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My Improvisation Practice

The act of improvising in individual instrumental practice, collaboration projects and performance

Skriftlig reflektion inom självständigt, konstnärligt arbete

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Abstract

In this study I research and reflect on the way I have been practicing with my saxophone, how I have been collaborating with others and how I've worked with performance during my two master years, with a focus on improvisation. The study is a presentation of my Professional Integration Project on NAIP-European Master of Music-program.

I have had many different projects that will be presented. By playing, listening, and analyzing free improvisation I wanted to learn more about myself as a musician and about improvisation in general. I am also going to present individual exercises for improvisation I've been using, as well as exercises for group improvisation. I am going to present time-lines of events to see how one thing leads to another. I will present the product of a piece with improvised aspects, that led me and my collaborators to find our own ways of rehearsing.

By summarizing the many aspects, I present my findings by describing what I want to learn, and how I want to learn it, and how I've been working with free improvisation groups and music collaboration, and what is important for me while performing improvisations.

The findings of my studies suggest that I have developed my improvisational skills by playing free improvisation and doing exercises. My projects has also shown that you can combine written music with improvisational aspects in a classical setting by using different ways of rehearsing. Lastly, I found that it is important that, while improvising, musicians have a total mental presence to avoid energy loss in the music.

Keywords: Improvisation, free, saxophone, practice, ensemble.

Sökord: Improvisation, fri, saxofon, övning, ensemble.

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1. Introduction

My Professionally Integration Project (¹PIP) during my two years at the Master for New Audiences and Innovative Practice (NAIP) has focused on putting me and my saxophone in different music-making situations and learn about what kinds of knowledge and skills are suitable to have in the different contexts, such as free improvisation, new music with improvisation aspects, collaboration with dance and playing and composing for theatre. The skill of improvising turned out to be very important, mainly because of a personal interest in the concept of more or less freedom in music, and my projects became more and more focused on that aspect of music playing, and that is the reason why I wanted to concentrate on my improvisation practice in this study.

The reason for my interest in improvisation comes from my interest of performance in itself. I saw the power of the way improvisation demands total focus and openness from the performer, and how that can spread to the audience, creating a performance where you have their total attention. It becomes a journey you take together, and where the performance is the sum of the musicians, the audience and the setting, and where these parts greatly influence each other.

I have found improvisation to be the way for me to express myself most naturally within music. Emotionally, this is probably the main reason for why this has taken up most of my time and energy during my later studies. Improvisation has given me the motivation to explore my instrument more deeply, listen to new music, as well as given me a direction into uncertainty which exhilarates me.

This study begins with giving a background of my own playing and my projects, followed by a more in-depth description of the aim of the research. Then I will describe the methods I've used during my studies and within projects, followed by conclusions and discussion about what I found to be valuable in this practice.

1.1. Personal background

I believe that my personal background as a musician is important for understanding the reasons for the place I am now, what I am looking for, and the reasons for this study. Thereby I will give a short timeline of my musical journey up until starting the NAIP education.

I started playing saxophone when I was ten years old in the culture school in Luleå. The first years I played the alto saxophone. My teacher Niklas Haak had a classical background and after a few years I got more classically oriented. For some time the only ensemble music I was playing was wind orchestra, where I sometimes played tenor saxophone. Eventually I also started playing in a saxophone quartet which was more demanding and rewarding. The repertoire in the quartet was wide, consisting of arrangements of classical pieces, folk music, original music for saxophone quartet, rag time, jazz, tango, video game music, music from TV-shows

¹ Pyykönen (2013) writes that: Professional Integration Project (PIP) is the final project of the NAIP-master program, where the student combines innovation and research in a specific context. Specific context means for example finding a specific audience (or client) for the project.

for children, and pop. Some time after that I became a part of the Arctic Youth Jazz Orchestra (AYJO), a youth big band run by the professional Norrbotten Big Band. In AYJO, I got to try out jazz improvisation. During this time I also played piano and did some shorter compositions. After high school, I started at Framnäs folkhögskola and focused totally on saxophone playing. I took saxophone lessons for Jörgen Pettersson, and got to learn a lot about contemporary music. I always used some of my individual playing time just playing around with what kinds of sounds I could produce with my saxophone. At Framnäs I played with a folklore band which mostly played music from the balkan countries.

