of us:

Mats: Thrilling gray areas all the time! You liked the seamless ones best?
Ola: Yes. Those that felt uniform and cohesive from start to finish. Analog instead of binary or how to phrase it.
M: Cool. I’m on the same track. The dream is to be able to play a three-hour set that just keeps on going! Maybe…
O: Yes, precisely! It would be interesting to strive for something like a seamless flow. But that maybe demands that we start with ideas and limit ourselves to them. But then one idea could be that of abrupt changes as well…
M: Yes, the latter is of course also a color on the palette. Lest we forget. Oh right, it would be fun to try different kinds of limitations: maybe a couple of notes, maybe a photo as inspiration, or imagining that one is stuck in syrup. On a deserted island. Or maybe only almost deserted…?
O: Exactly! The more specific the idea, the more distinct the framework maybe?
M: That could be. Maple syrup?
O: It’ll be like sending a request to one’s imagination.
M: “Are you there?”
O: So instead of the whole library, it’s only a chapter in a book… or a page, or a sentence. Word… letter.
M: Truly!
O: “Hello? I’ll hang up and try later.” (Sandberg & Dimming 2020)

I didn’t see it at first, but I had reasons to come back to both the “idea of abrupt changes” and “the more specific the idea, the more distinct the framework”. This will be dealt with later on in this text (see 2.3., 2.5., 3.5 and 4.1.).
Here (“Sound 1: Minimalism” in DiVA) is an example of me playing together with Sandberg. In this one we were joined by drummer Pelle Vallgren. This recording reminded me a lot of The Necks because of its slow development and long crescendo, and my bass playing seemed influenced by that of Lloyd Swanton (bass player in said trio) because of the limited number of notes.

Working with a minimalistic approach likes this started to give me new perspectives on change, form, time and… Patience. How far can you stretch something? It wasn’t only about gradually tweaking a motif when repeating it, it was also about just repeating it. Maybe it was ok that “nothing” was happening? Repetition was to me hypnotic - even without a set tempo or groove - and that was what I explored at this stage of the process. The music, I thought, didn’t need to “tell a story”, didn’t need contrasting parts and didn’t need the listener to hear the music from start to finish. I’m not sure I agree completely with the following quote - and it certainly didn’t work for me every time I tried it - but it inspired me to experiment and to challenge myself.

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all. (Cage n.d.)

Speaking of which, one quite challenging exercise I tried on a few occasions, and with different ensembles, I got from jazz trumpeter Jan Allan. He told a story of when Lee Konitz had them play just the note A for a full set at the jazz club Gyllene Cirkeln in Stockholm, some 50 years ago. According to him you were allowed to vary it as much as you liked, but never to leave that note. He found it both difficult and boring. So did I. Did I learn anything from this? Yes, I learned that I needed more options to vary a note; pitch, rhythm, use of space, dynamics, what have you. Or that it requires a lot of patience when you’re this restricted.

It became pretty boring, then we developed it. (Allan 2021)

2.3. Scores

Some of my ideas took the shape of scores, especially in the beginning of the project when I still wanted something concrete to put on a music stand in front of the musicians. (This later changed, see 2.7.). With these scores I had in mind improvisers coming together in cohesive pieces of music. Here are a few examples of these.
I was up all night with this one… “Följ pilarna i ditt eget tempo” is Swedish for “Follow the Arrows in Your Own Tempo”, and the idea was to have three sounds, three musical phrases, or something like that, and play them over and over in a cycle. You go through the three punctuation marks, but the content of these is up to the performer and it’s not even specified if it must be the same sound or phrase every time or if it’s ok with just an in-the-moment interpretation every new lap. Being that vague, it often meant me having to describe my intentions verbally anyway and I quickly realized that having a clearer score with more detailed instructions made it easier (as in less confusing) for others to interpret (“the more specific the idea, the more distinct the framework”), or that I could stick to only verbal instructions and not using the score at all. And I later switched to the latter.
What I wanted with this one was to focus on the dynamic parameter, the whole piece being just one long crescendo. Rendition lengths ranged from one minute to 20 minutes. Keeping a steady crescendo for that long was really challenging, and it forced me and the musicians I invited for this one to really pay attention to details, and to hold our horses. Great fun! Even though I was very pleased and proud of this artful score, it soon became apparent that a verbal instruction was enough (and often needed anyway) to reach my goals with this piece. One step towards abandoning scores.
Have a listen to “Kompositionsuppgift 1a” (“Sound 2: Kompositionsuppgift 1a” in DiVA). Participants were Katt Hernandez (violin), Milton Jordansson Pinto (guitar), Erik Blennow Calälv (bass clarinet), Pelle Vallgren (drums) and me (double bass).

Maybe my least imaginative score title to this date, “Kompositionsuppgift” meaning “Composition assignment”. But that I made up for when coming up with the following instructions, right? Parts 1 and 2 have graphic symbols (interpretations up to the performer). Parts 3 and 4 have a short motif of three ascending notes. Part 5 is a bassline with the instructions “Slow. Rubato. Feel free to develop”. Part 6: “Interact with 5. And 7?” 7: “You are a cat who cautiously but curiously pitter-patter about on a piano. From time to time wide-eyed looking at the others”. Quite different parts.

This created a music that to me was both austere and lively. Everyone stuck to their thing but still able to vary almost infinitely. A minimalism- and free improv alloy?

Interestingly, I think that the level of focus and attention increased when everyone was responsible for his or her respective individual parts. This stayed with me, and it later led to “The Hat”, described in 2.5. And also, some of the parts in “Kompositionsuppgift 1a” later appeared in some form in “The Hat”. (Those that didn’t are the first and the second, because they were a bit messy to explain to the ensemble. A problem similar to the problem with “Follow the Arrows in Your Own Tempo”.)
2.4. "Feldmanesque"

During the early stages of my master’s studies I wanted to create improvised pieces that would resemble the sound or feel of the music by Morton Feldman. This time I used a different approach to structuring an improvisation: not using scores, but verbal instructions. I gathered musicians who I thought would be fit for the task of “doing a Feldman” (or playing a “Feldmanesque” as I called it), meaning trying to emulate his music. First, I let us all listen together to one or two of his, and then I said a few words about how I perceived the music and what to possibly draw from it. It could be things like no set tempo, very soft playing with a lot of space between notes or phrases and tonality-wise floating somewhere in between tonal and atonal. Tone rather than noise. I did not study his music in that much detail, but rather tried to extract ideas. We had interesting discussions, for instance regarding the use of repetition; in some pieces there were a lot of them, something that reminded us of loops, but without a clear tempo, and in some pieces, there were few or no repetitions. In cases like this we agreed on a common approach to whatever we were discussing.

Feldman seeks to avoid memory relationships between the pitches, so while practicing, in addition to avoiding the obvious tonal relationships, I also think of Feldman’s ideal: “a totally abstract sonic adventure,” in which the aim was “to project sounds into time, free from a compositional rhetoric” (Feldman, 1985, p. 38), in choosing pitches. (Orning 2017: 87)

Let’s have a listen. Here is one rendition of “Feldmanesque” + a free improvisation, both from the same date, with the same musicians as in “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”, found above. (Katt Hernandez: violin, Milton Jordansson Pinto: guitar, Erik Blennow Calâlv: bass clarinet, Pelle Vallgren: drums and me: double bass). I believe it is quite interesting to hear the differences between the two.

The “Feldmanesque” is found in DiVA as “Sound 3: Feldmanesque”. It was fascinating for me to hear this music, because I thought we played more restrained than we would have otherwise (in a free improvisation, for example). The (improvised) bass line in the beginning of this was similar to the written bass line in “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”. I was aiming for some sort of free-tonal, abstract thing and flat sevenths and ninths had an open quality to them, I thought. Therefore, they both appeared later in “The Hat”.

And the free improvisation is found in DiVA as “Sound 4: Free improvisation”. Comparing the rendition of “Feldmanesque” with a free improvisation from the same session, I found the latter to be more dynamic, interaction being less subtle, with for instance quicker responses. Almost aggressive, at least compared to “Feldmanesque”.

Ok, it’s maybe not rocket science why “Feldmanesque” sounded like it did - I basically told us what to do. But why did the free improvisation sound the way it did? Was it livelier because we needed/wanted a contrast from the soft and stiff “Feldmanesque”? Or would it have been even livelier if we had played a hectic John Zorn piece or Peter Brötzmann style free jazz before?

Sådana frågor får vi aldrig svar på. (Åhlin, 1975, 0:18:05)

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3 (My) English translation: “Such questions we never get answers to”.

