Fiach Ó Briain

Activating the Ear

Exploring the development of listening, interplay, and presence in improvised music through spoken games and musical exercises.

Written reflection in independent, artistic work.

The independent artistic work exists documented in KMH’s digital archive.
Abstract

Listening and presence are essential skills of co-creative group improvisation. The purpose of this project was to construct a series of spoken games and musical exercises with the goal of enhancing the players’ sense of interpersonal awareness in improvised music settings. The playing of these games encouraged the ear and mind to warm-up and tune in to both the musical intentions of the other players in the group, as well as the types of interaction and stimuli that might occur during improvised performance. By encouraging playfulness within the games, while simultaneously maintaining the freedom to diverge from these forms, environments of co-creation could be facilitated. These games and exercises have the flexibility to be used either as a warm-up during rehearsals, a primer for an improvised performance, or more directly as parts of compositions. In this, the project explores: how to create useful and challenging exercises, how adjusting the parameters of the challenge affected both the performers and the musical outcome, and finally, how to utilise these musical outcomes in a concert setting. As well as providing new approaches to musical direction and composition, the project has also led to personal growth in the form of noticeable developments in listening, presence, and interaction through utilising this approach in group improvisations.
## Contents

Preface .......................................................................................................................... 1

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 2
   1.1. Purposes, aims, and questions. .................................................................................. 2
   1.2. Project background ................................................................................................. 6
   1.3. Methods .................................................................................................................. 11
   1.4. Area overview ........................................................................................................ 12

2. Process ......................................................................................................................... 14
   2.1. Choosing my point of departure .............................................................................. 15
   2.2. Initial sketches for spoken games ........................................................................... 16
   2.3. Trialling the spoken games and follow up interviews ........................................... 18
   2.4. Translation from spoken games into musical exercises ....................................... 20
   2.5. Musicians try the exercises .................................................................................... 21
   2.6. Reflecting and adjusting ........................................................................................ 25
   2.7. A sketch for a concert programme ........................................................................ 26

3. Artistic results ............................................................................................................. 29

4. Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 31

Reference lists ................................................................................................................ 34

Appendix ........................................................................................................................ 35
Preface

As a student, teacher, drummer, composer, and enthusiast of many performing arts, I have had a long-time fascination with the special kind of interaction that exists in a live performance context. Having had exposure to many artforms, living and performing in many cities around the world, I have especially found myself drawn to explore and understand the types of communication which can occur between musicians in improvised music.

I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Jazz and Performance in Newpark School of Music in Dublin, Ireland, in 2010. My thesis for that degree consisted of an analysis of some of the distinct types of interaction which were evident to me, between tenor saxophonist Donny McCaslin and drummer Jonathan Blake throughout McCaslin’s solo on his tune ‘Recommended Tools’ (2008), from the album of the same title. In short, I focussed on four distinct types of overt interaction between the two musicians in this solo which I identified as: rhythmic, melodic, dynamic, and textural. This work and analysis gave me a new insight into the subtleties of the musical conversation which can happen between soloist and accompanist. It revealed a deeper layer of the music which had previously gone unnoticed to me, at least on a conscious level. This work inspired me in the years to come. Throughout my next ten years working as a teacher and performing musician, I strived to enrich both my teaching and my playing with the knowledge I had extracted through this Bachelor’s degree thesis project.

Now, for this Master’s degree project, I have elected to delve deeper again into the exploration of communication and interaction in improvisation. The approach I decided to take this time was to begin at a somewhat more fundamental level, using our everyday communication skills of speaking and listening. By choosing two speaking voices and a series of interactive games as the point of departure, I could experiment with how listening, and interaction could be developed. Later, I could explore how to translate these spoken improvisational games into musical exercises in order to develop these skills in a musically useful way. Finally, I would experiment with how to transform these musical exercises into material for a concert.

I have been inspired and supported by: the teachers on my Bachelor’s degree, especially Conor and Ronan Guilfoyle, my co-workers and peers at the Contemporary Music Academy of Beijing, especially Dan Callaghan, Simone Schirru, and Moreno Donadel, the teachers on my master’s programme, especially Jussi Kanaste, Fredrik Ljungkvist, Søren Nørbo, Julie Kjær, and Klas Nevrin, my classmates, especially Johann Fritsche and Ewoud Van Eetvelde, and finally my father Diarmuid, mother Brenda, sister Ailbhe, and partner Kate.

Furthermore, I have drawn invaluable inspiration and energy from the recordings and published works of Pauline Oliveros, Thommy Andersson, John Stevens, Steve Lacy, and Marcel Cobussen to name but a few.
1. Introduction

What I am presenting in this text is a detailed outline of my artistic process throughout this project from my early influences and inspirations, through my methodology and experimentation, and finally, to the artistic results of this process and my own thoughts and conclusions about the project. Dotted throughout the text are some audio examples which will give the reader a context through which to experience the artistic research. In these examples you will hear the work in progress, which will help to connect the development of the spoken games into instrumental games. Finally, the audio of this project’s concluding exam concert is provided, in which, what could be considered to be, the completed work is presented.

In this chapter, you will find a description of the purposes and aims of this project. Here I give some insight into what it was that I hoped to achieve in this work, my specific desired outcomes, and furthermore, the questions I felt most relevant to ask of this project which would help me to target specific areas of interest. My inspiration and background to this project are also elaborated upon, detailing how this work relates back to my Bachelor’s studies and my previous work as a freelance musician, as well as including insight into which specific musicians, recordings, and literature have directly influenced my work. Here, the reader will understand clearly how I arrived at this concept through exposure to various artistic influences, and how they affected my motivations throughout the project. There is also a section in this chapter on methodology which describes the devices that I utilised in my research, from documentation, analysis, and feedback loops, to problematisation and delimitation. I have also presented in this chapter an overview of prior works in the field of improvisation and research on improvisation. This gives insight into my artistic and academic inspirations throughout the project, what I have learned during this research, and how that relates to my own work.

Next, the process chapter is laid out in chronological order; beginning with the initial versions of my spoken games, playing the games with others, dealing with the issues which arose, and how I went about refining the games by adjusting the challenge and intensity levels. Moving to the next phase of the process I illustrate how I converted the spoken games to playable musical ideas, and what the results of those experiments were. Finally, I demonstrate how I used some of the artistic results of these sessions as material for an extended improvised concert performance. Following this final section of the process, I reflect on the artistic results produced by this project and what my overall conclusions are regarding how this work has affected my own artistic outlook and expression.

1.1. Purposes, aims, and questions.

In this section I will go into detail about what the purposes of this project were and what, specifically, I wanted to explore. The individual aims of each part of the process are also presented, before finally addressing the various questions I deemed most relevant to ask of this project.

In the undertaking of this project, I hoped to achieve for myself, and maybe others, a way to prime the ear and mind for situations of group musical improvisation. I wanted to draw the emphasis towards enhancing group listening, group interaction, and co-creation. It was important for me to explore the research of this topic by way of reference to meaningful experiences I have had engaging with improvisation across multiple disciplines. By drawing
reference from several improvisational art forms, I hoped that I might also identify some commonalities among them, that may, in turn, guide the direction of my own artistic research.

The first purpose of this project was to create spoken games for two players, with which I hoped to encourage an increased level of listening, presence, and ability to interact in improvised music settings. I wanted to explore if it was possible to create games that could target specific listening and interaction skills which I deemed valuable to group improvisation. Beginning the process with spoken games was an important and conscious decision; there will be more on that in later chapters. After initially creating these spoken games for two people, I then translated those games into musically interpretable instructions to be played once again (but not necessarily by the same pair) in duo format. The purpose of this was to see if the spoken ideas could translate well onto instruments, or whether some of the instructions or parameters would need to be adjusted, in order to recreate the same interactive potential that existed within the spoken games.

Throughout both the spoken games, and the instrumental games experiments, I conducted and recorded interviews with the players, asking for their insight into how they experienced the games, their challenge, and the intrapersonal interaction that had occurred. The purpose of this interview-based method was to see if the spoken or playable games were having any perceivable effect on the players’ listening and presence in these situations, and furthermore, to give me ideas about how I might adjust the games to better facilitate the desired results. At the end of this project, I performed a concert related to my research. Therefore, the final purpose of this artistic research was to draw inspiration from both the comments of the players during the spoken and instrumental games experiments, and the artistic results of those sessions to create material for a concert programme.

Once I was content that the adjusted versions of these spoken games were producing the desired results, I then began the second stage of this process. This second stage of the process entailed translating the spoken games into interpretable musical instructions. At the point of planning this stage, it was not yet clear to me how this could be completed; thus I was hoping to become inspired by the initial sessions, playing the spoken games, and for the answer to this question to reveal itself through the process. Fortunately, it took only two rounds of feedback before I knew how I would proceed to translate these ideas into a musical context that would present the same type of challenges and elicit the same desired concentration and presence which was required of the spoken versions.

It was important at this stage for both participants to play in a way that was both permeable and usefully vague\(^1\) - terms that were brought to my attention in Klas Nevin’s Co-creation in transdisciplinary perspectives: Improvisation, productive disorder, and lines of variation (2022). Drawing upon Nevin’s concepts, the way in which I interpret these two terms within this context is that I required both players to play in such a way as to avoid holding onto a position of dominance within the duo for extended periods. Instead, by offering useful and

\(^1\) To play in a permeable way, as I understand it, refers to playing in such a way as to invite interaction. This is achieved by means of allowing the space, in one’s own playing, for outside stimulus to enter. This stimulus could come in the form of, for example, a musical response, counterplay, or the introduction of a new idea or musical direction.

Similarly, the term usefully vague, would describe the nature of such contributions to the group improvisation. These musical ideas would be suggestive in nature, as opposed to ideas that may dominate the direction of a group improvisation.
interpretable musical suggestions that the other player can adapt to, the music could move forward in a mutually agreeable way. In these duo sessions, it is especially clear that both players each have a hand on the proverbial steering wheel, and thus an awareness of the constantly shifting power dynamic would assist the players to arrive at the mutual musical goal simultaneously and through equal contribution. I concluded that playing with these intentions in mind would better facilitate the degree of listening and interaction that was present in the spoken versions of these games. However, compared to the spoken versions of these games, the instrumental versions would assume at least an intermediate level of instrumental competence to play and react in a dynamic and engaged way.

Looking ahead to how this project would conclude, I was also conscious that this artistic research may help me to arrive at, or create, some new methods and approaches to compose for these types of musical settings. Although I was aware that this project would culminate in a concert, with a primary focus on group improvisation, I was not yet certain how I would utilise the games I had created or the research that I had carried out in putting together such a programme of music. At this stage, I posited that the way in which I would likely utilise these games as part of the concert performance would, at least, assume an advanced level of musical competence and strong familiarity with improvised music settings.