After Framnäs I was a conscript in the Swedish Army Band, playing concerts and doing ceremonies for eleven months. The year after the army, I started bachelor degree studies in classical music at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm (Kungliga Musikhögskolan i Stockholm, KMH). During my bachelor I continued to play saxophone quartet and solo pieces for professor Christer Johnsson, diving deep into the intricacies of phrasing and how to play together in a classical music style.

In my second year I tried free ensemble improvisation for the first time. One reason for me to play free improvisation was the feeling I got when listening to contemporary art music. If I imagined the piece I listened to being totally improvised, I realized that the overall "sound" of the piece probably could be improvised to sound similar, while written tonal music is harder to mimic with every musician improvising their part. I don't think of it as a revolt as much as just another way of making music, of transferring the act of composition to the playing musicians, in real-time. We used a cycle of improvising, analyzing and discussing (similar to later described projects) to drive the project forward and learn about ourselves and music. This was a turning point where I realized how I like to play free. The inspiration from contemporary art music has been important, but we quickly realized that it was more fun and interesting letting any style or idea, or combinations of them, form within the improvisation.

I have very little training in idiomatic improvisation, and before starting the NAIP I had only experience of free improvisation from my own improvisation projects. With idiomatic improvisation I mean improvisation within a certain style of music, for example jazz.

1.2. Perspectives on free improvisation

It is complex to describe the history of free improvisation. According to Swedish musician Harald Stenström (2009:23-26) the most common view seems to be that it emerged between the 1950s and 1970s with the merging of contemporary jazz and contemporary art music. In Europe, it might have been a revolt against the mathematical approach to new art music, like serialism, when in the US it might have been more of a reaction to the constraints of the way jazz were supposed to be played. The term "free jazz" is for me more descriptive of the background of the free improvising musicians, since the concept while playing is the same as the above definition.

Stenström (2009:26) writes about how it can be problematic to study the history of free improvisation:

I prefer to see it as much a general human phenomenon as laughter, where its musical expression is but one of many. One can also, with Couldry's perspective, speculate on whether it was only the term free improvisation that

appeared around the middle of the 20th century. Maybe free improvisation is as old as humanity itself, or at least from the time when man first began using sounds without utilitarian purposes.

I will present three views on free improvisation below.

According to Stenström (2009:108) free ensemble improvisation:

- A- has nothing predetermined*
- B- does not emanate from anything written down*
- C- is independent from idioms, conventions or traditions*
- D- is a real-time phenomenon and therefore optimally contemporary*
- E- is interactive*
- F- is self-generating/-organizing*
- G- has no fixed roles for the musicians*
- H- can include any sound tool, sound or technique, at any moment*
- I- might have room for definitional reservations.*

and in a shortened form:

/.../ free ensemble improvisation is musical real-time interaction between two or more musicians where nothing musical is predetermined or binding and where everything musical is allowed.

I agree with this definition. The word “independent” at point C is important, since it doesn’t forbid idioms, conventions or traditions, but instead puts the music itself above these. Also the word “fixed” in point G opens up for roles to form, but they can at any time be switched or disappear.

Guitarist and improviser Derek Bailey (1992:142) writes about what distinguishes free improvisation:

/.../ it seems to me now that in practice the difference between free improvisation and idiomatic improvisation is not a fundamental one. Freedom for the free improviser is, like the ultimate idiomatic expression for the idiomatic improviser, something of a Shangri-la. In practice the focus of both players is probably more on means than ends. All improvisation takes place in relation to the known whether the known is traditional or newly acquired. The only real difference lies in the opportunities in free improvisation to renew or change the known and so provoke an open-endedness which by definition is not possible in idiomatic improvisation. And this is certainly a great enough difference, but in its moment to moment practice the essentials of improvisation are to be found, it seems to me, in all improvisation, and its nature is revealed in any one of its many forms.