14
2.5. “The Hat”

“The Hat” was yet another way of structuring an improvisation. It was sort of a development of “Kompositionsuppgift 1a” but cut to pieces. I wanted the parts to be chosen by chance by the musicians, to add an element of surprise and indeterminacy. The number of parts were also multiplied. The idea was to have slips of paper - each with an instruction to be followed by the musician – in a hat. The lion’s share of the “slip instructions” dealt with minimalism (notes, intervals, motifs and repetition) or interplay. There were also some slips that were meant more as inspiration (being not so concrete). Up until this point, I had not (explicitly or deliberately) focused on interplay, and those slips were created more “for fun”, to allow for some extra experimentation). But surprisingly, interplay/interaction later grew to be one of the focal points of my research (dealt with later in this text, see 2.7., 3.3., 3.5. and 4.1.).

Most of the slip instructions were created by me, but there were also contributions by accordionist Mara Piece and bass clarinetist Erik Blennow Calālv.

Off and on there was a need of explanations before playing a slip, and we often discussed and learned together how to work with them. Together we decided on how strict we were to follow the slip instructions. (There was no preordained “correct” way). To really dig in to each slip and to properly follow through each experiment, we were often quite uncompromising and meticulous. However, we also tried more liberal and “musical” interpretations. We could say things like “let us now use the slips to 80%”, meaning it was ok to “slip” once in a while, while following an instruction on a slip. We also refined our interpretations of them just through trying them out a couple of times - just like rehearsing more conventional music - making it “our” music.

How we used it: We usually had one, two or three instructions each. And kept it secret until after playing. Fun and exciting! Created attention. Also, great ear training guessing what the others had. And this in turn made me become a more aware listener, meaning I started trying to listen more carefully to the others. “What is he doing?” “Where is she going?” Like with the parts in “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”, everyone responsible for their own created a focus and attention. “The Hat” felt like a great practice tool, having to tackle a new task every time you drew a slip.

Here are some of the instructions on the slips of paper found in “The Hat”:

Slip instructions that focused on notes, intervals, motifs and stuff like that:

- This one was called **Up up (Upp upp)** and was borrowed from “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”. A simple and minimalistic motif to play around with.

- And this one was called **Four eighth notes and a rest**. Like **Up up**, a simple motif to play around with.
• **Explore one note. (Utforska en ton).** This one was inspired by the Lee Konitz anecdote as told by Jan Allan above, to stick to just one note, but vary as much you liked. To me, essence of minimalism. Being challenging, it made me more aware of all the possibilities for variation. Dynamics, pitch, tempo and how to make it fit in to what the others were doing etc.

• **Minor sevenths. (Små septimor).** This interval had some open quality to it, I thought. It fit well to my vague idea about how I wanted the music to sound; not so melodic, but more abstract. And being confined to this interval, it created some free tonal sounding music. Also this one came from “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”.

• **Sustained notes in a high register. (Långa toner högt register).** Challenges and rewards similar to Explore one note.

• **Soft notes spread out in the register. (Mjuka enstaka toner, utspridda i registret.)** With this one, I was influenced by how I perceived a lot of the music of Feldman; soft and leaving lots of space, which gave room for the other players. This one also helped in creating that abstract kind of music I was looking for, not so melodic.

• **Use three notes or sounds and play these as sincerely as only you can. (Använd dej av tre toner eller ljud och spela dessa så innerligt som bara du kan.)** I think the “sincerely as only you can” created an extra focus with the player, since he or she suddenly was forced to make individual choices about what and how to play, almost pouring your heart out.

Slip instructions that dealt with repetition and stuff like that:

• **Recurrences. (Upprepningar).** A simple instruction that could be interpreted in many ways (and it sure did!) Recurrences and repetition were some of the things I regarded as the essence of minimalism and also what I wanted to draw from it. I actually had two of these in the hat since it felt so “minimalism-ish”, and it really created minimalism-sounding improvisations.

• **Think cyclically. (Tänk cykliskt).** Similar to Recurrences, but on more a of a macro level; for instance, playing something, then something else, and then come back to it later. Or maybe think of it as long loops, like a minute or so, so in that way it might differ from for instance the motifs above (that were meant to be repeated, at least in some way).

• **Continuously come up with new stuff. (Hitta på nytt hela tiden.)** This one I made to experiment with the opposite of repetition, inspired by Ola’s “idea of abrupt changes”. It was a great exercise for both creativity and technique since it forced the player to all the time vary how and what to play. I discarded it early on, since the musical outcome was far from “minimalism-ish” (not coherent, not using repetition), but surprisingly, something similar actually came up later in the project. Read on...! (See 3.5.)

Slip instructions that were all about interplay (leaning more towards exploring possibilities in improvisation and co-creation, and not really about minimalism, creating both tension and laughter!):

• **Soft reaction to the one to your right. (Mjuk reaktion på den till höger om dej).** Inspiration for this one came from attending Klas Nevrin’s class Kreativ Improvisation at Kungl. Musikhögskolan in Stockholm, where we discussed and experimented with different kinds of responses to input (like fast or delayed ones).

• **Move in a different direction than the others. (Gå i en annan riktning än de andra).** Pretty vague instruction, but it made the listening more attentive, I believe.
• **Find a tempo (or a rhythm) in the middle of the others’ tempos (or rhythms). Faster than the slowest, but slower than the fastest.** (Hitta ett tempo (eller en rytmik) mellan de andras tempo (eller rytmik). Snabbare än den långsammaste, men långsammare än den snabbaste). This one really made us focus on what the others were playing.

• **Mirror/mimic. (Spegla/härma)**. The music became radically different when one for instance tried to play as similar to somebody else. The interplay became really “close”.

• **Throw some more wood on the fire! (Elda på!)** With this one the player were supposed to add more energy to the music and make everyone play more intensely.

• **Slow down/calm down! (Bromsa/lugna ner!)**. Opposite of the one just mentioned, trying to slow down the musical stream and to calm the whole ensemble down.

• **Solitaire. (Solitär)**. Kind of the opposite to those mentioned above. You were supposed to “stay in your own bubble”, not reacting (too much) to what the others were doing.

And some that were more meant as inspiration:

• **You are a cat who cautiously pitter-patter about on a piano. (Du är en katt som försiktigt tassar omkring på ett piano)**. Also this one was came from “Kompositionsuppgift 1a”. Even though it might seem like a very vague instruction, it definitely did something to those who drew this slip, something about how they physically approached their instruments. They kept the image of the cat in their minds and tried to illustrate with their respective instrument how they pictured what it would sound like.

• **This one was pretty experimental… I wanted to see what might happen if one tried to play something that was in middle of twelve-tone serialist composer Arnold Schönberg and krautrock drummer Jaki Liebezeit. I thought that an improvised piece with this kind of instruction could create some sort of abstract, yet minimalistic music, but yeah, you get it… it was all too vague (like some of my scores) and I discarded it quickly.**

• **Slow, cool and nerdy.** Inspired by – and words borrowed from – an article by minimalist composer and musician Tony Conrad:

Young⁴, characteristically, went cooler than any of the rest of them, and started incorporating cool, long spaced-out tones in his classical pieces. ... It was a point of pride, with Young at this time, that he was slow and cool, which brought him to the point of a shared taste with me. Slow, cool, and (which neither of us would have owned up to) nerdy. (Conrad 2005: 315)

You’ll find more examples like these in the Appendix.

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⁴ La Monte, that is.
So, let’s have a listen to a combination of slips from the hat. In the first one ("Sound 5: Hat combination 1 ("If this would have happened...") in DiVA). a trio consisting of Mara Peice on accordion, Erik Blennow Calälv on bass clarinet and myself on the bass, drew the slip instructions **Explore three notes and their relationship. Up up** and the notes D, E and F#. In this example all three of us had the same instructions. This recording was very interesting to me. Listening-wise, this was the one I enjoyed hearing the most. It was beautiful in its laid-back tranquillity. However not static, but slowly moving forward, yet in a natural way. It didn’t strike me as sounding forced at all. But interestingly, no one were happy about it when we played. It was actually a frustrating experience. Literally, the worst one from that session, feeling-wise. It (felt like) it was so difficult to “do anything”, to be creative with these limitations. I even said:

> If this would have happened in a concert, I would have killed myself! (Me in the rehearsal 2021-01-15)

That raised some questions. How could the experiences differ so much? And how could I then ever know if I was playing something that I would enjoy listening back to later? And could this mean that the frustration had been fruitful? And did it matter if it sounded good afterwards? I started to tell myself to relax while playing, since I wouldn’t know anyway if I would enjoy listening to it afterwards, and this actually made some difference; I started to try to enjoy the moment more, to be present and not to worry too much about a recording (or an audience). To think of it as an exploration, not a performance. And slowly I started to accept obstacles while playing - almost welcome them as something that might be creativity-spurring.
“Sound 6: Hat combination 2 (“Felt like fighting…”)” (in DiVA) is another example of slip combinations drawn and played by the same trio. This time we had two each, namely **Solitaire + Sustained notes in a high register** (Blennow Calâlv), **Slow down/calm down! + Recurrences** (Peice) and **Throw some more wood on the fire! + Four eighth notes and a rest** (me). We all also had a limited number of notes to use (everyone had the same): Bb, Eb, E, F#. These were also chosen by chance.