In short, my aims in this project were to explore the following:

- How can I construct accessible spoken games which challenge the concentration and listening of the players?
- How can I translate these games to musical ideas and structure them in such a way as to maintain a degree of challenge to the players without hindering their creative flow?
- What are the responses and reflections elicited from the players in relation to both the spoken and instrumental games?
- How do the players of these games perceive the difference in the musical outcome as the challenge or intensity level of the games is adjusted?
- Are there any potential pitfalls in this process? For example, does the music produced begin to become habitual, stagnant, or fall into patterns when performed multiple times?
- How can I apply these exercises and their outcomes as part of a concert performance?

With the above aims, questions, and goals in mind, I decided to begin this work with a series of spoken games for two players. I believed that the communicative and listening skills which I wanted to single out and hone could be experienced by the players, in a most clear and tangible form, between two people without instruments. Although a gesture-based communication could also have sufficed for this part of the artistic research, perhaps in the form of a pre-existing or purpose-made sign language, I wanted to keep the human voice and spoken interaction as a core component of these games; this was for several reasons. Many of the older generation of jazz-greats, notably the master bebop improvisors who held improvisatory and listening virtuosity at the core of their credo, often described their musical phrasing not as playing, but rather speaking. They can be seen in videos and interviews using this subtle but important distinction in language. A prime example is the late great pianist and educator Barry Harris, well known for his weekly masterclasses in New York in which he shared his knowledge on bebop language and phrasing. My former colleague, Moreno Donadel, a regular attendee of Harris’ workshops, regaled me with stories of the masterclasses. He would describe how the workshops would initially appear to be informal affairs but would rapidly elevate into a rich outpouring of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic teachings from a man who was about as close to the source of bebop as one could hope for.
Harris, who is said to have learned bebop language primarily by ear, imitating one of his heroes, Bud Powell, continued this style of aural tradition in his workshops. Students were free to take personal notes, but Harris wrote little, opting instead to describe verbally, to sing, or to play on the piano what it was he was trying to convey to his students. He can be seen in this masterclass lesson clip using verbiage such as or ‘He say D sharp, C sharp…’ referring to pianist Bud Powell while describing a particular phrase of interest over the tune Lady Bird:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F1gp9SDJMXg&list=RDltY8urgqChM&index=3

The term prosody relates to the rhythmisation and intonation of speech as a tool utilised in bebop and African American music and is explored at length in Daniel Belgrad’s *The Culture of Spontaneity* (1998). In this book, Belgrad references an earlier publication by LeRoi Jones named *Blue People* (1963), in which Jones traces African American musical prosody to the “talking drums” and ideophones in African languages. Examples of this musical prosody are easily recognised in ‘scat’ singing, the often languageless vocal solos prevalent throughout the bebop era and beyond. This example below shows master trumpeter Clarke Terry performing his famous ‘Mumbles’ tune in which he utilises phrasing from the bebop era with a sort of improvised set of mumbled words.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxOXqFDIrUA

Furthermore, drummer Eric Harland can be seen in the clip below beautifully demonstrating how to apply such an approach, connecting speech to instrumental phrasing, while improvising on the drum set:

https://youtu.be/zX1MwaHP-CQ

It has long believed that the brain’s left and right hemispheres are separate in their processing of language and music, respectively. However, some modern studies have shown that an area of the brain, known as Broca’s Area, is active in the processing of music and language simultaneously. In Aniruddh D. Patel’s book *Music, Language, and the Brain* (2007) he gives some insight into how this works:

"although musical and linguistic syntax have distinct and domain-specific syntactic representations, there is an overlap in the neural resources that serve to activate and integrate these representations during syntactic processing.” (Patel:2007)

It was important for me to construct my games in such a way that the familiarity of spoken interaction would be utilised, developed, and elaborated upon in order to relate the act of verbal communication to the act of instrumental communication in a way that reflected the perspectives of the abovementioned of Harris, Terry, and Harland.

John Stevens and Pauline Oliveros, both of who’s books were highly influential to this project, explore exercises which focus on the breath. One such example is an exercise from Stevens’ *Search and Reflect* (1985) which instructs the players to play or sing long notes only

________________________

2 Ideophones, as distinct to onomatopoeia, can express things like actions or manner of property. Using a special type of syntactic function within a sentence, they are not found in English but are prevalent in African, Australian, and Amerindian languages.
while breathing out. Not only does this draw attention to the various natural rhythmic breath cycles of the individual players in the group, but it also demands a moment of reflection, the inhale, in which one has the time and space to experience what is happening in the rest of the group. This moment of listening and reflection is just as important, if not more important, than the moment in which you play. For this reason, I decided that the use of speech, which in turn demands moments of pause to draw breath, would allow for brief moments in the midst of the games in which the players could listen more attentively to each other’s flow.

One final reason for removing instruments from the initial stage of these games is that I believed it might help remove some possible factors of interference or limitation that could affect the player’s ability to engage in the challenge fully. I considered these areas of interference or limitation to be factors such as one’s ability to follow more than two sources of sound at once, one’s own technical limitations on one’s musical instrument, or one’s potential preconceived expectations of the traditional role of a certain instrument in an ensemble setting. Instead, these games resemble a spoken conversation between two people, which is hopefully a familiar and comfortable setting in which the players can feel the necessary degree of freedom to participate fully in the games. It was my hope that by attempting to remove said potential limitations, the players may, at the very least, perceive a sense of increased freedom and facility, having only to rely on their voice and their ears to participate in the game. Thus, the spoken games, at the first stage of this process, assumed nothing more than a basic degree of oral and aural proficiency in a common language between two people. At this point in my thought process, I realised it would also be important to specify that the input which was required of the speakers should not be technically demanding, for example: the use of elaborate vocabulary. This was not only to facilitate the technical playability of the games but also to oppose any sense of linguistic imperialism or Anglophone dominance in the power dynamic of these games. Some of the games may also have the possibly to be played without a common language, and this could be an area for future experimentation. Ultimately, a sort of verbal safe space was required in which the participants would feel comfortable and capable to play and experiment within the parameters of the games.

1.2. Project background

As mentioned earlier, my degree project for my bachelor’s studies consisted of an analysis of certain types of interaction between an accompanying instrument and a soloist in an improvisation over chord changes. During the selection process for this material, I was recommended many great recordings to analyse from peers and teachers, ranging from bluesy hard-bop to late-Coltrane post-bop, to contemporary free-jazz. Throughout this thorough listening process, I was specifically looking for moments of overt or perceivable musical interaction. I was astounded at the virtuosity of some of the players’ listening and their ability to be so present both in the music and its meandering development. At this point in my studies, I hypothesised that some of the musicians whom I believed to be great improvisers may be engaging with the process of improvising in an entirely different way than I was. This was mainly due to what I perceived as an otherworldly degree of togetherness within an ensemble, the type that goes beyond long-time artistic collaboration, a high degree of instrumental proficiency, and high level of fluency with the musical material being performed. These moments of togetherness often manifested in interactions that seemed to reveal a deep level of listening that was altogether out of reach for me at the time. Such moments ranged from predictions or anticipations of another improvisor’s upcoming phasing or direction to more surprising moments when improvisors would simultaneously and
inexplicably arrive at either similar, or perfectly complimentary musical choices. I wondered if such improvisors may be moving within a realm of ‘instinctual playing’, all the while maintaining a presence and ability to react and interact appropriately in the given situation. At that time, I could see glimpses of such moments in my own performances, but they were rare and elusive, and I was wholly unaware of which situations would give rise to these moments, and moreover how to go about eliciting such a moment again. Although fascinating and exhilarating for me, I was somewhat left in the dark without a clear idea how to pursue this idea further.

Upon reflecting on many years of playing in musical groups of all sorts of constellations and styles, I realised that the parts of the performance which I was drawing the most excitement from were moments when an interesting or unpredictable instance of communication occurred on the bandstand. These moments took on many forms. Some such moments that come to mind are having to wait for a cue at the end of a long saxophone cadenza or subbing on a rockabilly gig and being instructed to watch the bass player’s foot-stomps to catch the hits and breaks. Another such example could be when a pianist would make an unexpected chord substitution that drastically changed the feeling and direction behind a solo, or perhaps something would go horribly wrong in the arrangement and the band needed to scramble to save the music as quickly as possible. These were learning moments in which I suddenly became maximally engaged with the music and my surroundings and I sought to invite these moments into my life.

I can say that for some time now, I have found improvisation and interaction to be the most fascinating and engaging aspect of music, both as a performer, and as a listener. To me, there can exist within these improvised moments the opportunity for exploration and communication, unpredictability, the symbiosis of the voice of the individuals and sound of the group, and an unparalleled opportunity for co-creation. I believe these moments can be exhilarating for all present and many times they can remove any hierarchy that exists between the audience and the performers. Oftentimes, for example, no formal musical education is necessary to perceive the musical conversation happening on the stage. I found it particularly interesting how Dave Liebman, in his book *Self portrait of a jazz artist: Musical thoughts and realities* (1988), perceives the audience’s interaction with improvisation.

> In fact, my feeling is that what a jazz audience is reading into is not really the soloists and their creations. On a deeper human level, they’re responding to the degree and quality of communication which is evidenced between the performers of the group. Besides the aforementioned points of freedom, spontaneity, and the idea of being in present time which jazz brings to people, there is also the direct inspiration an audience feels when they have witnessed good rapport and communication between human beings. (Liebman 1988: 3)

Conversely, avant-garde composer John Cage, speaking on the interaction in jazz music, has famously stated that: “Music as discourse (jazz) doesn’t work. If you’re going to have a conversation, have it and use words.” (Cage: 1967). This opinion appears in the form of a quote on the rear cover of his book *A Year from Tomorrow* (1967). Without further context it is difficult to analyse this comment as anything more than ill-informed either in relation to bebop, or the free jazz, as they related to the civil rights movement in America.

It is also, in part, due to current social factors that I have sought out these communicative or dialogue-encouraging musical scenarios. We can see since the birth of social media that connectivity through digital platforms has completely changed the way in which we
communicate and interact. It is my experience that as a result of this, the quality of person-to-person communication outside of these spaces has been declining. Likely, this is as a direct result of how we engage digitally with each other, in an indirect or more anonymous way. In a general sense, it appears to me that society is becoming increasingly socially and politically polarised by amoral and profit-driven algorithms, that we are being drawn increasingly toward selfishness and individualism. This is likely by means of what former Facebook vice-president, Chamath Palihapitiya, has called ‘short-term dopamine-driven feedback loops’ (2017). For this reason, it is also highly important for me that this project has a focus on how to better increase relationality and facilitate co-creation within my own musical approach in that it may provide some sort of alternative channels of communication and expression. To utilise improvisation as a way of processing the complexities of modern life is in line with the thinking of Marcel Cobussen. In his work, The Field of Musical Improvisation (2017), he describes improvisation as:

“not only one complex system among many others, but also a way of approaching and coping with complexity, a practice necessary to engage with complex situations, a response to instabilities” (Cobussen 2017: 182).