I agree with Bailey that the big difference is in the underlying concept. This doesn’t mean that an idiomatic improviser enjoys free improvisation, or vice versa.

Violinist and author Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990:103) writes about how improvisation relates to composed music and presents a variant of Baileys thoughts about “the known” :

In a piece of music, the opening chord, drone, or rhythm instantly generates expectations that generate questions that in turn feed the next bit of the

music. Once a musician has played something, anything at all, the next thing fits with that, or fits against it; a pattern is there to be reinforced, or modulated, or broken.

Thus, without our imposing a preconditioned intention on it, a musical improvisation can dynamically structure itself. The first selections of tones are very free, but as we continue, the selections we have made affect the selections we will make.

I believe that these three viewpoints are valid. Both idiomatic and non-idiomatic improvisation takes place moment to moment, but non-idiomatic or free improvisation has an open-endedness that goes beyond what you normally find in idiomatic improvisation.

I believe that in free improvisation you are always allowed to do whatever you want, and it has consequences.

Stenström (2009) finds four types of free ensemble improvisation skills:

1. *Listening skill*
2. *Choosing skill*
3. *Instrumental skill*
4. *Interactional skill*

Pianist and improviser Anto Pett (2007:5-9) stresses the importance of "developing a steady (permanent) control of attention. In other words, long thinking lines."

Stenström (2009) gives a more generalising picture, while Pett (2007) has a more practical approach.

1.3. Background of my professional integration project (PIP)

When applying for the NAIP, I described my project as a saxophone laboratory, where I wanted to put me and my saxophone in a diverse set of situations, in one single concert. I eventually changed that, keeping the diversity but instead making it into many different projects. The idea of a single big project was not good for keeping the flexibility I was looking for. Instead I could let each idea be explored on its own, have its own pace, and its own way of being performed. In this study, I will focus on the free improvisation studies, and a project called Approximately Four Improvisations.

Since this study is focused on improvisation, some projects with a less of an improvisational focus needs to be mentioned because I have considered them as part of my PIP. There are courses, theatre projects, regular concerts and tours as well as workshop leading. They are listed in a timeline in appendix 7, page 22.

2. Aim

Ever since I began my studies at KMH, before my improvisation focus, the aim of my studies have been to become a musician that musicians want to play with. This has continued to be important for me also in the NAIP. But when I have widened my practice, the aim seems to have morphed into being about becoming a musician that is also interesting, fun and rewarding to play and collaborate with. In this study I aim to find answers to the following questions:

1. *What kinds of improvisation skills do I want, and how do I acquire them?*
2. *How do I rehearse group improvisation in*
 - a) *free improvisation?*
 - b) *composed music with improvisational aspects?*
3. *What is important for me while performing improvisation?*

The reason to why I want to answer these research questions is to find out what direction I want to have in my future individual practice, collaboration projects and performance.

The aims of the projects themselves are more artistic in nature. These later described projects gave me the opportunity to collaborate and perform with many different people, investigating ways in how music can be used in different contexts.

I hope that my findings will be of interest for any musician that wants to explore improvisation in either a free improvisation setting or when combining composed material and improvisation.

3. Methods

I am approaching to answer my research questions by examining and reflecting on group improvisation projects, individual improvisation practice and the process of writing, rehearsing and performing one new composition.

The central methods in examining my improvisation practice are:

- **Audio and video recordings**, I have recorded most of my rehearsals and some of my individual improvisation practice using a Zoom H2 recorder, or gathered my fellow musicians recordings. Some performances also have video.
- **Improvisation analysis and reflective journals**, I have written down thoughts from rehearsals and planning of future rehearsals. I have also written down individual exercises and reflections from recordings of those.

In the next following sub-chapters I am going to present the key improvisation projects for this study based on notes and recordings.

3.1. Free Improvisation Projects

I want to show how one thing has lead to another considering free improvisation during these two years. The dates of the different rehearsals and performances can be found in appendix 5, page 19.