**Whew! Tense! Felt like fighting! (Me in the rehearsal 2020-12-18)**

Yes, it was kind of a weird - but also kind of fun - combination of instructions. A to me completely new kind of interaction happened. One of us desperately trying to calm everything down, one desperately trying to increase the energy level and another one kind of floating on top of it all, interplay-wise.

For the 100 years anniversary of tango composer and bandoneon player Astor Piazzolla, Mara made a “special hat”, using tango-inspired instructions and fragments of Piazzolla’s melodies. This music became more melodic and had more fragments of tempi than when using the other hat. Interestingly, I found that fun but also quite challenging. In my note app I wrote “all too messy with all the almost-tempi and almost-harmonies”. Maybe it wasn’t abstract enough for my taste? Listening back to it I noticed that I missed the open quality of the other deck of cards, meaning lots of space both vertically and horizontally. I realized later that one probably could have tweaked these instructions or the interpretations of them a little bit, to come closer to my – somewhat vague – ideal. Oh well, I’ll give it a try for the 200-year anniversary…

We also mixed slips from the Piazzolla hat with the other one. This was interesting in a way I hadn’t thought about up to this point, namely about co-creation- and leadership-wise. It felt nicer to compose a collection of instructions together. Which made me think that I maybe enjoyed music making more when I wasn´t the one in charge for the music as much.

A couple of things I noticed when working with “The Hat”. First, even though I had written most of the paper slips, the chance element of drawing slip instructions gave me a sense of “we’re in this together”, more so than when playing my scores. Co-creation! And that was a joyful experience. Second, it was something about the surprises that was exciting to me. It kept us on the edge of our seats. Hm… at this point my initial idea of dragged-out, gradually developing pieces felt old. Maybe it was time to leave the lotus seat? Third, the experimental and explorative part of using “The Hat” interested me more after a while, those who challenged my habits and forced me to act or react in other ways than I used to. I realized how many more options there are out there, waiting to be found.

2.6. **Spela utav bara helvete!**

I began to experiment more with simple verbal instructions (bearing resemblance to those found in “The Hat”) to structure improvisations. Not necessarily to merge free improvisation with minimalism anymore, but more to challenge my own habits, and through that find new ways of creating together.

I was told a story. While being a hilarious one, it also served as inspiration to me during this project. “Spela utav bara helvete” in English would be “Play your ass off!”, “Go nuts!” or
something like that, and it was about Swedish composer Bo Nilsson, who was commissioned to write a piece for the inauguration of a church organ. Months passed, also weeks. With only days to the ceremony, the organist is – understandably - stressed. On the very day of the concert, still no music. The poor organist almost panicking. Finally, audience already seated, Nilsson shows up. He rushes through the aisle of the church. Organist soaked with sweat. Nilsson hands over a folder. The organist, prepared for just about anything. A sight-reading nightmare? He opens the folder and looks at the sheet music. There are only four words written in the score. Spela utav bara helvete!

How true or accurate this story was, I didn’t know. But it raised some interesting questions for me. Was this a “composition”? And what did the soaked-with-sweat organist play? And whatever he played, in what way was it influenced by those four words? How different would it have sounded if there were four other words? “Only play black keys”. “Play hymns from memory”. “Don’t screw this up”. Questions like these inspired me to experiment in rehearsals with similar instructions. To be able to steer the music in some direction with only a few words or sentences. Guided, or governed, improvisations. Or maybe: “almost free improvisations”? Limitations as a powerful tool to spur creativity. A composition could be something rather complex like a score with a lot to keep in mind, or it could be something trivial as just one word, aiming to inspire in some way.

On a few occasions during this degree project, I played a “piece” by and together with saxophonist Kari Sjöstrand called “Lövhalka”. There was only one instruction, and that instruction was to think about “lövhalka” (which in Swedish means something like fallen leaves making a road or pathway slippery) and try to illustrate that with music. The music was created in the moment, together. The outcome was a far cry from the rendition of “Feldmanesque” mentioned earlier. This one could go anywhere. It was cohesive in its non-cohesiveness. It was loud, it was soft. Everyone played at the same time, then suddenly everyone could stop, or someone was left solo. It was lyrical and melodic, then suddenly harsh and jarring. Was this an improvisation? A composition? Was it something like the following description?

An intellectual creation: such as … a written piece of music especially of considerable size and complexity? (Merriam-Webster Dictionary: 2022 “composition”)

Was it more or less a composition than “C-jam blues”, which I guessed most people would consider a composition, even though the number of notes and rhythms put to paper is limited? But, in rendition after rendition of this iconic tune, musicians improvise over it in more or less personal manners. There is a lot of freedom, but always relating to for example the twelve-bar blues form, the key, tempo and style. And maybe expectations from bandmembers and audience, and a thousand other things. This was a useful way for me to think about it:

Music is an ontological continuum between two place-holding endpoints - improvisation and composition - which are, philosophically speaking, the only two points on this continuum that do not exist. (Nordeson 2018: 100)

Where on the continuum my scores and experiments were, I couldn’t really tell, but at this point of the process, I was moving towards the improvisation-end.

5 This story was told to me by guitarist Tommy Lakso.
2.7. Transitioning

I kept mulling over composing throughout my studies. To compose or not to compose? There were pros and cons with both structured improvisations and free improvisations. When listening back to the recorded sessions I found that I enjoyed listening to my compositions and instructions roughly as often as I enjoyed listening to the free improvisations. And since I after a while discerned a pattern in my notes that I enjoyed playing free improvisations more than my own compositions, I started phasing out the latter. This is a simplification, I went back and forth, processes overlapping. A slow transition. Noticing this, my focus shifted from a composer- and bandleader perspective to more of an improviser- and group member perspective. I wanted everyone to be able to contribute equally as much.

“Democracy on the bandstand.” (Cymerman 2019)

I became more interested in the here-and-now, than deciding beforehand how or what to play. I wanted to welcome the surprise and the adventure and said goodbye to me governing the creative process. In some ways, at least! I was still in charge of bringing musicians together. Who? When? Where? This led me to understand how influential and significant each musician would be to how a free improvisation would unfold, and I began to view choosing musicians as a kind of composition. This kind of composition would have a tremendous impact on the sound and the interplay of an improvisation. More so than when playing my previous compositions. So, instead of creating scores and hats, my job became instead to choose musicians. How many? What kind of instruments? These questions became crucial.

An acoustic double bass being the weapon of choice for yours truly, I started to look for a combination of instruments and musicians that would allow me to express myself as freely as possible, without me telling anyone what to do. A soft-spoken string trio, for instance, would probably make it easier for me than let’s say, an orchestra of high-octane baritone saxophones.

And so, when musicians were gathered, my intention would be to not steer the music in any kind of direction more than anyone else. This made a huge difference in my music making, since I much more could – and had to - rely on them. And if I let people do their thing, co-creation could flow freely, I thought. Hypnotic, meditative and slow moving? So be it. Hectic and fast-changing? So be it.

With free improvisers, I give away a lot of my control, and also place a great deal of trust in them. (Zanussi 2017: 33)

So why composing? My ego, I wanted to show something that I made, only me? Or to have something concrete to show? Working with free improvisation, it sometimes felt like I had accomplished nothing. Having a score in your hands at the end of a project like this might be a clearer result. Trying to develop as an improviser was vaguer to me.

Bringing a composition to an ensemble could mean wanting something specific (could be anything; minimalism, style of interplay, a melody) to happen. But a composition could also function as a tool for experiment: “let’s see how this one plays out”.