A further proponent of the interpersonal benefits of improvisation is David Borgo. Towards the end of his book Sync or Swarm (2005) he makes an eloquent case for group improvisation as a method of personal and social growth:

“Improvising music is not simply an alternative approach to composition, but rather the ongoing process of internalizing alternative value systems through music. Multiplicity, therefore, must mean more than simple pluralism. At its heart, the still nascent shift to multiplicity must involve acknowledging uncertainty while foregrounding complex visions of agency, identity, embodiment, community, and culture” (Borgo 2005:192)

The perspectives of Cobussen and Borgo have served to reinforce my own opinions around group improvisation. These books, among others, were influential in my decision to steer this project in the direction of group improvisation.

I have drawn a lot of inspiration, especially in terms of the approach to practicing attention, spontaneity, and listening from literature and recordings and this will be described in more detail further on. However, aside from those mentioned previously, several experiences engaging with different artforms have shifted my perspective about what it means to improvise. In previous years, especially during my Bachelor’s degree, I had viewed improvisation as something resembling an instance of individual expression. These moments could manifest in virtuosic solos, facilitated by carefully set parameters, or perhaps an overt call-and-response style of accompaniment between rhythm section and soloist. However, exposure to other areas of improvisation had a huge influence on how I perceived the act of creating in the moment, especially in a group scenario. Improvised artforms such as improvised dance, long form improv comedy, and improvised theatre, have attuned me to the commonalities between these artforms and improvised music. These artforms, as well as improvised music, seem to me to produce the most engaging work when they include the presence of highly attentive players who possess both an awareness of themselves, and the group as a whole, and who maintain an openness to the inevitable diversity of inputs from the players within the group. In contrast to, for example, musical scenarios in which there is a leader who must be accompanied by a group, these artforms seemed to lean instead in the direction of an attitude embodying the concept of ‘no wrong answers’ or ‘yes, and…’, an improv concept explained and elaborated in Keith Johnstone’s Improvisation and the Theatre (1979). The golden rule was never to block another player’s creative flow and to remember that the group had, at all times, the collective potential to turn any idea or input into a profound and meaningful improvisatory moment.
Improvised comedy troops, and in particular long form improvised comedy shows have given me great insight and perspective as regards to the subtleties of interplay, the balance of power dynamics, and the importance of risk-taking in a live improvised situation. In 2019 I regularly attended the shows of BeijingImprov, a comedy troop experimenting with long and short form comedy, and more recently in May 2022 I attended Swimp, the annual Swedish improv comedy festival in Uppsala. These improv scenarios rely heavily on Johnstone’s ‘yes, and…’ approach, both between performers and the audience, to facilitate their art. Televised examples of this can be found in the long-running short-form improv sketch show ‘Who’s line is it anyway’ (1988-1998) in which the host provides a set of parameters within which the players must create a scene. Another more recent example is the long-form improv comedy television series, Middleditch and Schwartz (2020). In it, comedians Thomas Middleditch and Ben Schwartz provided a modern interpretation of this stimulus-based creative improvising. The performers receive a random selection of words and instructions from a live audience in an auditorium and proceed to create several engaging sets of comedic scenarios complete with story arc, form, development, and moments of creative magic.

Some years ago, while living in Beijing, I worked as an accompanist with Lindy Hop and Charleston swing dance clubs, particularly with the dance school SwingBeijing. With this group I witnessed first-hand just how subtly the musicians and dancers can affect each other’s energy and performance. I can still recall how, after the first session, I was astounded by the inter-determinacy between us musicians in the accompaniment band and the dancers. To elaborate on this, if we, the band, had the right groove and a solid tempo the Lindy Hoppers would dance with more confidence and virtuosily, in turn inspiring us to cook the music even more. Contrastingly, if we overplayed or they over-reached in their dancing, creating imbalance in the respective intensities, it was felt throughout the room. In the most intense moments of these sessions, we watched the dancers closely as we played and they listened to us closely as they danced and it was clear that both were affecting each other in real time, mutually responsible for the direction and outcome of the moment. After the first set that night I already understood this to be an extension of the type of inter-determinacy that I felt playing improvised instrumental music, and a parallel with how I perceived the improvised comedy acts from the improv comedy players. These experiences drew me to the conclusion that open channels for interaction, and a set of skills with which one can contribute to the moment were at the heart of the improvised scenarios I sought to explore.

Inspired by the various works and artforms mentioned above, I arrived at the concept of creating spoken improvisational games also as a sort of response to what I saw as a strange duality. I had had warm comments from peers and teachers about my “good ear”, and that a core strength of my musicianship was being a “musician who listened”. These comments affirmed my own aspirations of being a sensitive, empathetic, and engaged player. My personal growth ethos has generally been to seek out my strengths and endeavour to pivot my development around them. It has always been more of a struggle for me to try to emulate my peers’ strengths or to slog away at improving areas in my own playing which did not naturally align with my personality or musical approach. The type of practitioners who train like sort of ‘musical Olympians’, striving to be the fastest, cleanest, most technical, most powerful players, were impressive and admirable, but ultimately appeared individualistic and ego driven to me. Instead of questions like: ‘how can I play this line at 400bpm?’ or ‘have I got enough 32nd note licks?’, I was asking myself things like: ‘how can I improve at accompanying the bass solo?’ or ‘am I getting in the way of the song too much when I play with a singer?’. Thus, directing my focus on building and improving my listening and
communicative skills resonated well with my general goals as a developing musician. However, having spent much time listening back on recordings of my own playing in various contexts, and reflecting on improvised music situations I had been a part of, I identified certain aspects of listening and interaction to be the weak areas in my playing. Specifically, I felt I could improve upon my ability to keep track of my own train of thought and flow while simultaneously maintaining presence, and my ability to react and engage in the productive and co-creative manner which I was striving for in these musical contexts. I noticed that I could often listen and engage well in certain musical scenarios but sometimes my time or my tone would suffer as a result. Similarly, I found that I could accompany a soloist in a sort of auto-pilot way that would allow me to fully experience their playing, but the quality of my own playing would, again, suffer as a result. I would need to find a way to balance being a good listener while making quality contributions of my own to the musical context. My perceived strengths and weaknesses were interconnected, and it was exciting for me to create a project in which I could unravel that a little bit and explore the subject further.

I defined the layer of listening I was focussing on not as surface level listening; things like actively analysing the tone and delivery of each sound and pitch, the phrases and chord progressions, the form and arc of the piece, etc, but rather as something that was happening on a more subconscious or instinctual level. The area that I wanted to improve on in my playing was not dealing with moments or instances during an improvisation in which there was time to make active or informed choices to influence the music in real-time. Rather, I was looking at moments which were so rapid and fleeting that I deemed conscious decisions could not be a factor which was at play. The difference between improvisation and composition has been understood by some as simply ‘rapid composition vs slow composition’ but the musical decisions which I refer to above happen at an almost instantaneous speed. They appear to me to be intuitive or instinctual decisions and reactions, often informed by playing experiences, listening experiences, or maybe a variety of other things. It could be a type of sensing, perhaps, in which several senses come together in a given moment to inform an instantaneous decision. This could manifest in daily life, for example, in situations like deciding at the last moment not to step out on the road, without knowing why, only for a car to speed past right in front of you. Whatever was going on it was below the threshold of the level of conscious thought and whether these ‘decisions’ were subconscious or non-conscious in nature, it became useful for me to visualise a ‘subconscious ear’ at work.

It was clear to me that this ‘subconscious ear’ was operating actively during group improvisation, at all times guiding my direction and interaction, and it was with this in mind that I began to imagine what exercises, which would endeavour to strengthen this aspect of my musical engagement, might look like. I felt that strengthening this area would not only improve my presence and ability to constructively engage in such situations but would also undoubtedly serve to inform and reinforce decision making during moments which allowed for more ‘conscious decisions’ in less improvised scenarios.

In the beginning, I decided that this image of a ‘subconscious ear’ would drive my process of exploration and I began to think of more scenarios outside of music in which we would use this sense. I conjured up an image, maybe a memory, of a busy dining room during a family celebration, the room alive with chatter over food and drinks, ten conversations happening at once. I have experienced that I can be having an engaging conversation with one or two people at that table and still follow the development of one or two of the other conversations happening around me. I do not have the training nor background to explain the science of what is happening in that moment; the rapid way in which the ear and brain must switch
between active and passive listening, the mental juggling and sorting of information which must occur in the brain. Nonetheless, I can say that it is a highly engaging experience and cannot be achieved without an absolute presence in the moment. Using a combination of ideas attained through practicing exercises from the books of John Stevens and Thommy Andersson, as well as some of the experimental games that I had seen in comedy improv as inspiration, I resolved that my project would begin with spoken games. I sought to create games which I believed reflected or had a direct correlation to communicative and interplay moments which I had personally experienced in improvised music.

1.3. Methods

This project first began with sketching out as many ideas for these interactive spoken games as I deemed useful. I wanted to ensure that each game had one clear main challenge, to be achieved individually or collectively, and which could only be achieved by utilising speaking and listening in tandem. I then trialled these games on my partner, a non-musician, before bringing them to musician peers for trial and reflection. I relied heavily on documentation, note taking, and audio recording during this part of the process.

My first challenge was to test these exercises on fellow musicians of varying instruments and varying degrees of improvisational experience. At this stage, I conducted trials with two musicians quite familiar with improvised music and two musicians who were less familiar with it. The idea here was to draw out some variation in the musicians’ responses and perhaps also to give rise to further opportunities for problematisation. Next, I created a type of feedback loop which involved trialling a game, receiving feedback, then adjusting the game’s challenge or intensity level based on the feedback. I was curious to explore what reactions playing these interactive spoken games with my classmates, fellow musicians, would elicit. Whether they would find them too simple, too challenging, or whether the way in which they engaged with and reacted to the games would inspire me to adjust my ideas or produce entirely new ones. For this reason, documentation and feedback were paramount to the earliest stage of the process. I used a simple phone recording app to record trials of the spoken games, and afterwards I conducted a short debriefing-style interview with the players. I then analysed these recordings and reflected upon them before adjusting some of the parameters of the games, if necessary, and playing again. Through this process I was able to effectively problematise the games themselves and create an appropriate challenge and intensity level for the participants. Listening back to recordings of these sessions - how the participants engaged with the games and how they described their experience, I looked for areas in which the session was not opening the desired channels of communication and adjusted the instructions of the game appropriately.

In the next phase of the process, I contextualised the games by imagining a way to translate them into playable musical exercises. This involved sourcing and reading related material from relevant musicians in the field. During the 3rd semester of my master’s degree I was lucky to be part of saxophonist Julie Kjær’s free improv ensemble course in Aarhus in which she was working almost exclusively with material from John Stevens’ Search and Reflect (1985). Simultaneously, I was part of a week-long workshop with bassist Thommy Andersson and in which we were experimenting with many listening-orientated exercises from his own book React and Play (2017). I took much inspiration from these exercises and games, while also paying close attention to how myself and the other musicians engaged with them. During
these, I would take mental notes on what worked immediately, and what was more challenging. I then spent some time looking for parallels in my own games and searching for areas to problematise. Taking inspiration from both of these experiences, I sketched some versions of the games to be played on instruments. These would come in the form of musically interpretable instructions. Essentially, these instrumental versions of the games would follow the same format as the spoken versions, in that maintaining a balance of playing and listening would be necessary in order to engage with the game. From here, the methodology followed a similar line as with the first phase of spoken trials. I trialled the games, documented the session through audio recording, listened back to the recording, made adjustments, and repeated the process again looking for areas to problematise.