In the beginning of 2013 I went to an improvisation course in Helsinki that made me want to concentrate more on free improvisation. This was a course for classical musicians that wanted to try improvisation, and there were participating students and teachers from Stockholm, Malmö, Oslo, Tallinn and Helsinki. There were workshops, rehearsals and concerts. The students and teachers from Tallinn came from a masters program for free improvisation, with the pianist Anto Pett and vocalist Anne-Liis Poll as teachers. In the last concert I performed a duo with one of their students, vocalist and clarinetist Jaan Krivel. This was a turning point for me, and I realized that I had to continue playing free improvisation, and I wanted to do it more active. Both me and Jaan liked our collaboration and in May 2013 I went to play in his master exam concert in Tallinn, now in collaboration with a dancer, Karmen Ong.

During this spring I also rehearsed and recorded quite free improvisations together with jazz drummer Timo van Ruiswijk around the main theme of Alfie Atkins (Alfons Åberg)

In the autumn of 2013 I were on an four month exchange in Reykjavík, Iceland. There I spent a lot of time practicing different improvisation exercises, as well as playing free improvisation with many students and groups. This was the first time I had practiced improvisation individually.

When coming back to Stockholm in the spring of 2014, I started to plan my examination concert, which was planned to be held May 13th. I contacted singers because I wanted to try different ideas I had. With this group I wanted to do a few sessions, and have time to go into different concepts of improvisation. I would plan and lead the sessions myself and decide what kinds of exercises we would do. I found four interested singers, Amanda Larsson, Linnea Andreassen, Viktor Rydén and Maiju Kopra and I asked them to listen and think about the recordings we did during the sessions. I also started improvising with a percussionist, Kristoffer Linder. We worked similarly, but with a little less planning of the sessions, but also with the examination concert in mind. The third thing I wanted to have in the concert was a quartet where we would improvise over some harmonic and melodic ideas I had written during my time in Iceland. This quartet consisted of me, Alexander Rydberg on violin, Emma Augustsson on cello and Anton Svanberg on tuba. During the rehearsals of this piece it became more free, with free improvisation before and in between my written ideas. These three ensembles performed May 13 at KMH. We ended the concert with a free improvisation orchestra, consisting of 11 musicians.

During the spring I was also taking free ensemble improvisation lessons from jazz pianist Klas Nevrin, which helped with getting new ideas for exercises with my groups. I had also worked with a contemporary piece with improvisation together with the classical saxophonist Jörgen Pettersson, who specializes in contemporary art music. These experiences affected each other in a good way.

As a free improviser, you are the one to decide if, and how you practice improvisation. Below I will present the methods I've used when I have practiced improvisation individually. Some are technical and restricting, others are more emotional while some are more analytical.

Breaking habits

I wanted to analyze my solo improvisations, so I used this method:

1. Record solo improvisations

2. Listen to the recordings
3. Analyze the improvisations

In the analysis I tried to find out what I liked as well as what I thought I could do better. I try to keep an open mind to the music, and accepting possible unease that can come from listening to myself playing. The analysis gave me ideas of how to plan future practice sessions and I thought a lot about how one can make exercises that enhance the players sense of form. I will describe such exercises further below.

Technical exercises

Pett (2007:9-10) describes a number of exercises for gaining control over fast movements and developing thinking speed (made for pianists, but transferrable to saxophone):

1. *Try repeating an interval twice using two fingers at a time. Listen carefully to the tension each interval and what occurs between the two fingers while playing legato. This exercise is to firm and flexible work of sensomotorical system (the neuro-muscular memory). /.../*
2. *While repeating twice the same note in staccato, try to achieve a clear quality of sound. It is essential here that our imagination can follow every hand movement not allowing pure mechanical playing. /.../*
3. *As an articulation exercise, play two notes with a legato arc, the first note played stronger than the second. The next group starts with the preceding note. In further development, use tension and relaxation with two, three, four or five legato notes by alternating asymmetrical groups, by acquiring a perception of different meters over one pulsating tempo. /.../*
4. *As a rhythmic exercise, we will use dotted rhythms on one note. There is a small rest between the dotted and the short note and it is important to pay attention to the quick legato movement between short and dotted note. /.../ On the more advanced level we can play this exercise without repeating each note in dotted rhythms and adding triplets and syncopation.*

I believe these exercises are a good alternative to playing scales, and has really helped me to gain speed when I want to play many tones in my improvisations. Just as with scales, it is very important to be aware of your phrasing, tone, tempo and rythm while doing these exercises, since you are developing habits. How you want that tone or phrasing to sound is up to you though.