Most composition for improvisation historically, deals in some way or another with ways of “getting away from” or “disrupt” habitual patterns - habits in the playing - so that other structures, patterns and tone textures can manifest themselves”. (Doverud 2021)
So, in the early stages of the process I was composing because I knew what I wanted, but at a later stage I was composing to move away from my habits when improvising freely, at least to discover more alternatives. A different goal, leaning more towards an experimental and explorative approach. I hoped that breaking new ground could make me a “freer” improviser.

3. Improvisation

3.1. Intro

At this stage of the process of my master’s studies (roughly two years in), I wanted to move away from structuring the music, other than suggesting play dates for improvisers (who, when and where), and my focus shifted more to my own playing and improvising. Of course, how and what I was playing would steer the music in some direction, but hopefully on the same terms as my co-players.

However, I was still looking for what I called an “abstract kind of music”, not so much emphasis on melody, harmony or tempo, and still moving away from the traditional roles of the instruments and moving towards that “democracy on the bandstand”-thing. And my solution to this was to find musicians who already did play in this way, without me telling them what to do. Another kind of composing: Composing the ensemble.

But improvising without a score in front of me and without some explicit limitations or instructions led to new problems and questions to arise. New stuff to practice, new stuff to ponder. But what and how? This chapter deals with some of this. For instance, when improvising freely, still having expectations about the musical outcome and about the interaction, and how a change of mindset resolved that (a slightly different approach to thinking while and about improvising). I will also discuss how I used my compositions as practice tools to expand my vocabulary as improviser and the importance of just feeling good with one’s instrument (both being in shape and accepting whatever comes out of it).

3.2. Awkward silence

During the project I thought a lot about how to begin an improvisation. I started doing so after noticing that I often enjoyed the music that appeared after a few minutes in a recording of myself, more than the music in the very beginning. Having an idea in my mind already on how or what to play (like a composition or an instruction) often made it easier for me to get started. And then, usually as soon as I was “in” - as soon as flow showed it’s beautiful face - the music ran “by itself”. It was something about having something to focus on that could help flow and imagination. For instance, the simple slip instruction, be it something concrete like Explore one note or something extra-musical like You are a cat who cautiously pitter-patter about on a piano. But without it, there was risk for a writer’s block. Or maybe “improviser’s block”.

(That in combination with sometimes feeling insecure just before an improvisation was about to start. I realized after a while that I often was so anxious about the sound of my own playing, simply because being afraid of not sounding good, and how that affected the experience of making music. I’ll come back to that. See 3.4.)
I started to look into how to approach the beginning of an improvisation. There are of course countless of ways to do this. Here follow two quotes that to me stands for two quite different types of approaches. First:

That is exactly how you start talking: just chitchat. You don’t start with the hot stuff: ‘So, you vote for… well, well… and how come? And are you out of your mind?’ (Ribbing 2014)

From Swedish etiquette expert Magdalena Ribbing’s quote above I drew a lot of inspiration in that an improvisation doesn’t need to be epic-magical-grandiose-hypnotic-meditative-tremendous-and-monumental from the very first nanoseconds, but instead you can start with something small, something tentative. Say something, wait for a response, say something more. Trying the water, looking for common ground. And then, when and if you do find common ground, build from that. Then:

Just jump into the energy! Good way to start an impro. (Ljungkvist 2020)

From Swedish saxophone player and improviser Fredrik Ljungkvist’s quote above I also drew a lot of inspiration, but instead in that an improvisation doesn’t need to start small, tentative and looking for common ground: it can actually be epic-magical-grandiose-hypnotic-meditative-tremendous-and-monumental from the very first nanoseconds.

To my experience, the musical outcome of these two approaches were drastically different, and I experimented with trying them both out. (It was not always a problem though, thank heavens! I mean, if someone else started, I could just tag along, or even coast along, waiting for inspiration to emerge. When using “The Hat”, I worked quite a lot with different approaches to responding to input from environing sounds, rhythms, phrasing, etcetera, etcetera and etcetera, but was also something that I felt could be researched and experimented to a much larger extent). But then, how do I know which approach to use?

I had a very rewarding chat with Mats Gustafsson (another saxophone player and improviser) about improvisation, interplay and a plentiful of related topics. He offered some insightful thoughts about how to approach starting an improvisation, and he boiled it down to these beautiful words:

It’s not about learning to respond in a certain way, or to start an improvisation in a certain way. One has to trust the situation, one has to trust one’s co-players. Only then can it become a real sharing of the present. (Gustafsson 2021)

Hearing this, I started to wonder if I really had left composing behind. I found that I still had a lot of expectations, hopes and wishes about how my music were to sound like, and that I in a way tried or wanted the free improvisations to move in certain directions (like using repetition, gradually changing or that the development of a piece had to be logical or stringent to me in some way). There were more crucial differences between composed or improvised than I had thought of. It was not only about leaving scores behind, but it also had to do with a different approach to the music making. And this in turn slowly led to shift of mindset. Which segues us into the next subchapter…
3.3. Mindsets

You can’t control if that guy cuts you off in traffic. You can’t control if that guy at the supermarket was mean to you. The only thing you can control is how you interpret and respond to that information in your mind. (West 2015)

So, a (slow, but still) breakthrough was when I slowly understood that I often was full of expectations and wanted it to feel and sound in a certain way. Sometimes, for instance when improvisations started with something unexpected or improvising in a new constellation not directly connected to my degree project, I felt more open to whatever-might-happen-next. Moreover, I generally felt happier after a session like that. Even if I certainly had my favorite sounds and favorite ways of interplay etc., I started to try staying as open as possible when improvising. Even curious about and desiring surprises, which was quite different from my minimalist-approach-compositions and scores.

Play it where it lies, a golfer would say. (Holiday 2014: 149)

I have a couple of sources of inspiration to thank for this. Sources that inspired me to move in a different direction and made me think differently about approaching the start of an improvisation, and improvisation in general.

One of these sources were saxophonist, improviser and fellow master student David Bennet. During my second year of studies, we met quite frequently (often once a week) and practiced and experimented together, as well as discussed improvisation, composition and music in general. In one of our sessions, he uttered the following about interplay, co-creation and improvisation. Hands down, mind blown:

We are listening for possibilities. (Bennet 2021)

Two other sources for this were reading The Obstacle Is the Way6 (Holiday 2014) and listening to the podcast Philosophize This (episodes on stoicism). These inspired me greatly to alter my mindset when improvising from trying to create coherent pieces of music with certain kinds of sounds or certain kinds of interplay to just… let go. Accept whatever happens, go-with-the-flow, chew whatever bone thrown at me. Simply, not worrying too much if the music we played lined up with the ideals in my (or someone else’s) mind, but instead focusing on the moment - being present – and on the collective creation.

Maybe this whole thing was synonym to leaving composing for improvising. Clarifying for myself the differences between improvising freely and improvisation in a structured way (like following the instructions in a score) made it easier for me stay present and respond to whatever input there is. Suddenly it felt like I could use everything; developing a specific idea, like slowly tweaking a motif or a sound, but I could also stop right in the middle of it, changing to something completely different. This in turn meant welcoming surprises.

"It's the uniqueness of every situation that is important to me.” (Butcher 2020: 62)

After hearing Mats Gustafsson talk about trusting one’s co-players, I started to “actively” trust the others and the situation, if that makes sense. And since “the situation” also included me, I

6 A book inspired by stoicism.
started to also trust myself and my own playing. It changed the way I think about and respond to what the others played. Less anxiety, more curiosity. This in turn led me to discussing mistakes with myself. What is a mistake? And do they matter in an improvisation? I figured that one could say that in a way there are no mistakes in an improvisation. Or that mistakes are a part of it, part of the adventure. This had some impact on my playing, or at least my mindset while playing. I allowed myself to take more risks, to challenge myself to try stuff out when improvising (be it for instance being quiet for longer periods than what felt comfortable, abruptly changing ideas in seemingly illogical ways or playing a melody with a bow in a high register even if I was unsure about whether it would sound beautiful or not – if that was my intention).

One absolute key is that one can’t be afraid of making mistakes - one must almost seek them out - otherwise you’re never fully present. Only playing defensive and trying to fit in, it’s not interesting! (Gustafsson 2021)

Even though I at this point did not try to merge free improvisation with minimalism, one of the features of the latter - as I saw it - was the focus on the moment, that beginnings and endings could seem unimportant and that the overall form or structure of the entire piece was built up of tiny cells, and I realized that that had stayed with me. This went hand in hand with my new “stoic approach” to improvisation. Come what may!