Moving forward, I took these musical exercises in their current state and considered how they could be valuable to use as part of a concert. This involved research in the form of listening to, and analysing recordings of improvising musicians. I read interviews and searched for patterns in the performances that may resemble my exercises. In these recordings, I searched for tools that I could draw upon which might help contextualise the exercises in a longer-form improvised concert. I analysed live albums from Steve Lacy and Ornette Coleman, hoping for insight into how they approach the structure of an improvised concert. Drawing inspiration from this research, I then assembled a usefully vague and permeable form, in the form of structural suggestions and song forms against a free-tonal improvised backdrop, with which to structure my concert performance. I defined this as being an almost completely open form concert with a time restriction of 45-60 minutes. Throughout the concert all musicians would be free to play as they felt necessary, however they were encouraged to play in a co-creative and mutually encouraging way. Another mitigating factor would be that the band assembled for this performance would consist entirely of musicians who had been part of my artistic research project, having experimented with both the spoken and the instrumental versions of my games. They would thus be aware of the intention of my project and my aspirations for its positive influence on listening and presence during the concert performance.

1.4. Area overview

Here, I would like to draw attention to some of the drummers mentioned in the background section, their inspirational recordings, performances, and workshops. Firstly, however, I would like to briefly detail how some of the relevant literature in this area has inspired me in relation to my own project.

- Marcel Cobussen’s *The Field of Musical Improvisation* (2017) has inspired me greatly in regard to how the roles of improvisers can be changeable in given contexts. His analysis of improvisors as actants capable of engaging with the music in different ways, given the permutations of the ensemble or settings, was of particular interest to me. This perspective encouraged me to rethink the possibilities of my own role as part of an improvising ensemble.

- Tommy Andersson’s *React & Play* (2017) has helped inspire the structure of my games. The precision and clarity of his instructions for the players, I believe, helps his exercises target specific skills. I strived to recreate the same thorough and methodical approach in my own exercises.
• John Stevens’ *Search and Reflect* (1985) has been an inspirational book on many levels. From the layout and presentation of this book to the exercises themselves, Stevens maintains a playful and engaging environment. This book in particular drew my attention to the advantage of using playful game-like exercises to train important musical skills.

• Jason Weiss’ *Steve Lacy: Conversations* (2006) provided a fascinating insight into the decisions and practices of one of the most important free jazz improvisers of our time. Reading about Lacy’s perspectives on the philosophy of his art has been of particular value. The sections detailing the various musical experiments he has conducted over the years has been inspirational in broadening my perspectives regarding what format a musical improvisation can take. One such experiment that comes to mind was his weekly workshop in which he invited non-musicians into a room of musical instruments and made free improvisations together with them.

• Pauline Oliveros’ *Deep listening – a composer’s sound practice* (2005) is full of many useful practices and exercises. I drew inspiration particularly from her breathing and listening exercises. Her attention to developing one’s listening in order to better perceive the interplay of sounds is, I believe, a crucial practice for musicians at all levels.

• Peter Niklas Wilson’s *Ornette Coleman: His life and his music* (2000) was a book that gave me insight into the cultural context of Coleman’s music. His political motivations and the scope of his vision as a free jazz composer were intertwined. This book encouraged thoughts about how to ensure my own music could be socially conscious and not just art for the sake of art.

• Dave Liebman’s *Self portrait of a jazz artist: Musical thoughts and realities* (1988) has inspired much reflection on the activation of one’s intuition within improvising. As well as this, Liebman has put much thought into the experience of the audience as they engage with improvised music. This, in turn, has help me shape my own aesthetics in this area.

Next, I’d like to draw attention to some of the musicians who have greatly inspired my playing and research with their recorded and live performances. In a workshop in Dublin circa 2009, drummer Jim Black played in trio format with two of the teachers in my school. Over some sections of the tune, particularly some drum-breaks, Black appeared not to be playing in a way that fit into the familiar grid of subdivisions which functions as the rhythmic architecture of much of the music I was listening to at the time. During a Q&A session after the performance, Black was asked about this. Here, and I paraphrase his response, he said that with practice, four beats or eight beats, even thirty-two beats or longer, can simply be felt as a passage of time. Although present somewhere deep inside, he was not relying on an overt metronomic pulse and its resultant subdivisions to guide him through the musical passage, rather he knew the starting point and could ‘feel’ or maybe telegraph the ending point. This concept is also often referenced in relation to John Coltrane’s “sheets of sound” concept of playing which he began to develop in the late 1950’s, as illustrated in Lewis Porter’s book *John Coltrane: His life and music* (1999). For Coltrane, and also Black, this allows the player to break away from a pulse and subdivision-motivated approach to playing. This, in turn, frees them up to play entirely loose and rubato, should they choose, over the desired number of beats, or space of time. Another fascinating aspect of that workshop was a tune Black brought
that included a rest at the end of each sixteen bars or so. The rest was not in time but simply described as ‘a breath’. This would inevitably be variable and relied on the focus of all three musicians to execute this breath cohesively. Although classical musicians may be more familiar with this type of phrasing, especially in conductor-less settings like a string quartet, it was the first time I had seen a ‘jazz’ musician utilise this type of technique. It opened my eyes to some of the possibilities that existed outside of traditional jazz playing and lead me to discover and be inspired by the recordings of the early free jazz masters like Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman. After digging into Coleman’s seminal album, *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), I wanted to explore more of his catalogue. It was his live album *Sound Grammar* (2005) that had the most profound effect on me. I became more attuned to the compositional possibilities of free jazz through the identification of musical parameters and their subsequent omission or accentuation. For instance, I became more familiar with song formats such as ‘time-no-changes’ or the ‘free ballad’, and the importance of focussing on the balance of intensity of each musician’s part, rather than having their parts fit together in a traditionally rhythmic or harmonic fashion.

Another terrific example of a drummer who utilises the concept of filling between the bar-lines with a non-metric-grid-based approach is Dave King. I first became aware of King through his work with long running group The Bad Plus. King appears at moments to employ the same type of technique as Jim Black, in abandoning the structure of subdivisions and bending space-time, so to speak, before returning seamlessly to a tempo or groove. Seminal Dutch free jazz drummer Han Bennink and contemporary US drummer Tyshawn Sorey are also proponents of this technique. These such drummers can be heard playing sections of a piece with no implied tempo or with each player having their own tempo. They are capable in moments like this to make accentuated hits within their own flow which converge with points of focus in another player’s flow, despite each musician playing in different tempos or in no tempo at all. This, to me, demonstrates an ability not only to listen actively to more than one improvised flow simultaneously but also to make dynamic decisions throughout that process.

Finally, the conversational nature of some of Steve Lacy’s recordings, especially his *Duets/Associates* (1997) album, a series of duets with his contemporaries, have also had a huge influence on me in terms of the collective responsibly for the development of a narrative during an improvised piece. Some of his pieces appear to begin with a simple theme of sorts, often with very few parameters, and this theme is then used as inspiration for the development of the rest of the piece. I became inspired, later in this project, to apply a similar technique to my own musical games. By creating themes which were open to interpretation and development, I could encourage channels for communication and improvisation within the group.

2. Process

In this chapter I will present the process stages of my project in chronological order. Beginning with how I chose my point of departure, I will then detail the construction of the spoken games, my influences in this area, and my selection process of which spoken games to work with. Following this, I will discuss which challenges I faced in converting these exercises into interpretable musical instructions for the instrumental versions of these games. Finally, I will elaborate upon how the first two phases of this process influenced my decisions around the construction of the exam concert for this project.
2.1. Choosing my point of departure

In the spring 2021, I attended a course titled Free-Tonal Improvisation which is taught by Fredrik Ljungkvist at Kungliga Musikhögskolan. This course leaned heavily on an ethos of ‘play first, think later’. Ljungkvist facilitated many musical situations with what I would later recognise as ‘usefully vague’ instructions or parameters. While I did not overtly present any of the preliminary ideas for my games during this course, I was highly influenced by the focus the course brought to awareness of the density or permeability of one’s own playing, and the group’s playing as a whole. It became clear to me at an early stage of this course that a particularly sensitive type of listening was necessary in this environment if any of the group’s improvisations were to be coherent or mutually fulfilling.

As mentioned previously, during a semester at Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium in Aarhus in the autumn 2021, I attended a bi-weekly improvisation course taught by Julie Kjær. Kjær introduced many improvisation and listening-orientated exercises from John Stevens’ book *Search and Reflect* (1985). These sessions would involve working through exercises from the book which were relevant to our group (voice, alto saxophone, two guitars, two pianos, and drums). After the sessions, we would reflect on the environment created by these exercises, their limitations, and their ability to inspire, as well as discuss our individual experiences performing the exercises, and how we would evaluate the musical outcome.

Another inspirational moment from my time in Aarhus in 2021 was the aforementioned week-long intensive workshop with Swedish bassist Thommy Andersson. Anderson worked first with some basic warm up exercises focussing on opening the ensemble’s collective ears to the sonic possibilities of the players’ instruments. Subsequently, he introduced what he believed to be the most relevant exercises for our particular group from his own book *React and Play* (2017). Again, Anderson’s workshop relied heavily on mutual listening and co-creation which culminated in an hour-long improvised concert in Det Jyske Musikkonservatorium’s Lille Sal concert hall during the annual ‘Festuge’ music festival. This performance broadened my thinking about how to shape a long form improvised concert based, once again, on musical directions and possibilities with ‘useful vagueness’. While inspired by the structure and methodical nature of Andersson’s exercises, I found that these exercises were mainly in the form of a leader-based games. These exercises had a director or movable director, sometimes only in the initialisation and conclusion of the exercise, while the remaining participants played an engaged but nonetheless fundamentally reactionary role. The leader was initially the teacher of the exercise, and the other musicians would follow the leader’s instructions, attempting to execute the prescribed musical reaction in any given situation. In one such example, the leader begins with the first note of the C Major scale and the other musicians must jump in, taking turns and taking care not to overlap, playing the remaining notes of the scale in the correct ascending order as quickly as possible. However, as any player could jump in at any time with the next note of the scale, the risk of multiple players playing the next scale tone at the same time was greatly increased. The game ends either when two or more people play the same note at the same time, or the scale is completed successfully.

I found that these games gave me great insight into the musical intentions or each player in the group. Specifically, I reflected upon how they chose their moment to play and when they decided to leave space. Although the leader role was passed around the group once the exercise was understood by all, the games still relied on the presence of a leader in each
instance. This would later give me clarity in how I wanted to structure the aesthetics of my own games, with the primary difference being a ‘leader-less’ approach. The type of improvised playing that I was most interested in did not necessarily rely on a leader-reactor type of dynamic but rather on a type of collective creation. Where a leader may appear momentarily in guiding the improvisation in a new direction, or leading a melodic or rhythmic figure, these roles would be fleeting and the power dynamic of the group would be much more fluid than as in a single leader orientated game or improvisation.