Restricting exercises

By giving myself restricting exercises, I both focus on that particular task, and learn to think in new ways. These exercises are made to get the creativity flowing by limiting the options. By for example restricting yourself to one tone or sound in an improvisation, you force yourself to get creative within that boundary. If you then add another tone or sound, you realize how many new options you get. If you add a few more tones you will get a scale or mode that gives you more possibilities. Another way of restricting which takes more practice to learn is to restrict oneself to certain intervals. This means that the rule is for example: Every new tone you play must relate to the former as a minor second or a major third. In this example, the highest number of tone options you can have is 4. If you for

example play a C, then your options for the next note is the C#/Db or E above the C, and the B or G#/Ab below the C.

If I would want to improvise using only minor seconds and major thirds, these are some exercises that would make it easier:

1. The chromatic scale (*see appendix 1, page 17*).
2. Stacking major thirds (four transpositions)(*see appendix 2, page 17*).
3. Stacking major thirds and minor seconds (five transpositions)(*see appendix 3, page 18*).
4. Major third up, minor second down. Repeat and retrograde (three transpositions)(*see appendix 4, page 18*).

If I would feel that I got stuck in certain patterns while improvising over these intervals, I would do more intricate exercises, such as:

5. Major third up a, two minor seconds down, repeat and retrograde (two transpositions).
6. Major third up, three minor seconds down, repeat and retrograde (no transposition).
7. Major third up, minor second up, major third down, repeat and retrograde (no transposition).

Concerning articulation, phrasing, tempo, time signature, dynamic and other musical parameters, I would try to vary these as much as possible, both during the exercises and during the improvisations.

To structure free improvisation rehearsals I have found it valuable to do more or less strict group exercises. These are some of the ones I've come across or made up myself, and used in my practice.

Restricting to few tones

I have been taught different variants of this exercise by Anto Pett and Swedish pianist Arne Forsén.

The musicians in the ensemble decide individually which four/five tones to restrict themselves to. You can also give the instructions to "introduce" new tones one by one, giving the improvisation a direction from simplicity to more and more complexity.

Follow me

This is an exercise I've been doing with singers, and the concept also inspired the second movement of "approximately four improvisations". The exercise transition from very strict to more free. The details of this exercise are my own ideas.

Step 1. The saxophonist is the leader. The group should sing the tone that are played simultaneous with the saxophonist, who improvises. In the beginning the saxophonist plays without fast passages.

Step 2. The singers are now allowed to stay at any tone the saxophonist plays. This will create a kind of "reverb" which the saxophonist has some control over and can

relate to. The singers decide themselves when to sing and when to change tone. The saxophonist can choose to play slightly faster passages.

Step 3. In addition to the instructions in the last step, the singers are now allowed to echo passages they hear are played by the saxophonist.

Step 4. Now the singers can imitate passages what the saxophonist plays with other, individually chosen, pitches.

Alternative step 4.5. The leader role is transferred within the group.

Step 5. Now the whole group is allowed to add ideas to the music, echoing each other, or staying on notes they hear. Here there is no leader anymore.

Short pieces

I have got variants of this exercise from Anto Pett and Swedish jazz pianist Klas Nevrin.

You decide who will start the improvisation. This person starts and the group is free to join in at will. The improvisation should not change into something different, instead investigate the ideas presented. This goes on for around 30 sec - 1 minute. After the ending there is silence and the next person in line starts, and so on. This exercise is effective in getting ideas flowing and can be used shortly before a concert.

Hold that thought

This is an exercise for training your ability to remember material. The details of this exercise are my own ideas.