To be ok with the process of finding. I enjoy that struggle. (Mendoza 2019)

3.4. Wow, a shift of mindset, was that all?

No. Unfortunately not. Slowly I also began to realize that being confident with my own instrument and my own playing was crucial to how I felt about improvising (or playing in general) with or without others. If I for instance felt like I had a nice sound coming out of my bass, it felt like I could do anything, meeting any playing situation with eagerness. Then it was also easier to be present and to interact to my co-players. And the opposite, if I felt like nothing sounded good from my instrument, I got intimidated. Fear of making mistakes limited the number of options in the moment. Having something to say, but not being able – or dare - to say it. Imagination crippled by lack of confidence.

I think that for me the answer was two-fold. A change of mindset (accepting whatever comes out of my or the other’s instrument, for instance) was one of the answers. Almost a quick fix! The other one was a completely different approach, namely honing my skills in the practice room.

And there is no way around it: it’s only practice. Practice, practice, practice, practice, practice. And when you have reached a very high technical level, then it can work intuitively. Because you can react absolutely immediately, because you have the technique to do it. (Gustafsson 2021)

Yup, I almost forgot about that part. Practicing your instrument. Can be crucial. Not necessarily to become the most virtuoso musician, but at least to feel confident when playing. To feel at home, behind the bass. I noticed that when I enjoyed playing my instrument, without too much anxiety, I had no problems for instance to begin an improvisation. Of course, there were other factors that made it difficult. For instance, the sound of the room, gut strings going out of tune or someone playing so loud I couldn’t hear myself.
But practicing was not only about confidence and about feeling good. It was also about vocabulary. To expand the number of ways of starting (or ending) an improvisation (or a phrase, or a sound). To be able to play soft or loud. Beautifully or horribly (and anywhere on that spectrum). Being able to quickly adapt and adjust to input from other players. Or the opposite, to “be in my own bubble”. These are of course just a few examples of many.

Falling into my usual patterns was sometimes frustrating, and it could feel like I was playing the way I did yesterday, regardless of if I wanted to or not. More options could lead to more deliberate choices, I thought.

What “stuff” did I have in my own belly? What did I want to fill it with? And how? (This will be dealt with further down, see 3.5. and 3.6.). And yes, what needed to go? (Some of that was dealt with in the Mindset chapter). The following koan-like words by saxophonist and improviser Evan Parker inspired me to keep working on stuff in the practice room, but in the moment of co-creation try to clear my head of expectations (as much as possible), start from zero and be open to anything:

> The last thing you need to do is rely on material that is already fixed in your mind, but if you don’t have anything fixed in your mind, you have no starting point. That’s the central paradox, really. (Parker 2017)

The need for stuffing the belly did however not only come from a need. “Less anxiety, more curiosity” (mentioned earlier) was a tremendously nice feeling, and it made me start exploring different kinds of interaction – not just out of need. That curiosity also spilled over on the handling of my weapon of choice (the double bass). And suddenly I remembered that overwhelming spirit of inquiry, discovering sounds from my instrument and how they might be combined sounds from other instruments.

> A gigantic library of techniques, colors and sounds, because this is the library that is you. And hell, that’s the most important thing there is, that you build your own individual language that is Mats Dimming. (Gustafsson 2021)

3.5. Back in the shed

So, now I knew that I needed (and wanted) to practice. But what and how?

> No one really knows how to deal with the unexpected. How do you rehearse the unknown? (Shorter 2013)

During my three years at Kungl. Musikhögskolan, I studied classical double bass for Michael Karlsson since I wanted to improve my technique (especially with the bow). And this proved to be one answer to the “what and how” to practice.

On the composition-improvisation continuum, my master’s studies were spent most often closer to the latter end. I did improve my bowing skills. But practicing and playing classical music (like bowing exercises, scales, arpeggios, solo pieces and orchestral excerpts) - in which there was little to no improvisation, and the degree of interpretation was much more limited than in my own improvisation-based compositions (mentioned earlier), forced me in trying to produce a certain specific sound (decided by somebody else, namely the composer and my teacher) over and over. I worked on technical details to a higher degree than I
otherwise would, because in studying classical music, I could not “get away with” personality, aesthetic choices, etc. Just being “Mats Dimming” wouldn’t do.

After about a year or so, I started to feel much more confident with using the bow – which made me dare using it more often - and suddenly I had more colors on the palette. For instance, I could play both softer and louder, I had an increased control of tone and a more articulate execution of the initial attack. (I had been using the bow a lot in improvised music also before my studies, but the number of tools for expression were more limited back then). So, studying “not-free” music made me freer when playing “free” music. I gained more freedom through constraints and limitations. Diamonds form under pressure! Karlsson put it this way:

Even if you’ll never use that exact bowing in real life, it makes things available when you master a thing like that. (Karlsson 2022)

I did however also notice similar effects (constraints and limitations as powerful practice tools) when using my own compositions (“The Hat” for instance). I’ll come back to that (see 3.6. and 4.1.).

One must tailor one’s practice routines. And constantly review them. You could probably work on anything, and it would push you in some direction. What do I need today?

Practicing can be just about anything; it is a very personal matter, and there are many different strategies used by improvisers. One musician might spend hours exploring technique alone, while another performs every time she/he picks up the instrument, regardless of the absence of an audience. Indeed, sometimes it is unnecessary to make a distinction at all in free improvisation between “practicing” and “performing.” After all, the term “rehearsal” implies rehearsing. Nothing in free improvisation is ever heard (live) more than once, so (unless recorded and heard back) there is really nothing to rehearse, in the usual sense of the word. The “practice session” focuses instead on the creative PROCESS and the musical materials chosen to work with. (Nunn 1998)

David Bennet and I tried lots of different concepts for challenging us in a variety of ways. Here is one example. In this one we gave ourselves one instruction each. David had “be more aware of how I develop ideas, and to not be so restless” and I had “be aware of what ‘tempo’ I’m playing, though not a steady one. Like, am I playing faster or slower than David? I’m supposed to play differently than David”. I got the idea for my instruction from reflecting on recordings of myself. I had noticed that I often played slower than the others and that I was more often following them, than taking own initiatives or “solos”. So I wanted to try something else, maybe an opposite approach. This is a good example of my working method – listening to recordings of myself, finding out what or how I usually played or approached the playing situation, and then tried tweaking it, developing it, or even trying to do the opposite. Have a listen to it! (“Sound 7: Practicing/experimenting with David Bennet” in DiVA).

Speaking of challenging one’s habits. Much thanks to discussing the topic of playing coherently with Joakim Milder, I started thinking about what it even means. When is an improvisation coherent? He gave me a very interesting and valuable assignment: try to improvise incoherently. This I did and I quickly concluded that changing ones playing as often as possible (dynamics, playing technique, interaction-wise etc.) soon became a coherent way of playing. The incoherent playing was coherent. (Wow, Sandberg was right! The “idea of abrupt changes”). I also concluded that you could view coherence/incoherence differently. Something I might think of as incoherent, someone else could experience as coherent.
This in turn led me to experiment with opposites ends of continuums in other areas of my work. For instance, even though my mindset about the starts of improvisations had changed (less worried), I still wanted to explore different approaches to it. And to do that, I did a series of what I called “miniatures”. A miniature was a very short piece, like a minute or so. Improvising many short pieces = improvising many starts of improvisations. So, I found myself working with these very short pieces, after all that work with slowly evolving pieces, initial idea of long duration concerts etc.! I basically went from twelve-hour pieces to one-minute pieces.

Discover the recipes you are using and abandon them. (Eno & Schmidt n.d.)

Lo and behold, these miniatures proved to be very useful practice tools for interplay and creativity as well. They invited us to work with contrasts (again, opposites, but on a micro level). Both individually and as a group. For instance, dynamics (how much?), density (how much?), communication (how much?), tonality (how much?) and rhythm (how much?). And do all of us play every time?

Here (“Sound 8: Three miniatures” in DiVA) are three miniatures played in a row by Peice, Blennow Calälv and me. Instructions were to play circa one minute per miniature and trying to contrast the previous one.

And here (“Sound 9: Practicing on my own” in DiVA) is an example of a miniature piece (solo double bass) I recorded for a seminar with Klas Nevrin at Kungl. Musikhögskolan, to present my artistic work in progress. Around that time (last semester of master’s studies) I started to work with slip instructions from “The Hat” (and similar limitations) as practice tools for myself. (Going back to them will be dealt with in the next subchapter). For this one, I had limit – and encouraged – myself to develop the use of the creaking noise created by high pressure and little movement of the bow.