Throughout these various inspirational engagements, I had noticed a pattern emerge among improvisation researchers and exercise books. There were breathing and singing exercises in John Stevens’ Search and Reflect (1985), Pauline Oliveros had various breath and play exercises in her book Deep listening – a composer’s sound practice (2005), and furthermore I had done some warmup exercises using voice in the aforementioned workshop conducted by Thommy Andersson. These experiences helped define the first clear parameter of my games – they would begin away from the instrument, speaking with the voice. Furthermore, the courses and workshops above ignited my interest in game-based learning. The simplicity and playfulness of learning through games seemed to provide an accessible angle of entry into my area of interest. In his book Man, play, and games (1961), Roger Caillois eloquently describes the change in mindset experienced during the playing of games:

Together with music, calligraphy, and painting, the Chinese place the games of checkers and chess among the 5 arts a scholar must practice. They feel that both these games train the mind to find pleasure in multiple responses, combinations and surprises that continuously give rise to new situations. Aggressiveness is thus inhibited while the mind finds tranquillity, harmony, and joy in contemplating the possibilities. (Caillois 1961: 84)

My next step in this process required reflection on the inspirational experiences detailed above. Doing this, in conjunction with research in the form of reading relevant books and articles, would help structure the aesthetics of the games I would produce.

2.2. Initial sketches for spoken games

The first ideas for these spoken games date back to the beginning of my master’s degree. The early months of my study took place during the pandemic-induced lockdown of 2020. Throughout that time, I was in isolation with my partner and I began formulating some ideas for my master’s project. While initially I had a sort of exercise book in mind for this project, it became clear to me that I also wanted to have a chance to perform and demonstrate these ideas with a group in my exam concert. Regardless, some of the early ideas for the games come from that time and some have made it all the way to the end of the project.

Prior to constructing any spoken games, it was important for me to have a clear idea of what the aesthetics of the games would be. Below is a list I compiled of what I believed would be the most constructive qualities to apply to the games that would best serve the intention and needs of the project.

- They are played away from the instrument
- They demand listening, communication, and interaction
- There is generally no single leader
- The challenge is theoretically equal for all players
- They are playful in nature
- There is no defined ideal outcome or ending
• There is possibility for repetition and variation

At this point it was also important for me to problematise some aspects of these aesthetics. I had already decided to begin away from the instrument. This would help remove any technical limitation that might occur in instrumental facility which, in turn, could distract from the intended degree of listening that the games would demand. Indeed, this presence and concentration, in relation to group communication and listening, would perhaps be the most difficult area to problematise in a theoretical way. I would need to wait until after the games had been played before I could effectively assess this area.

The idea of having leader-less games was also important to me. I believed that drawing attention to the removal of a singular director of the power dynamic was an interesting way of not only removing some individual responsibility, in terms of leadership or non-leadership roles, but also increasing some collective responsibility for the musical outcome. I concluded that this may also contribute towards ensuring an equal challenge for both players of the game by way of creating equal responsibility for the completion of the game.

As mentioned before, playfulness, was an important factor in the construction of the games. I was keenly aware from some of my own experience teaching music to young children that game-based learning facilitates an environment of intrigue and memory retention which can rapidly accelerate the learning process. Another aspect related to the playful nature of the games is that they would have no defined outcome or ending. That is not to say that they are whimsical or non-goal-orientated, but rather that their value lies in the process of playing the game as opposed to the successful completion of the game.

I would set the limitations of the games to be rather vague, taking inspiration from some of Fredrik Ljungkvist’s instructions in his ‘Free-tonal Improvisation’ class. I believed this would lead to an increased possibility for interest in future repetitions and, furthermore, would leave the games open enough that the participants may feel inspired to make their own variations in time - a sort of open-source approach.

Below is the complete list of games that I conceived in the first stage of this project. As stated before, each game concept endeavoured to home in on a specific challenge, mostly related to listening and interaction, which I deemed to be useful in improvised music. In the appendix you will find the full set of instructions for each game laid out in bullet points. This is followed by some brief notes for the players about the game itself and some thoughts on what I consider the primary skills that each challenge focusses on. In some instances there are also notes on how to further develop the game’s challenge.

1. Parallel lines

2. Convergence

3. Interruptions

4. Swoppics

—

3 Swoppics is an invented word I used to describe the swapping of topics, as required for this game.
5. Looping

6. Breathing

7. Following Game

8. Association Games

After trying all of the above exercises with my partner, a non-musician, I decided to narrow my list down to the first five games numbered above: Parallel Lines, Convergence, Interruptions, Swoppics, and Looping. I concluded that these were the games which best encouraged the environment and listening interaction which I was seeking to facilitate. I should also say that the games began with simpler instructions, however, after playing them a couple of times I was able to refine these instructions and set the parameters of each game more concisely. The work during this part of the process would also help me better understand how to advance each game’s playability, in terms of adjusting the difficulty or intensity level to match the given players.

2.3. Trialling the spoken games and follow up interviews

The next step was to test these spoken games with some of my classmates. I elected to meet individually with two musicians from an improv class I was part of in my 3rd semester of my masters in Aarhus, Denmark. I gave both participants very little information prior to our meeting so that they could not formulate any expectations or make any preparations for the encounter. I tried the first four games mentioned in the previous section. Below are some examples of recordings from these sessions.

- **Converging Topics** (spoken)
  Speakers begin with different and undisclosed topics, and they try to converge at a new topic.


- **Converging Topics** (spoken) 2
  Speakers begin with different and undisclosed topics, and they try to converge at a new topic.


- **Clapping 2 Trigger Words** (car, mother)
  Each person has a trigger word, car, and mother. Both responses are a clap.

• **Clapping** (radio)
  The trigger word is radio. The response is a clap.
  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/clapping-radio

• **Clapping** (music)
  The trigger word is music. The response is a clap.
  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/clapping-music

• **Clapping** (bicycle)
  The trigger word is bicycle. The response is a clap.
  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/clapping-bicycle
  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/clapping-bicycle/s-u0QxbfvIQtL?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

The participants named Mandy Neukirchner and Johann Fritsche had varying experiences with the challenges. Mandy is a guitarist, and, at the time, she was not overly familiar with improvised music. I observed her having some difficulty with the challenges initially. However, after I made a small adjustment to the game (helping her choose a topic to speak about, and first demonstrating the game with me as the ‘reactor’), she grasped the game much more quickly. After this session she gave some feedback regarding how the game was introduced and explained. I decided to take her feedback into account and adjust the clarity of the instructions of the games for future trials. The second participant was Johann, a pianist. Johann, on the other hand, had a different issue, as seen in the final example above. Despite being more familiar with improvisation and improvised music, he had a little difficulty with the task involving clapping with the trigger word. I concluded that this may have a little to do with maintaining a concentration of listening and flow and interaction in one’s second language. This became clear to me after trying the instrumental games with him as he was overly qualified and could grasp the challenge easily. I considered that there may be a need in the future to find a way to adjust the access level of these spoken games for players participating in their second or additional language. I found that by suggesting the use of a memory or an aspiration as a starting point for one’s improvised speech, players were able to enter the flow and engage with the games much more quickly. I would continue to give this advice in future trials.

Some interesting insights and questions arose during this part of the process. I noticed that the players who participated in these trials with me rarely asked the question ‘why?’. It seemed to be that the purpose of the game was instantly clear to them. As such, they were eager to improve their playing in each game, encouraging repetitions and increases in the level of the challenge. This, I concluded, meant that the games were working successfully on a playful level, while simultaneously presenting the appropriate degree of challenge intensity that the players would not be discouraged in their early attempts. In fact, the players’ difficulty with the exercises came almost exclusively from an initial unfamiliarity with the task at hand, partly due to my wording of the instruction. This was easily solvable and was adjusted immediately by refining my word choices and making the language more concise.
2.4. Translation from spoken games into musical exercises

I selected the five games stated in the chapter above for further experimentation: Parallel Lines, Convergence, Interruptions, Swoppics, and Looping. I spent some time imagining how these concepts might be translated, in an interpretable way, to playable musical instructions. While spoken language mainly consists of universal definitions and can generally be interpreted as thus, musical notes, phrases, and rhythms are infinitely more subjective in nature. It was useful to remember that in the spoken games phase of this process the content of the players’ speech was not important, with the exception sometimes of the ‘trigger word’. Aside from that it was generally about the relationality of intensities between the players as opposed to the substance of their output. By this thinking, the musical versions of these games could generally translate well if I avoided trying to force any concrete or defined melodies, rhythms, or phrasings, instead focusing on the relational intensity between the players’ flows. It was my decision to try these exercises in the next stage of the process not only in duo format, but also as trio and quartet. This would help bring the concepts closer to how they may appear in the concert format and assist me further in finding areas needing clarification or further problematisation. Below is a list of my initial thoughts on the translations of these five games.

1. Parallel Lines
   This game would be the simplest translation. Musicians would simply begin playing at the same time with unique and un-predetermined flows. They would avoid conscious interaction and would discuss afterward how they experienced each other’s playing.

2. Convergence
   I decided that this game may also not require too much adjusting. The musicians would all begin at the same time with different musical flows and ideas. Then they would try to converge them into one singular collective and coherent flow.

3. Interruptions
   This trigger-based game could also be translated quite easily. My initial thought was for one musician to have a set trigger in the form of a particular sound, for example playing the lowest note on the piano. When that trigger was played the respondent musician would have to perform their prescribed response, for example hitting the bell of the cymbal.

4. Swoppics
   Swoppics is a sort of development of the Parallel Lines game. Therefore I felt that this game could be almost directly translated into a musical exercise. The players start to play at the same time with unique and un-predetermined flows. They must listen as they play and try to finish up playing an imitation, or continuation, of the flow of their partner.

5. Looping
   I felt this game I could translate directly. It made sense to me to structure the instrumental version of this game based around a repeated music phrase. I would give no instructions as to the length of this phrase or how it should be executed, but simply that when one player began looping a phrase, the other must follow by looping the last phrase they played until the loop is broken by the initiator.
I hoped that these instructions would strike such a balance between vague and concise so as to elicit interesting results from the players. It was a necessity that the musical outcomes of these exercises would both further refine the instructions themselves, while simultaneously producing interesting and challenging musical landscapes to play within.

2.5. Musicians try the exercises

After preparing instructions for these instrumental exercises, I began rehearsing them with the group who would later play in my exam concert. These rehearsals happened in duo, trio, and quartet formats, which helped me become aware of the potential parameters and limitations that pertained to each exercise. The following examples include Johann Fritsche on piano, Mats Dimming on acoustic bass, and Fredrik Ljungkvist on tenor and soprano saxophones.

There are two things I would like to convey at this point. Firstly, the audio files presented below are select examples in which I believe the exercises are well-executed and interpretable to the listener. They are mostly examples of the exercises after I have made some instructional adjustments, detailed in the next chapter. Secondly, the first audio file in this list is one of the games which initially hadn’t made the shortlist. I felt, however, that it could work well as a warm-up game in this context, and so, we tried it and I decided to include it.