The improvisation should have three distinctly different parts with silence in between: A, B and C. In B you should avoid using material that has been used in A, but in C you are allowed to use material from A and B. So the form becomes:

A

B

C (A & B)

Hold That Thought 2

I did this exercise in a workshop with the Swiss jazz pianist and free improviser Christoph Baumann.

A duo exercise: The improvisers silently chooses two sounds each. Then they improvise together using only the sounds they chose for themselves. After this, they should improvise with the other improvisers sounds.

This exercise can be varied by starting the improvisation the same way, but letting the improvisers use the other improvisers sounds at will. That means that the musicians has four sounds each to use.

Five form

This is also an exercise I picked up from Christoph Baumann.

A duo exercise: improvise a piece with 5 short movements. Two of the movements must be solos, one solo each.

The long tones

This exercise was inspired by my composition teacher at KMH, Johan Hammerth, who told me he used to give his student an assignment where they had to write a composition where the main theme is just a long tone.

This is an exercise for deep listening to yourself and the group. Start the improvisation with the instruction of just playing long tones. Listen to each other and see if you find something in the sound that interest you. It can be a certain timbre, a mistake, or anything that you react to. Then change your sound slightly to imitate what you heard. Here you don't have to feel that you have to DO anything, or create something spectacular. Instead everything you need to make the music is what you hear. After a while, the improvisation might morph away from long tones into something completely different.

Variety and relaxation

This is again an exercise I did with Klas Nevrin.

Make delimited sounds. Avoid creating any patterns by always varying the type of sounds, the dynamics of the sounds and the length of the pauses. In the pauses, relax. Don't "play" the pauses. Do not react on the other players, and do not let patterns emerge by the relations between the players.

The continuation of this exercise is to allow for some reaction now and then, while keeping the fundamental rules.

3.2. "Approximately Four Improvisations"

This was a project where composer Emil Råberg composed a piece for alto saxophone and choir, which was premiered with the choir Uppsala Vocal Ensemble led by Sofia Ågren in the end of May 2013.

I had the idea that I wanted to combine the saxophone with singers in improvisation. I got in contact with a friend who is a composer, Emil Råberg. I knew he was a choir singer and had written music for choir that had got attention for its qualities and also that it was possible for the many amateur choirs to sing them. We met and talked about possibilities and ideas, and Emil started to work on some parts. This was a very rewarding project. We met about once a month during the autumn to talk about ideas of the music. I presented many concepts that I've been thinking about, ways of how the soloist, the choir, the choir leader and the composer could relate to each other in improvisation, and Emil added his ideas and thoughts about how to present this in written music and how to form a piece out of it. After some time approximately four concepts arose, that would later become the four movements of the piece.

We also got in contact with a choir leader, Sofia Ågren, who led a choir that would be interested in working with us eventually, Uppsala Vocal Ensemble, a good amateur choir with a classical music focus.

In the spring of 2013 we got to try out one of these concepts with the choir in a workshop, and after that it was decided that the piece would be part of their repertoire for three concerts in the end of May, beginning of June. This meant a lot of work for Emil to make an understandable score, a lot of work for me with the different concepts, and a lot of work for Sofia to decide how to conduct it, and a lot of work in the rehearsals to get it all together. Some parts of the music were harder to explain, and it was hard to get the choir members to be free in the improvised parts in the first rehearsals since they had to understand the underlying concept, read the unorthodox score, look at the conductor's instructions and listen to the soloist and each other. But after a few rehearsals they were able to do all this and thereby make music that I believe couldn't be done in any other way. Sofia is much to thank for the good progress, she worked smart and deliberate with the choir, from warming up exercises that was connected to modes used in the piece, to solving complicated passages and explaining the concepts. (see appendix 6 on page 20 for a timeline)

Here are the main ideas of the four movements of "Approximately Four Improvisations"

I. Sommarmelodi, *Summer Melody*

This movement is based on the idea that the composer only presents a melody, and it is up to the choir to sing it the way they want. In addition to the melody, Emil decided to give examples of how the melody could be harmonised.