3.6. Going around in circles

So, I had noticed how the challenges in playing compositions and structured improvisations led me to having more options - tools - when improvising freely. It had put pressure on both my playing (like forcing me to act or react in to me unfamiliar or uncomfortable manners, and to be creative with a minimum of material) and listening (like trying to keep track of what the others were doing). The latter was almost something like a guessing game, which sharpened my ears and attention. “What is he doing?” “Is she responding to me now, or to him?” It had forced me - in a playful way - to make new kinds of moves, in ways that made me step outside of my comfort zone and to find new possibilities within improvisation and co-creation. One could possibly say that working with limitations led to more options, and to more freedom. Lessons learned will be discussed in more detail in the Artistic results chapter.

And it was terribly useful to do these kinds of limitations like “now we do this, but you can’t do that”. What happens to the music then? And in a group - extremely important - because you learn something from this. If you have worked for - let’s say, a week - with setting up rules, limitations, frameworks (you focus on maybe just one or two parameters and nothing else is allowed) and then set the music free, then stuff happens, damn! For you have just done that, it’s at the top of the backpack. Easiest to reach, you know. And then you have your recent experience accessible, and it comes up instantly and then everything functions intuitively. It’s fantastic what happens.

(Gustafsson 2021)
Understanding the efficiency of this working method, I went full circle; back to the structured improvisations and compositions, but this time using them more as etudes, and less as something to be used in a live performance. In the case of using my compositions from earlier stages of the process, “The Hat” proved to be easiest to work with. One or two short simple instructions or limitations was quite enough challenge, trying to “obey the rules” – but still having maneuver room for improvising in a personal manner (a good balance between subordination and freedom). It was also very easy to create and add more slips with new instructions.

Here are two excerpts from my note app, reflecting on practice sessions by myself. In the first one, back to those limitations set in one of the examples in the 2.5.: only allowed to use D, E and F#.

Starting on the D-string. After a while I switch to one octave up, on the G-string. It sounds pretty good! But then, moving to yet another octave higher, it’s getting difficult. Uncomfortable. This area of the fingerboard… murky waters. Where are those notes hiding? Reference points are miles away. And switching between these three octaves? Hard. And trills? Jeez! How do I trill between D and F#? They are too far away. This needs hours and hours. (Dimming 2019-2022)

In the second one, I gave myself the limitation of only playing softly. Inspired from the quite challenging slip instruction “Soft notes spread out in the register”. Piano, pianissimo. I noticed quickly that also this was something I could spend countless of practice hours on.

This also comes with some difficulties. Difficult to get the tone going with the bow with little pressure. And yes, of course. How soft is “soft”? Occasionally, when carried away, I played something I would call “mezzo-forte”, at least in that room. Then I took a step back, volume-wise. Next, I’ll try this exercise in the middle of night. Instruction: play all night, but without waking up the neighbors. (Dimming 2019-2022)

I also started to use to the slip instructions in another way. I found that I could use the slip instructions without actually drawing them physically from a hat, but instead to pick them from inside my mind. This in a non-explicit way, when an improvisation already had started, and especially in situations where I found myself cornered in some way. For instance, if I suddenly ran out of inspiration, if I felt I had used “all my tricks” or if my co-players played something that I had no idea how to respond to (oh yes, it happened every now and then). (See 4.1.)

Learning a large repertory of vocal and speech passages (i.e. the “stuff” to be applied during improvisation) (Chan 1998: 208)

At this stage of the process, I had quit using “Follow the Arrows in Your Own Tempo” as a score, but instead used it as an inspirational tool for myself, when looking at the process as a whole. It felt like I was going in circles, but in a positive and rewarding way. To focus on some aspect or aspects of music making for a while (like minimalism, repetition, motivic development, gradual change etc.) and then letting it go, moving on to some other aspect (like presence, interaction, communication, practicing etc.), but with new skills earned from what had come before. Something like new layers on top of old ones with each new “lap”. Going back to improvisation, but with elements of minimalism as a color on the palette (having been diving deeper into it), much like in the projects prior the master’s studies. Back to square one? Maybe more like “square one 2.0”!
The combination of having expanded my vocabulary (like being creative with a minimum of means, more ways of interaction etc.) and overcoming my obtrusive obsession with creating coherent pieces (minimalism – good riddance!), and instead enjoying a feeling of “resting inside the music” and focusing on the moment (minimalism – good morning!) proved to help in improvising longer pieces. The music could go on forever, as I wrote in the chapter on minimalism. So, in a way all this work actually did pave way for my initial idea of “duration concerts” or “concert installations”. All it took was a great deal of work and shift of mindset… Which leads us to…

4. Artistic results

4.1. Intro

I took quite a detour during my three years as a master’s student. In the genesis of my degree project, I set out to merge free improvisation with minimalism, and doing so through composing. At times however, it felt like I was looking for what I was looking for (which I think of as being part of the adventure of exploration!), and at the end of the studies, I entirely focused on free improvisation, but with elements of minimalism sneaking in here and there (just like the music I was doing prior to my studies). Circles!

And the end result cannot consist of a straightforward answer, or even success, but of the presentation of fruitful new questions and a tentative yet courageous unravelling of the failures. (Hannula 2002: 81; quoted from Rosenberg 2013: 36)

I did however acquire some new skills and knowledge along the way! The main takeaways were **new tools for improvising, new tools for practicing, experimentation and exploration** and a **slightly altered approach to free improvisation, composition and minimalism**:

- **New tools for improvising.**
  I now have more stuff to use when “exploding my belly” when improvising freely, thanks to my studies. Here are some of them:

Some tools (or concepts) that I can clearly relate to my work with minimalism are motivic development, repetition, loops and cycles. For instance, if I play a short motif - let’s say, low note pizzicato --> high note pizzicato --> scratchy sound with the bow – I am now aware about more possibilities to vary it and also actually able to vary this motif in many more ways than I was before the master’s studies. To go into details about all these ways of varying just a single motif would probably take a few hundred more pages, but here are some examples:

  - The order of the ingredients to the motif can be varied.
  - One of the ingredients can be left out or doubled.
  - The speed can be varied, contracting or expanding the motif.
  - The rests between the ingredients can be shortened or even removed while the notes and sounds can be extended. And the opposite.
  - Other ingredients can be added to the motif.
  - It can be played softer or louder, and different parts of the motif can be treated differently, dynamic-wise. And then we have crescendos and diminuendos.
The motif can be played “in my own bubble”, not reacting to the sounding environment, and the opposite: I can (try to) fit it in where there are silences or together with other sounds.

I can view and use the motif as an accompaniment to a co-player or as a leading part.

Pizzicato can be traded for bowing, and vice versa.

The scratchy sound can be altered to just-a-little- scratchy-and-a-almost-a-pitch.

The pitches (low and high) can be varied.

A motif can be repeated a few times, then left while something else happens, and then come back. For instance, in a cycle. (Motif -> new motif or idea -> coming back to the old motif -> yet another new motif or idea -> the old motif again switching between them. This can of course be seen as an idea in itself!)

ALL OF THE ABOVE CAN AND PROBABLY ALWAYS WILL BE FUSED IN SOME WAYS (DELIBERATE OR NOT) AND ALL OF THEM EXIST ON A CONTINUUM: HOW MUCH OR HOW LITTLE?

I also expanded my vocabulary when it comes to interaction and interplay, which means I now have (or at least am aware of) more possibilities of varying how to act and react.

I am now more aware of the spectrum of roles. I can wait for others to take initiatives and then follow them, taking on the role as an accompaniment or backdrop for someone else to shine on top of. But I can also take initiatives myself (to lead, or to “take a solo”), letting the others serve as accompaniment to me.

I am also more aware of the spectrum of responses. I am better at responding in a quick, aggressive and direct way, for instance play at the same time as somebody else or in the spaces between sounds. That’s one end of the spectrum. On the other hand, I am better at responding in a slow, not so direct, fashion. Or even not responding at all, shutting out my co-players (at least to some extent, it seems impossible to do it completely). Oh, how I’d like to pick Ribbing’s brain on this matter!

I am also more aware of the possibility to – and dare to – be completely silent (I don’t have to make any sounds at all!). And the opposite of that (for instance, playing a lot and all the time, and also maybe louder than everybody else).

I boosted my listening-for-possibilities. I think of it as an expansion of my “sound and interplay imagination”. What is there, what am I hearing? What is not there, what am I not hearing? Personally, this is the skill that I believe is the most valuable to me, at the moment. To me, it basically means finding out what to play. For instance, rhythm. What rhythms are there? Is my co-player playing a lot of fast rhythms? Then it might be a good choice to play something slow/er. Or pitches, is it dense in the low register? Then I might move on top of that.