- **Follow The Leader** - Back and Forth
  Drums and piano take turns leading and following each other.
  

  Here, I believe, you can hear the piano following, in an interpretive way, the intensity, dynamics, and rhythms of the drums. During a rhythmically sporadic period in the middle of the piece the drums begin to switch over and follow the piano’s groove as well as interpreting the mood of the melodic and harmonic content in a textural way.

- **Convergence**
  Piano and drums begin with different ideas and must gradually converge in a new combined idea.

  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/convergence-1wav/s-Rx2S0QU2hMz?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

  Somewhat unfortunately, in this example, both of the instruments begin with strikingly similar ideas and timbres. It is my interpretation that they deliberately diverge a little bit in order to create contrast, before returning to finish with a more unified ending.

- **Swoppies 1**
  The piano and drums begin with different ideas and must gradually swap.

  https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/swoppics-3wav
The drums appear to begin with free tempo sporadic playing contrasting with the piano’s bebop phrasing. At the point in which the drums begin to play with more of a bebop feel, the piano immediately begins to play more disjointedly. This resulted in a somewhat immediate trade of roles.

- **Swoppics 2**
  The piano and drums begin with different ideas and must gradually swap.
  
  In this example the piano plays extremely sparsely with dark chords. The drums play mallets in a searching, rhythmic way. The drums become increasingly sparse as the piano transitions to more searching, melodic, figures.

- **Swoppics 3**
  The piano and drums begin with different ideas and must gradually swap.
  
  The piano begins with frantic and unsettled busts of melodic figures with the drums playing relaxed and soft with the brushes. After some time they abruptly switch over with the piano becoming increasingly soft and relaxing and the drums culminating in a chaotic and aggressive finish.

- **Follow The Leader 1**
  Piano must follow the phrasing and direction of the drums.
  
  The drums begin with an atmospheric combination of long cymbal sounds, rolls, and bell sounds. The piano follows the rhythm and atmosphere intently, repeating notes, rests, and figures according to the arc of the drums sounds.

- **Follow The Leader 2**
  Drums must follow the phrasing and direction of the piano.
The piano begins abruptly with disjointed rhythmic figures and the drums follow closely behind with rhythmic punctuations. The mood changes to a softer one, briefly, before a quick accelerando and a frantic unison ending.

- **Loops** - Piano
  When the piano repeats a phrase in a loop the drums must then also repeat the last thing they played in a loop.
  [https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/loops-pianowav](https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/loops-pianowav)

After setting the mood, the piano begins a four-note loop in which the drums repeat a cymbal figure. When the piano reaches the next loop, a simple minor 2\textsuperscript{nd} interval, the drums are caught in a complex multi-textural figure. A number of shorter loops are explored before a sort of staggered loops is played extensively, which leads the duo towards an ending.

- **Loops** - Drums
  When the drummer repeats a phrase in a loop the piano must then also repeat the last thing they played in a loop.
  [https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/loops-drumswav](https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/loops-drumswav)

This duo begins with energetic rhythmic playing before the drums start a loop on the hi-hat and snare. The piano is caught playing a two-note figure for some repetitions. The next loop begins with a repeated snare roll where the piano is stuck playing one cluster repeatedly. A longer loop is reached when the drums play a backbeat style groove, and the piano figure is in a complex rhythmic relation with that beat. After an energetic release they finish with a final loop on the bells of the cymbals.

- **Triggers** – Drums (Bell)
  When the drummer hits the bell, the piano must change direction.
  [https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/triggers-drums-bellwav](https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/triggers-drums-bellwav)

Beginning with a hit on the bell the piano instantly chooses a mood. Throughout the example several bell triggers are played, with the drums choosing to follow or go against the mood of the piano.

- **Triggers** – Piano (Sweep)
  When the pianist sweeps the strings, the drums must change direction.
  [https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/triggers-piano-sweepwav](https://soundcloud.com/fiachmusic-1/triggers-piano-sweepwav)
The piano sweeps the strings to begin. As before, the drums choose an entirely different style of playing for each iteration of the trigger. The piano chooses to sometimes go along with, or go against what the drums play.

- **Loops** (drums)
  When the bass hears the drums looping a phrase, they must then also loop the last thing they played.

The piece begins with a sort of loose swing feel. When the drums begin the first loop the bass is caught in a two-note pattern and the drums immediately begin to play inside this oblong time frame. Several loops later, the players both decide to play around inside one particularly rhythmically interesting loop for an extended time. The piece surprisingly finishes with a unison loop.

- **Loops** (bass)
  When the drums hear the bass looping a phrase, they must then also loop the last thing they played.

Both instruments play for some time in unique flows before the bass settles on a three-note pattern for some time. The drums are caught in a complex multi-textural loop which provides a nice contrast. The piece with drums following several loops of the bass until a walking style loop is reached before a sort of rhythmic cadenza ends the piece.

- **Drums Trigger** (bell)
  The bass must change direction upon hearing the drums play the bell.

The instruments begin with quite contrasting ideas. After the first trigger the bass switches from low bowing to a single high note. The bass continues to respond by changing mood after each iteration of the bell, with the drums choosing to go with or against the bass.

- **Bass Trigger** (open E)
  When the bass plays an open E string the drums must do something different.
This trigger provided a greater challenge at moments when the open E string was played as part of a phrase on the bass. However, several, interesting moods were reached as a result of the intensity of this particular trigger.

- **Swoppics Trio**
  Three players beginning with different and undisclosed topics pass their ideas around in a circular motion eventually converging at a central gravitational point.

In this long example the trio begin at almost the same time with contrasting ideas. They take their time exploring their unique ideas for some time before attempting to transition clockwise to the next person in the rotation’s idea. These moments are punctuated with momentary instances of unison playing before the texture changes entirely. After quite some time the group decide to break the dogma of the exercise in favour of a particularly inspirational musical landscape.

2.6. **Reflecting and adjusting**

As evident in the audio list above, there are examples of **Swoppics, Follow the leader, Convergence, Triggers, and Loops**. The game **Parallel Lines** was put aside for now, and there is further explanation for that in the text that follows. Furthermore, the game **Follow the leader** was reintroduced briefly as a warm-up. Although I was ultimately trying to avoid stationary leader-based games, I found that this one worked very well as a warm-up game. I saw a lot of potential for this exercise especially between musicians improvising together for the first time. I found that the instructions to all of the other games worked quite well in practice. Listening back to the audio examples, I was content with how the players had interpreted my instruction, creating the desired necessity for listening and interaction. What follows are some specific notes on the artistic results of these sessions.

1. **Parallel Lines**
   This game worked very easily. The artistic results, however, were not as interesting as some of the other games. This was, in part, due to the fact that the challenge of this game did not translate well. Of course it was easy for two musicians to improvise independently of one another and avoid conscious interaction. I decided at this point to put this game aside and focus more on the ones that demanded more listening and interaction.

2. **Convergence**
   This game would take some adjusting. Musicians are well trained in playing together, balancing dynamics, time feel, and intensity as a regular part of their discipline. To begin playing with different musical ideas and converge them was, again, too simple a
task. Thus, I decided to adjust this challenge by requiring the musicians to converge their musical ideas over an extended period of time. I believed this would challenge the players to become aware, on a micro-moment level, of the potential consequences of their musical choices within the ensemble.

3. **Interruptions**
   This trigger-based game would also require some adjusting. The initial plan of having a particular trigger sound and a prescribed sonic response was somewhat un-useful. This challenge didn’t translate, in an interesting way, to real life musical scenarios. It also did not challenge the listening of the musicians enough. Hence, I decided that the trigger would instead instigate a feel change from the respondent. This would create a dynamic and unpredictable musical landscape between the players.

4. **Swoppics**
   This game was exciting and challenging to perform in all formats, as duo, trio, and quartet. The only adjustment that I made to the instructions for this game, per se, was to try to choose an extreme idea to begin with. This would allow the musicians to clearly distinguish each other’s ideas in the mix of sounds and to have a clear direction to move towards.

5. **Looping**
   This game worked quite well. The musicians took naturally both to creating and responding to loops. Furthermore, some surprising and exciting forms were created using this technique. Once some familiarity with the challenge had been reached, I was then able to adjust the intensity level by encouraging the players to begin improvising within the new forms created by the loops.

It was a rewarding and inspiring process to see these exercises come to fruition. I found it equally interesting to discover which games could translate well to musical exercises, which ones needed reworking, and which ones would need to be put aside for the time being. All of the exercises, useful or not, produced exciting and engaging musical environments. The musicians all commented at this stage about how they noticed that their listening and focus were heightened by the unique tasks of each exercise. This affirmation was important for me in confirming that the intensity level of the exercises was appropriate for this scenario. Throughout the sessions trying these exercises we found ourselves in many new and interesting musical landscapes. It is my experience that these exercises offered oblique points of entry into what might normally be obscure or elusive improvisatory moments.

### 2.7. A sketch for a concert programme

I’d like to explain a little bit now about how these games became a catalyst for improvised pieces. There were many ways to approach this exam concert given the material I had produced, the time scale of the concert, and my own artistic creativity.

Of my musical exercises based on speaking games, which I tried with my band mates in the sessions described above, we found that Swoppics, the Trigger game, Loops, and Convergence were some of the most exciting and versatile musical landscapes to improvise within. I was conscious that during the exam concert I wanted to allow each piece enough time for exposition, development, and exploration. Thus, I resolved that the four exercises
stated above, would be more than sufficient given the allocated concert time of 45-60 minutes and the scope with which we intended to explore the material. These four improvisational stimuli were repurposed as four movements and became known henceforth as: **Swopping, Triggers, Looping, and Melting**. I was happy with this decision as all 4 movements demanded an intense sort of listening to the other band members and maintained a direct link to the core concept of my research.

Imagining ahead to how this concert might play out on the night, I was excited by the possibility of having these four movements shift seamlessly from one to the next. Rather than having breaks between movements and introducing the concept of each movement to the audience, I preferred the idea of giving a brief introduction at the beginning of the concert, playing the movements, and then speaking more at the end of the performance. It was very important for me that we could maintain a sense of flow amongst the band throughout the concert. Thus, by excluding breaks and interruptions we might better facilitate a focussed and co-creative atmosphere. The performers needed only to remember each core concept of the four movements as well as the order in which they would be presented. By suggesting a fluid time frame for each piece, I felt I could maximise the space within each musician’s mind for presence, exploration, listening, and thereby, co-creation.