II. Vinterklanger, *Winter Sounds*

The idea for this movement was to use the choir as a kind of living reverberation of the saxophone sounds. All the music comes from the saxophone first, and is imitated and echoed by the choir, and later with more freedom to improvise for the choir members. This concept is the most free of them all, but still creates a very clear and recognisable piece, even if the melodies and lengths of the different parts differ between performances.

III. Intermezzo, *Intermezzo*

This is a scherzo, played *attacca*. It explores and exaggerates manners that can happen between movements of a choir piece, like changing page too early, giving many tones, humming tones and coughing. More disgusting sounds appear and reaches a crescendo that takes the piece into the last movement.

IV. Vårtrall, *Spring Tune*

This is the most traditionally written movement, where the improvisation mostly takes place in the saxophone part, making improvised melodies over written chords and rhythms sung by the choir, or sometimes playing accompaniment from written chords. This also turned into a very rhythmic, almost folk music-like movement. It also has a part where the choir members choose their own parts over harmonic changes.

4. Findings

What kinds of improvisation skills do I want, and how do I acquire them?

I will elaborate on Stenström's (2009) list of improvisation skills to show what I am looking for:

1. **Listening skill.** The skill of listening to myself and others. I want to be able to quickly analyze every new musical situation.
2. **Choosing skill.** I want to make good musical decisions based on what I've heard and what I think I can add or what I think the music needs.
3. **Instrumental skill.** I want to feel in charge over my instrument so my musical decisions become what I wish them to be. I also want my instrument to be a source of inspiration.
4. **Interactional skill.** I want to be easy and fun to play with, and at the same time have the skill to be interesting or bold. I want to make music that makes the listener care.

I believe these are the things that made me acquire and enhance my improvisation skills:

- Practice of free improvisation and free improvisation exercises, in groups or individually
- Listening to free improvisation and free improvisation exercises, my own and others
- Analysis of free improvisation and free improvisation exercises, my own and others
- Group discussions of free improvisation and free improvisation exercises, hearing what other musicians think
- Technical instrument exercises
- Studying of composition- and improvisation literature
- Collaboration with composer in partly improvised music

By analyzing improvisations, individually and in groups, I have learned so much about myself as an improviser and musician. I am presented with my sound, taste, decisions, strengths and weaknesses, and I clearly realize the consequences of my actions. I might have some underlying attribute or process that has helped me which I haven't seen, but I do believe that these are the main parts.

How do I rehearse group improvisation in free improvisation?

The things that greatly affect the way to rehearse free improvisation are in my view:

- The size of the group
- The level of the musicians
- The experience of free improvisation within the group
- The length of the collaboration
- The time left before an eventual performance
- The presence of a teacher or instructor

Some things that have been the same in almost all my free improvisation projects are:

- Short rehearsals of approximately maximum 2 hours because of the high amount of physical and mental effort.

- A loose or strict planning of the session, either by the group in the beginning, or by the instructor beforehand. The planning has always had room for new ideas of exercises.
- Using many different types of exercises (within the session in short-time collaborations, and in a group of sessions in long-time collaborations) to not get stuck in a certain "style" of improvisation.
- Audio recording of parts of or whole sessions, for future listening, analyzing and discussing.

How do I rehearse group improvisation in composed music with improvisational aspects?

The "Approximately Four Improvisations"-project will be the basis for this answer. In the rehearsals with the choir, I had the role of soloist. Sofia Ågren led the rehearsals and had to find ways of giving perfectly clear instructions while letting the choir find its own way in the music. The importance of these clear instructions is vital, especially concerning the varied experience of the choir singers. The different concepts of the piece had to be very clearly explained, as well as understood by the choir. The more the choir understood where the boundaries were, the more bold they got inside of those boundaries. This is similar to when giving instructions about improvisation exercises. This combination of rehearsing written music in a traditional way and explaining the concepts of the improvisational parts seems to be important to remember. Since we did three performances, I got to experience how the performance grew more confident, both in written and improvised parts. This will probably help the choir singers to more quickly grasp other improvisational concepts in the future.

What is important for me while performing improvisation?