I have an overall revamped technique, especially with the bow (I am better at producing the sounds I want to hear - be it gorgeous, grotesque or whatever) but also when it comes to volume/dynamics (I can now play both softer and louder) and sound
(I have a fuller sound coming out of my bass thanks to extensive listening, experimentation and practicing).

When needed, I can use the slip instructions in a non-explicit way, picking any of them “from my mind”, but not actually physically drawing them from a hat. I can – at any moment – pick for instance some of the more concrete ones, like playing soft notes spread out in the register or limit myself to just one single note. Or I can think of some of the more extra-musical and inspirational ones, like imagining that cat pitter-pattering about on the piano.

They are also quite easy to modify as you go! The soft notes can become soft-but-not-too-soft or soft-but-not-spread-out-in-the-register. That exploring of a single note can become exploring a single noise or exploring-one-note-but-on-an-extreme-volume-level. And the cat can become a lion-that-furiously-hammers-away-on-a-grand-piano or a lion-that-lethargically-chichats-about-the-upcoming-election.

- **New tools for practicing, experimentation and exploration.**
  Suddenly I had loads of that! Especially “The Hat” was rewarding (and fun) to use. Playful, challenging, surprising. And as mentioned earlier, it is easy to just come up with new slip instructions. Expanding the number of practice tools to expand the number of improvising tools.

  Reflection (listening back to recordings of oneself) as a practice tool. It was not a surprise to me, but I understood on a deeper level how powerful this can be. Finding out what I usually do - how I usually act, react or sound – and then try to challenge that. What other options are there? Maybe trying opposites, for instance.

- **A slightly altered approach to free improvisation, composition and minimalism.**
  Free improvisation! My approach to improvising is today more relaxed. I’m not as anxious of starting an improvisation and not as anxious of making mistakes. I am almost looking forward to that awkward silence! I am better at letting whatever happens happen if it happens. If the music doesn’t match my expectations, I am (more) ok with that now. I don’t bother myself with hyperbolic delusions of grandeur, that every piece must have a certain kind of narrative. A relaxed focus.

  All of this means I am also enjoying every playing situation more. Not only in free improvised music, but this new mindset/approach is also spilling over to other genres. “Today we did like this - cool.” I also don’t worry as much if the music sounds “bad”, because listening to a recording afterwards might show it in fact did sound “good”. And I never know what my co-players or the audience might think, maybe they like it.

  I am also (almost) looking forward to new challenges when improvising freely, since it can push me in a new direction and eventually lead me to new possibilities.
So, what´s so cool about improv? Thanks to countless of rehearsals, jam session, literature studies and discussions with peers and teacher, these studies enlightened me about which of the qualities of free improvisation that are important to me, namely co-creation, communication, the moment and the element of surprise. And I understood that the choice of musicians – the composition of the ensemble – was paramount to me. We create here and now, together (which was why I left composing music).

Composition! I did phase out composing, but I do now have a couple of nice scores in my drawers and some nice simple ideas for structuring and inspiring an improvisation (for a performance, for instance). Yeah, now that I think about it, maybe it would be nice to use them again… Uh-oh…

(A lesson learned was that it can be important to be clear about what one wants, both for oneself and for others. For instance, if a composition is meant as an experiment or if I’m looking for a specific sound or a specific way of interaction. And then find a fitting way of communicating that. For instance, if an instruction of the more poetic or inspirational kind doesn’t communicate my intentions, a more concrete instruction could be more useful. Again, “the more specific the idea, the more distinct the framework”.)

Minimalism! In a way, I do think that I actually managed to merge minimalism with free improvisation, though not exactly as I planned to. It’s more like improvised music with a minimalistic approach as a color on the palette, something to pick from if desired. Both regarding motivic development, the use of repetition and a cyclic thinking (as mentioned above), but it is also something about patience, the lotus seat, that “nothing” has to happen. We hang out with sounds, not necessarily focusing on telling a certain (kind of) story.

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In this excerpt (found in DiVA as “Sound 10: Artistic results”) of a live concert (as part of a workshop in improvisation at Åsa Folkhögskola) together with Leif Jordansson (guitar) and Daniel Borgegård Älgå (bass clarinet, live sampling and electronics) I can hear traces of a lot of the above-mentioned new tools, skills and approaches. Do you?

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4.2. Exam concert

Exam concert. Me, Isabell Gustafsson-Ny and David Bennet. Photo: Fredrik Ljungkvist.

For my exam concert I asked David Bennet and pianist and fellow master’s student Isabell Gustafsson-Ny to join me. We had met a few times as a trio and I had felt a profound serenity when making music with these two. We had “only” improvised together, not using scores, exercises or any other explicit ideas for structuring the music. Interplay-wise, there was a lot of trust, just letting sounds crash against each other, melting – or not melting – together. Ideas coming and going. So, sharing the stage as a trio would feel safe, yet potentially surprising. So, how was the concert?

The dynamics! The silence! The visual! The sound! The emotions! It was so sweet! (Casserstedt 2022)

I perceived a relaxed focus - a low-pressure presence - between us. The interplay was beautiful! Responses were on occasions rapid, and on other occasions remote. Maybe thanks to my explorations of possibilities of interaction? I believe we even took it one step further, namely exploring silences (and the excitement it created) to a larger extent than before.

I have never heard such vivid rests… Electric! (Lindåker 2022)

Yes, what struck me the most was how sparse the music was at times, even completely or almost completely silent for longer periods of time than I was used to. Was that a once-in-a-lifetime-thing or does it point out a new direction for me to explore in the future? Yes, experiencing how “electric” these silences could be was revelatory. “Awkward” silence? Not anymore. We also (even) dared to leave someone solo every now and then. I think it had to do with trust: trusting the situation and trusting one’s co-players, as Gustafsson put it. And patience: we let whatever happened happen. (Patience yes, but a curious one.) When on stage, Grydeland’s words came to mind:
Wait and see what is inside the sound, 
wait and see what emerges. 
Waiting for action 
Waiting for sound to blossom 
Waiting for merges 
Waiting for something to bleed 
Requires a lot of patience.

I do not push. 
I do not force the music into a specific territory. 
Play, wait, and let the sounds grow into something, into each other, 
let the music emerge. 
Just trust in the material and in the others. 

Another thing I also enjoyed very much was how we often distributed the sounds from our instruments, both in register and rhythmically. Layers, as I thought of it. It felt like there always were many or at least several ways for me to act or react. I was not confined to just one way of playing my bass. Free! I think we were

achieving permeability (mixtures of sonic materials that afford opportunities for everyone to both affect and be affected). (Nevrin 2019: 4)

The second piece though, was - as I heard and experienced it - louder and denser, had more movement, and was more melodic. Maybe as a reaction and a contrast to the first piece? (Oh, but I liked both!)

However, it was (maybe) not all roses. Standing on stage in front of friends and family, teachers and students did affect my playing. Even though I did feel quite confident with playing with the bow, I avoided for instance playing with the bow in the thumb position7, afraid of making “mistakes”, in this case playing out of key or not having a full sound or a steady tone. So, I was confined to doing other things. Not as free!

But on the other hand, maybe an improvised piece doesn’t have to (or rather can’t) include everything. Not the “whole library”, as Sandberg so eloquently framed it. Avoiding one thing might mean choosing something else. Que the stoics. Those obstacles might have allowed for other things to emerge. At least, that was what I told myself on stage, and I sort of let the situation affect the way I played, not (too) bothered.

To summarize, I sometimes had the courage to not play but sometimes didn’t have the courage to play (certain things).

The concert consisted of two improvised pieces. They are found in DiVA as “Sound 11: Exam concert – Improvisation 01” and “Sound 12: Exam concert – Improvisation 02”.

7 Playing in a high register, far down the fingerboard.
5. Conclusions

5.1. Intro

I’ve been looking for freedom. I’ve been looking so long. (Hasselhoff 1989)

I started out with wanting to merge free improvisation with minimalism, using for instance repetition, cycles, motivic development and gradual change, and to compose for improvisers. I conducted a huge number of experiments and rehearsals where I tried out my scores and ideas and concepts for structuring an improvisation, as well as free improvisations. Interestingly, I began to realize that I mostly enjoyed the latter of these and started therefore to focus more on that. The composer-side was slowly phased out. That gradual change, again… However, I also noticed that working with structured improvisation, for instance all those instructions and limitations found in “The Hat”, had expanded my vocabulary as improver. It felt like I suddenly had more options, meaning that limiting oneself while improvising could lead to more freedom later. I stopped using compositions for performing but kept using them as practice tools.