Although I had put together what was conceptually quite a simple sketch for this concert, there was still a lot to explain to the band in advance of the performance if the music was to encourage the co-creative spaces I was trying to facilitate. As such, the final set of instructions that I verbalised to the band ahead of the concert were as follows:

- **Swopping**
  Each person begins to play at approximately the same time, trying to begin with a unique musical idea. There is no prescribed key, meter, tempo, or feeling but it will be useful to try to gravitate towards an extreme idea on one’s own instrument. This would hopefully create a clearer contrast with the ideas that the other musicians might choose. This would also be useful for us so as to clearly distinguish each other’s flow in the beginning movement of this concert. After some time playing within our own flow, we should gradually try to swap the ideas around the group in a clockwise order relative to how we’re positioned on the stage. This involves trying to create and maintain a clear individual flow while listening to the next person in the rotation, and preparing to transition into playing a version of that next person’s idea. Once the switch has been made, we may take a moment to breathe and appreciate the new orientation of sounds and ideas in this new configuration. Next, when the moment feels right, we may all transition through the rotation, once again, to the next person’s idea, and so on. This process may happen a few times but, more than likely, after a few iterations, an interesting or inspirational landscape will unfold in which we will want to play within for an extended period. The movement will end when a natural sort of conclusion, of any description, reveals itself.

- **Triggers**
  Following the previous movement there may be the possibility of a single instrument interlude. If this happens, the instrument which is left alone must listen out for the first trigger. The first trigger is the first sound produced by whichever instrument decides to enter next. The second trigger is the first sound produced by the next instrument, and the third trigger is the first sound produced by the third instrument. When the trigger is played you must switch the feeling of your flow to something entirely
different. All instruments must obey the triggers at least initially with, as before, the possibility to diverge from the prescribed form if some more enticing musical landscape emerges. Again we will see where the piece takes us and how we may transition, or not, into the next movement.

- **Looping**
  Depending on how the previous movement ends, there is, once again, the possibility that this movement may begin with an interlude of sorts. If that happens, any instruments not playing can find their way into the music before we begin the looping process. Anyone can begin to loop their phrase at a moment that seems appropriate and once they do, the other musicians must also begin to loop the phrase that they have just played. We can try this a few times and settle into the environments that the loops create. If a particularly nice loop or moment presents itself, we can feel free to play inside that form for some time, exploring the parameters of the moment and being open to the possibility that we may be taken in a new direction as a result.

- **Melting**
  Once again there may or may not be some type of interlude that occurs which will allow us to transition into this movement from the previous. If not, we will just begin to play together, preferably, as in the first piece, with clear and distinct ideas. Over an extended period of time we will make a gradual and smooth transition from our initial individual ideas to some type of new common ground, taking time to appreciate and develop the micro-moments of the composition as each musician’s ideas slowly evolve and melt together into a new form.

For me, this order made the most musical and developmental sense. Beginning with the **Swopping** game would allow for an immediate exposition of the four themes which would later be passed around the group and developed. This game is an exciting beginning to a concert as it is instantly mysterious and intriguing to the audience. Moreover, for the musicians, it requires the instant acknowledgement of each other’s ideas and demands greater attention and listening from the offset of the music in order for the piece to evolve. Utilising this game as a sort of warm-up movement was a conscious choice and prepared the ear and mind for the next movement, **Triggers**. This second movement would, in some ways, resemble a game of pong with three balls, requiring the players to keep track of three floating triggers which they must respond to. Although **Triggers** and the next movement **Loops** share some similarities - the loop being a type of trigger in itself-, **Loops** demands further intensification in concentration from the musicians. This is due to the fact that the game demands listening out for a moment in which you are called upon to instantly recall and repeat what you have just played, while simultaneously holding the possibility to create that moment oneself. Playing in the present, anticipating the future, and retrieving the recent past on demand could, in some ways, be the apex of this concert in terms of challenge and concentration. Finally, placing **Melting** at the end of the set, as the final movement as such, would allow for a final release of tension. After two movements of quick listening and instantaneous reactions, this movement would require the musicians to slowly gravitate towards a central point. This is not to say that the same intensity would not persist in this movement, rather that the intensity would be spread out over the slow development of each musician’s unique initial ideas. The listening would become focussed on allowing the music to evolve in increments throughout the movement’s micro-moments, and challenge the musicians to exercise patience for the movement’s culmination and conclusion.
In short, this concert would consist of 4 movements in a specific order: Swopping, Triggers, Loops, and Melting. These would ideally be played through, one into the next, without breaks, but with the possibility of improvised musical interludes in between movements. Using our intuition and experience with time keeping, as by-products of both playing improvised music and performing time-restricted sets of music, we would aim for 45-60 minutes of playing, giving enough time to explore the nuances of each movement.

3. Artistic results

The most direct artistic result of this work was the approximately 47-minute concert that the research produced. Through shaping the movements of the concert around four choice games of my own creation, I was able to facilitate precisely the type of co-creative space that I desired. These movements provided each musician with the room to interact, co-create, express themselves, and explore the potential boundaries of each movement. Before discussing the concert’s artistic merits, I would like to briefly mention some of the artistic results arrived upon at earlier stages in the process.

During the spoken games phase of this process, I realised that these games were simple and fun, yet challenging and valuable at the same time. It occurred to me that I had not had any of this type of education throughout the early years of my formal music training. I had not been exposed to anything that remotely resembled these types of exercises until reaching postgraduate education, and yet, the exercises were so simple and easy to grasp. Reflecting on these exercises now, I not only deem them to be valuable for fundamental improvisatory musical skills, but also for how one might experience music in general from an early age. This resulted in a change of perspective for me as a teacher, as I reflected upon how I might apply this realisation in the future. I considered how to balance traditional music education skills, such as theoretical and instrumental skills, with constructive playful elements such as the interactive listening games explored in this work, in my teaching going forward.

The musicians that participated in the spoken games with me conveyed that they had experienced some changes themselves in regard to their own artistic approaches. Those musicians who trialled, and indeed helped me develop, the spoken games aspect of this work reported increased awareness of both the effects of their musical decisions and of the relationship of musical ideas within a collective musical improvisation context. It transpired for both myself and my colleagues that by playing these spoken games in advance of an improvised concert, a greater sense of awareness and presence had been facilitated. It seemed to function successfully as a warm-up exercise, to prime the ear and mind before playing on the instruments.

In the rehearsals prior to the concert, the musical exercises based on the spoken games were experimented with as deliberately short vignettes. This resulted in brief and intense pieces ranging roughly from 1 – 5 minutes. During this time, the players engaged with each exercise in a direct and often overstated way. To me, these brief musical episodes were exhilarating to play and equally exciting to listen back to. Although they didn’t leave room for the sort of development which was encouraged in the exam concert, the majority of the musical choices were left to the musicians to decide in the moment and the core idea of each exercise was presented almost as an etude. Indeed, this part of the process encouraged me to work on my ability to focus and provide the intensity necessary to successfully perform the exercises, within these short time restrictions, with other musicians.
As I transformed the musical exercises into movements for the exam concert, I had some recurring doubts that there may not be sufficient material for the 45–60-minute time allocation. The answer to this question was left somewhat up to chance in the end. During the final rehearsal ahead of the concert, I settled on the four exercises we would play and improvise with, but not yet the order of the movements. In creating a final order for the movements just before the concert, I felt the band would be less inclined to reference things they had played in the rehearsals or to fall into recurring patterns regarding how they engaged with the challenges. On the day of the exam I conveyed to them the concert form, the order of the movements, and my final instructions for each movement. It was an essential aspect of the process, to me, to have this sense of freshness amongst the band, a mutual sense of mystery and intrigue about how the music might manifest. This was also a learning moment for me as I reflected on just how much the order of the pieces can affect the mood and concentration of a concert. Furthermore, I learned a lot in this moment about balancing how much or how little information to convey to the band so as not to hinder the specific explorative visions I had for each individual movement, nor hinder the creative flow of each musician’s improvisation. This was an experiment in useful vagueness. I was particularly inspired by this aspect of the project to further explore the parameters of instruction-based compositions and improvisations.

As the concert transpired, we performed the four movements as laid out in my plan. In total, the concert duration was approximately 47 minutes. Beginning with Swopping (01:22 - 19:44), we took our time to develop individual ideas before proceeding to exchange them around the group. This resulted in an intriguing and mysterious, yet somehow coherent beginning to the concert. The landscape of the movement took on many interesting permutations as the piece gradually lead us towards a type of collective improvisation, borne out of these shifting musical ideas. An unexpected frantic moment emerged after just a few minutes which I believe came as a non-conscious response to the intense concentration needed to complete the first compulsory task of the concert. Almost as a necessary relief to said frantic moment, we returned to trading ideas around the group briefly before merging into a quiet and tender moment. It was terrific to demonstrate just how versatile the outcomes of these exercises could be, with seemingly infinite variations.

The next movement, Triggers (19:45 - 27:28), was arrived at by means of an extremely anxious and intense drum and saxophone duet, which seemed to grow slowly out of the preceding tender and self-reflective passage. For me, this served as the perfect ending to the first movement as it gave space for the drums to take over and provide a brief interlude, transitioning into the second movement. This moment allowed the others in the band to use this moment of rest to prepare for the new task of the second movement. The piano was the first instrument to interrupt the solo drums with a trigger by sweeping with a finger along the strings inside the instrument. This provided a few triggers for the drums to change feel before the bass enters with another trigger – a muted pizzicato passage. Finally, the saxophone promptly entered with an abrupt two-pitch statement as the third and final trigger. The mood of the piece changed rapidly from one feel to the next as each musician listened out for the triggers and reacted accordingly. As the piece became increasingly intense and chaotic, it was a natural decision to abandon the idea of playing the triggers in quick succession, opting instead to play them more sparsely and at clear moments in which the whole band could react.

---

4 These timestamps which follow the 4 movements: Swopping, Triggers, Looping, and Melting, refer to the beginning and ending times of the movement in question as per the attached audio file of the exam concert.
It was clear after many brief and inspiring moments the band was ready to linger a little longer within some of the landscapes created by the triggers and the piece evolved quickly into a collective multi-textured narrative. The piece eventually simmered down naturally into a solo piano interlude.

This interlude was cleverly executed on piano as it introduced the concept of the loops towards the end of an explorative passage. And such, **Loops** (27:28 - 37:08) begins when the drums, bass, and saxophone join the piano and some initial melodic and rhythmic loops are created in quick succession. Before long some broader asymmetric loops emerge, and in these moments some very interesting forms appear which the band improvise within and explore. This is the true magic of this concept as it is a sort of oblique entry point into quite an unusual musical texture. Towards the midpoint of this piece I, on the drums, happened upon a particularly rhythmically interesting loop which felt natural to repeat and develop over several minutes. This allowed the other instruments to explore this sort of oblong groove as a backdrop with which to improvise over. This piece came to a very interesting and elusive ending, with many rhythmically asymmetrical loops overlapping, intensity increasing, a collective diminuendo, and finishing with a fragmented looped pattern on the gong and bass culminating in a poignant unison figure.

The result of this unison ending was the only break in between any of the movements. Although unplanned, it was in fact a welcome moment of silence which served to clear the metaphorical palette, before the final movement of the set – **Melting** (37:09 - 48:42). This piece began somewhat unexpectedly with the drums alone. Originally the piece had been planned to begin in unison with contrasting ideas. However, what transpired was a slow introduction of instrumental themes one by one. Although all the instruments started at a low dynamic, we retained a sense of contrasting sounds and themes which developed slowly over 11 minutes, melting into a new and unrehearsed coherent collective atmosphere. I was very satisfied with how patient the band was in the development of the music, listening carefully as it meandered in some different directions before building in intensity towards a collective conclusion.