Moving on to improvising freely posed some new questions and challenges. I struggled for instance with starting an improvisation. Thanks to a change of mindset, this problem was (at least to some extent) solved. Another breakthrough was realizing how important it was for me to feel confident and comfortable with my own instrument and my own playing, and how in doing so I was able to be more present, communicative and interacting while improvising together with others. And in a way I actually did merge minimalism with free improvisation, but in another way than how I first pictured it. Instead, I developed some minimalist-approach skills to improvising, like tools for developing an idea or a motif. I also “borrowed” from minimalism a sense of rest and a focus on the moment (not focusing as much on the overall structure or narrative), and incorporated it into my improvising.

5.2. Future

I’ve been looking for freedom. Still the search goes on. (Hasselhoff 1989)

During this project the to-do-list became ridiculously long. I continuously added things to practice or ideas to try out, solo or together with others. It feels at this point like I’ve just scratched the surface when it comes to improvisation, free or structured. A lot of questions were raised during my studies (and in this thesis), and if time permitted, I would have tried to answer more of them. But at least, now I have one helluva springboard for future work!

In the future I think it would be beneficial for me to work more with limitations as etudes. Maybe in a more structured way, like say, only playing the note A for 30 minutes, then move on to the note A flat for another 30... Lab coat on! I would also like to develop “The Hat”, for instance by creating more instruction-slips for together with others, so that it becomes more of a group effort. Come up with more practice tools and keep challenging my habits to find more ways of playing. Keep expanding my vocabulary to enhance the operational reliability when it comes to exploding my belly. Dive deeper into stuff I’ve just touched upon, or not even at all. Some examples:

- Listening?
- Flow?
- Go back to the long duration thing?
What about ear training?
Or transcribing?
I tried out what I called a “Feldmanesque”. But what about a “Rileyesque”? Or a “Pollockesque”? “A-recording-of-ourselves-esque”? “4’33’esque”?
Solo. What if I started over and did the whole thing again, but alone?
Spend more time practicing the bass, for instance playing with the bow in the thumb position.
What hang-ups do I have now? Looking forward to working with them. I take solace in:

In the depths of oneself understand that as improviser one will never be complete. You will never be complete, and I will never be complete. We will have advanced languages, we will have experiences, we will have possibilities to communicate freely with our instruments on a high level, but we will never be complete. As an artist you don’t. … And one doesn’t need all that frigging anxiety over developing one’s techniques, but instead enjoy the process … It’s good that it takes time, it’s super, because then you learn in a deeper way. One must learn to love the process, not being so goddamn impatient, you know. (Gustafsson 2021)

Going around in circles, we might spot or pick up something new each lap. The next lap might differ from the previous, but we can use experiences from it. Square one, 2.0.

The cleansing rain clears, and other sounds blur into this aural landscape. A melancholy keyboard melody drifts through, the pianist scraping across the strings, playing the guts like an ominous, sylvan harp. The ephemeral melody devolves into disjunct smears of sound. Now come the approaching-night noises. Dulled bells and whistles echo thick and humid. Clicks and pops reverberate. Water flows. Chirps, wordless vocalizations, and percussion commingle as the dense, confounding sound of nature’s discourse. (Ross 2021)
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Appendix

Here are some more of the instructions on the slips of paper found in “The Hat”:

More slip instructions focusing on notes, intervals, motifs and stuff like that:

- A sibling and a variation/development of Up up.
- Slightly different from the one above.
- Major ninths. (Stora nior). A cousin to Minor sevenths.
- G A. A development of Minor sevenths and Major ninths, but also opens the floor to other intervals (like the major second), but at the same time stricter because it says which actual notes to use – not just an interval.
- B A F. A development of the one above. To be used as a motif or a collection of notes to use in any way one likes to.
- b-a-c-h. Further development of those mentioned above.
- Chromaticism. (Kromatik). Taking the one above a step further.
- Every other interval large, every other interval small. (Varannat intervall stort, varannat litet). This one was made by Erik Blennow Calälv. Similar to Soft notes spread out in the register. Surprisingly challenging to keep track of what one just played the moment before. Made me more aware of my own playing.
- Trills. (Drillar). This one proved to be problematic, since we didn’t think that the sound of trills fit the music we were after. It stuck out too much. So, we discarded it early on. But it raised the questions of “really, is it not possible to make the trills fit?” and, “maybe that’s the quality of trills, that they do stick out?” So, they came back into the hat. And then we discarded them again. And then they came back. Should one leave them out or should one leave them in? Fight or flight. Working with it could mean new potentialities!
- Explore two notes and their relationship. (Utforska två toner och relationen mellan dem). Obviously closely related to Explore one note, but also vastly more open to improvisation possibilities.
- Explore three notes and their relationship. (Utforska tre toner och relationen mellan dem). A twin to the one above.
- Sustained notes in a low register. (Långa toner lågt register). A variation of Sustained notes in a high register.
- Soft notes spread out in the register. Rests between the notes. (Mjuka toner utspridda i registret. Pauser mellan tonerna.) A development of Soft notes spread out in the register, with an extra instruction making it more specific.
- Melodic, but free tonal. Slow, but not too slow. (Melodiskt, men fritonalt. Långsamt, men inte för långsamt.) With this one I wanted to explore melody (since I had to a large extent avoided it) in a somewhat abstract way.
- Small fragments of optional melodies. (Små fragment av valfria melodier). Another way of exploring melody.
- First, hit a note (or make a sound). Then hit another one or couple of other ones. Start over. (Ta en ton (eller ljud) du gillar först. Ta sedan någon eller några
I think that I with this one wanted to make improvising “simple”, focusing on the moment, and not caring about the larger structure or direction of the piece (in that way inspired by minimalism). This one was also inspired by a Cecil Taylor quote:

Hit one note that you like. Then find another note that you like in combination with that. That’s how you begin to make your own music. (Taylor n.d.)

More slip instructions that are all about interplay:

- **Move in the same direction as the others.** (Gå i samma riktning som de andra). A sibling (or nemesis?) to **Move in a different direction than the others.**
- **Fast reaction to the one to your right.** (Snabb reaktion på den till höger). Closely related to **Slow reaction to the one to your right**, in that it focuses the attention to one specific co-player but responding differently. Very interesting to experience the difference between the two types of reaction (both as the one who drew the slip and as the one being reacted to).
- **Play when completely silent.** (Spela när helt tyst). A certain amount of ambiguity to this instruction. Is it supposed to mean “play only when completely silent” or “always play when completely silent”? Also, if you start playing, then it’s not completely silent anymore… Led to both pragmatic and philosophical discussion about instructions, silence etc.
- **Only play when all the others are playing.** (Spela bara när alla andra spelar). Cousin to the one above. This one led to dramatic dynamics; in the trio format for instance, it meant that either was only one playing, or all three of us.
- **Play with and/or against (rhythmically) someone/some of the others.** (Spela med och/eller emot (rytmiskt) någon/några av de andra). I found this instruction to be quite direct, yet quite open to interpretation and therefore both inspiring to the player and sharpening his or her attention.
- **Act like glue between the others.** (Agera lim mellan de andra). Personally, I loved this one. It made me listen to my co-players in a new way. “What is he doing, what is she doing, and what can I do to bind the two together?” It could mean picking up rhythmic ideas from one, and to pick up tonal ideas from another. Or to fill in the gap, doing something no one else were doing.
- **Pick up some element/parameter/motif from someone of the others and use this in your own way.** (Plocka upp något element/parameter/motiv från någon av de andra, och använd detta på ditt eget sätt). This could create a certain amount of coherence, when trying to play like somebody else. But at the same time, you were encouraged to do it in a personal way. Being yourself, but actively being influenced by your co-players. Similar to **Mirror/mimic**.
- **Imitate sound/sounds from someone of the others.** (Imitera sound/ljud från någon av de andra). Erik made this one as well. Similar to the one above, and to **Mirror/mimic**.
Improvisation starts for me at the moment it is needed, and it is always in a context in which there are fixed points to refer to. So the term “free” is meaningless. The sort of improvisation I am interested in is the sort that everyone does in his daily life. Of course, I don’t mean daily life transformed into music, but in certain respects there are parallels between music and daily life. For example, in the respect that very vulgar things are happening very near very aesthetic things, people go pissing one moment and have deep philosophical thoughts the next, or maybe both at the same time. (Mengelberg 1992: 16)