The total time of the concert came in at 47:20 minutes. I felt this was an ideal time to finish this set, especially given the intensity of listening and concentration required to play these four movements. Based on the overall length of the set, the length of the individual movements, and the intensity arc of the movements, relative to their position in the set, I think the band delivered a complete and compelling narrative. The first three movements began with an exposition of their core concepts followed by many inspired improvisational developments. The final movement, in contrast, developed one concept over an extended period of time, delivering a sense of closure. It was my experience playing this music that we settled into the mindset of group improvisation very quickly having first to focus on the initial prescribed task of each movement. I posit the reason for this was that the challenges of each movement demanded the same attention and presence which was later employed in the moments of co-creation that followed.

### 4. Conclusions

As a result of completing this project, I have arrived at several important insights. These insights come in the form of enriched understanding in several areas; namely, the relationship between language and music, the value of warming up, presence in improvisation, and how I
as a bandleader can successfully utilise concepts, as opposed to compositions, as forms or movements in an improvised concert context.

**Language/music**

The research I conducted during the various stages of this work has further affirmed to me the connection between language and music. This was further illustrated in the examples found of the use of prosody by leading improvising musicians, but also by the connection found with ideophones in languages. Furthermore, the improvised musical flow and the flow of improvised speech, as received and interpreted by the listener, has been shown to be related on the level of syntactic processing. Ultimately this helped to encourage and structure my spoken games in a way that could aim to home in on specific listening and processing skills vital to group improvisation.

**Mental warm-up**

The value of warming up for musicians is often equated to the types of warm-ups used by athletes; loosening, stretching, and getting the blood flowing. However, the type of mental warm-up that my spoken exercises provided, especially in advance of group improvisation, was new ground for me. This is something I will continue to encourage when working with new ensembles in the future. In both the rehearsals and concert, the musicians reported listening more attentively and accessing a degree of situational presence with greater ease.

**Presence**

Several new concepts enlightened me in relation to presence and one’s role in a group improvisation. The utilisation of usefully vague playing, sensitivity to permeability, and an increased awareness of power dynamics within the group elevated my own ability to contribute meaningfully within group improvisations. Not only can I now more readily access the mind-space necessary for constructive group improvisation, but I also have a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics at play within these situations, and how better to navigate that landscape.

**Composition/concert format**

Due to the abstract nature of the musical concepts that I worked with throughout this project, I was forced to abandon the standard forms that I was familiar with in favour of conceptual movements and improvisatory instructions. This approach was new to me and allowed a lot of room for divergence. It also encouraged spaces of co-creation and elevated the individuals’ playing as well as the group’s sound as a whole. This project has inspired thoughts about how to continue further with this approach, searching for different contexts in which to apply it, and different parameters to work within.

The challenges encountered throughout this project came at different stages of the process. After working for some time on a broad range of spoken games I found that many of the games did not relate, in a way that was of interest, to the type of listening and interaction that was key to this project. However, I did find more than enough useful material to explore in the games, the exercises, and the concert. The games which were not appropriate for this work have been filed away for later use in another context. I found that in the initial trials of the spoken games that the challenge elicited a broad range of responses from the participants. All reported finding the games fun and interesting, although I found that some people took to the challenge more naturally than others. I was encouraged to refine the language I had used in the instructions and verbal explanation for my games and exercises, and this later helped me to better illustrate the concept of each movement of the concert to my exam band in a more
concise way. When it came to translating the spoken games to musical exercises, I found that some were straightforward to translate while others needed adjusting. For example, the game *Convergence*, which eventually became the piece ‘Melting’, had a different challenge as a spoken game compared with as a musical exercise. As a spoken game it seemed to take much longer to analyse the flow of one’s partner and move towards a middle ground, whereas as a musical exercise the challenge lay in resisting rushing the development and the urge to play in a sympathetic and complimentary way immediately.

I have been inspired by this project to look deeper into the relationship between language and music. I’m curious what we, as improvisors, can learn from the ever-expanding world of linguistics, and how we may utilise some of their concepts to enrich our own playing and perceptions of discourse within improvisation. I have further been inspired to develop these mental warm-ups both as group activities and as inspiration for further compositions and I see a lot of scope for further development of these types of games both in early music education and at an advanced improvisatory level. Going forward, I will certainly utilise these games and exercises in my teaching. I have furthermore considered assembling the exercises in a book or syllabus format. I am aware that there are many more points of entry into this mind-space of presence in improvisation and am curious what might be discovered by searching for more of these points of entry through spoken games and musical exercises, not least because it will inspire further compositions and performance material. The next clear stage of development of this work, for me, is to engage with different art forms. Specifically, I would like to bring this exam concert ensemble into transdisciplinary work. I can see the potential in applying this approach in collaboration with improvised material artists, improvised dancers, and improvised theatre. It would be extremely interesting, as a future study, to explore how the roles of each player might fluctuate and balance in this environment, and what we can learn from each other through this type of explorative collaboration.

Ultimately, to me, the value of this work lies in the important space that it creates. The games and exercises have been shown to prime the mind and ear for the group improvisation landscape. This eliminates, for me at least, the all-too-common hurdle of entering the mind-space necessary for this type of music. Whether in the format of games, exercises, or resultant improvisations, important spaces for mutual learning, mutual listening, mutual respect, co-creation, and emotional release have been facilitated, and as musicians, artists, and humans, these spaces are vital.
Reference lists

Literature


Recordings

Coleman, Ornette. The shape of jazz to come. Atlantic Records; 1959.


Visual Media

“Barry Harris - Masterclass #2 (2020)”,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Flgp95DJMx&list=RDItY8urgqChM&index=3

“Chamath Palihapitiya, Founder and CEO Social Capital, on Money as an Instrument of Change (2017)”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMotykw0SIk&t=1295s

“Clark Terry – Mumbles 1973 France (1973)”,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxOXqFDrU

https://youtu.be/CX1wHaHP-Q

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094580/


Appendix

1. Parallel Lines

- Game for two people.
- Both players privately choose a topic to speak about. (In the beginning a memory or aspiration can be a good entry point.)
- On cue, they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue, telling a brief story.
- The game continues for a time and concludes at a moment mutually agreed upon in real-time, maybe by means of a predetermined signal.
- The player must then describe, to the best of their memory, what the other person’s story was about.

(notes)
- The game aims to challenge the players’ ability to actively listen and absorb information while engaging in their own task. Thus, both players must not be tempted to leave long silences in their monologue, instead they should aim to simultaneously speak and listen.
- Initially the players do not interact overtly. However, as a level of familiarity and comfort with the challenge is reached, players may find opportunities to interact.
2. Convergence

- Game for two people.
- Both players privately choose a topic to speak about. (In the beginning a memory or aspiration can be a good entry point.)
- On cue, they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue, telling a brief story.
- Without overtly listening or interacting, the players attempt to arrive at talking about the same subject gradually and seamlessly. This subject is different from either of their original topics.
- The game can end when: it becomes too easy; it becomes too difficult; a natural ending has occurred.

*(notes)*

- The game challenges the players’ ability to actively track the direction of the other player’s story and find a convergence point with it by means of gradually adjusting the direction of their own story.
- As the finishing point of each player’s story is initially undetermined, the players must be attentive and prepared to gradually change topic, maybe several times, and move towards a middle ground.
- During the learning phase of this game, short versions are recommended. Later, longer versions can be attempted with a longer, more meandering story in which several points of convergence may occur.

3. Interruptions

3a (preliminary exercise)

- Game for two (or more) people.
- Each player privately chooses a topic to speak about and does not share this with the other. One player has a ‘trigger word’ which is stated in advance.
- On cue they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue.
- When the ‘trigger word’ is spoken the other player(s) must perform a pre-defined action (e.g., clap) without breaking stride.
- The game can end when; it becomes too easy, it becomes too difficult, or a natural ending has occurred.

3b. Game for two (or more) people.

- Each player privately chooses a topic to speak about. Each player has a ‘trigger word’ which is stated in advance.
- On cue they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue.
- When the word is spoken the other player(s) must perform a pre-defined action (e.g., clap) without breaking stride.
- The game can end when; the players are catching all the cues with ease, the players are missing too many cues, or when the players finish speaking about their topics.

*(notes)*

- It is possible to allow for variations of a word (e.g., star, starry, starring, starred).
4. Swoppics

- Game for two people.
- Both players privately choose a topic to speak about.
- Both players agree on the same or a unique pre-determined ‘trigger action’ (e.g., clap)
- On cue they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue.
- Each player is free at any point to do the ‘trigger action’ and on this cue they must swap topics, taking it up as close as possible to where the other left off.
- The game can end when; it becomes too easy, it becomes too difficult, or a natural ending has occurred.

(notes)
- The game can be played with more than 2 players by passing the topics around the group in a predefined order, (e.g., clockwise).

5. Looping

- Game for two (or more) people.
- Each player privately chooses a topic to speak about.
- On cue they begin speaking at the same time, each in a continuous and fluent monologue.
- Any player can at any point begin to loop a particular word or phrase. The other player(s) then must also begin to loop the most recent words or phrase they have just spoken.
- The loop continues until the player who began it breaks the loop and continues their flow.
- 2 loops should not overlap.
- The game can end when; it becomes too easy, it becomes too difficult, or a natural ending has occurred.

(notes)
- The loop can be strict, or the players can micro-adjust the loop that it has mutual fixed starting point.

6. Breathing

6a.
- In unison, both players take a deep breath then read off, as quick as possible, a prewritten or improvised speech or text until their breath runs out. After, the players try to recall what each other had spoken about.

6b.
- Players only speak while breathing in. The players try to recall what each other had spoken about.

6c.
- Players alternate singing one long note while breathing out. They try to achieve rhythmic harmony in the alteration.

(notes)
• The games encourage an attentiveness to each other’s rhythmic breath cycles.

7. Following Game

• One person begins telling a simple and predictable story or song. The second person must speak in unison to the best of their ability as if they also know the story.

   *(notes)*

• The difficulty can be increased by adding dynamics to the song or difficult vocabulary to the story.

8. Association Games

a) One person speaks prepared or improvised nouns. The other person(s) must immediately associate a colour with the noun.

b) One person speaks a prepared or improvised short phrase. The other person(s) must immediately associate a texture with the phrase.

c) One person is the leader and speaks a continuous stream of words followed by a short pause. The other person(s) must immediately respond with a related word.

d) One person speaks a word of phrase. The other person(s) must respond immediately with a rhyming word or phrase.

e) One person speaks phrases of any length. The other person(s) must respond with any phrase but must follow the same syllabic rhythm.

f) One person speaks 3 sentences then leaves a gap for the second person to speak a sentence. The process is repeated, and difficulty increased by shortening both the setup and the response.