In free improvisation, it is important for me to feel that every musician in the improvising group is equal. If there is a fear of disturbing someone else by adding to the music, that is not good for free improvisation, since it reflects a difference in status. The reversed feeling of getting disturbed by or feeling superior to another musician I believe is equally problematic. I do believe that an improvisation group can have a leader without this becoming a problem in the playing. I also think that it is unproblematic if an improvisation or part of an improvisation has a musician with a musically leading role, since this is natural music making. But I do think that if the same person takes that role every time a group improvises, it is problematic.

It is also important for me to be in an acceptive mode. Everything that happens is important and meaningful. It is easy to be accepting if what happens resonate with my own taste, and harder if it doesn't. A prerequisite for this is an overall focus from all the musicians. As both a listener and a performer, it is of vital importance for me that the improvising musicians are mentally present in every moment. This also touches on the subject of energy. I believe there are improvisational behaviors that give energy to the music, and thereby to the group, and there are behaviors that take energy. The main reason of energy loss in an improvisation is, I believe, either that one or many musicians are totally out of ideas or simply not completely present in the moment. Maybe the latter is the cause of the former.

Concerning more musical taste issues, I think it is important that the musicians give each other space. This lightens up the improvisation and makes room for interesting combinations of instruments within a group. I believe that this is an

interactional skill, to simply choose to not play. Another taste issue that is important to me is the memory and usage of musical material, and the searching for change and contrasts. The included exercises handle some of these issues.

5. Conclusions and discussion

I think that these findings will help me plan my future individual instrument practice. This kind of practice has been evolving for me since I started playing, and the questions of "what" and "why" to practice has become more important. I feel that I have found many good answers to these questions, and many tools for answering the question of "how" to practice. I believe that my practicing will continue to evolve because of new answers to the "what" and "why"-questions.

Concerning free ensemble improvisation, this study summarizes my experience and also reflects on my interest in the inner workings of improvisation and probably also my taste, how I like an improvisation to be. I believe that this way of music making will continue to engage me and pose many questions, like "should I have an idea of what I want the improvisation to be?", "is free improvisation a style of music? If not, when does music become a style?", "what can be learned from theatre improvisation and dance improvisation?", "why does so many people tell me that I can't be completely free?", "what does it mean for free improvisation if free will is an illusion?" and so on.

I personally believe that students of music should be presented to the concept of free improvisation now and then during their studies. I do believe that there are some benefits to gain for everyone in this practice, but I don't believe that everyone will find it useful enough to put energy into it. I guess you can try to make someone improvise but if the interest isn't there I think the music will suffer and the gains will be small.

The collaboration with a composer has been very rewarding, since I got to put my ideas of the power of freedom into a different setting. Also, to learn a new piece of music is, especially with contemporary music, often linked to learning new techniques or understanding a new concept. In that way, this project has also changed me as an improviser. I see it as an influence chain that hooks in to itself. Playing written music got me interested in free improvisation, and I played free improvisation inspired by the music I've been playing and listening to. Then I got interested in written music inspired by improvisation, and then this written music influence my free improvisation.

Reflecting over what is important for me as I perform improvisation is a good foundation when learning about what other musicians think is important in this regard.

Both the choir project and my exam concert had aspects of presenting improvisation to performers and audiences that normally wouldn't come in contact with the concept. I believe that the singers of Uppsala Vocal Ensemble got an experience that will help them if they are expected to improvise in the future. I also believe that I changed some views about what improvisation can be for both the audience and the performers.

In this study, I wanted to give an overview of my master studies, with the PIP and improvisation in focus. The nature of my PIP forced me to look shortly at many different aspects of my practice, and I hope that this arrangement was effective in conveying a general picture of my journey and in summarizing a broad subject.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1:



Appendix 2:



Appendix 3:

Appendix 3 consists of five musical staves, each labeled with a Roman numeral from I to V. Each staff contains a sequence of notes in a single melodic line. The notes are: Staff I: C#4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5; Staff II: C#4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5; Staff III: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C#5; Staff IV: C4, D4, E4, F#4, G4, A4, B4, C#5; Staff V: C#4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C#5.

Appendix 4:

Appendix 4 consists of three musical staves in 4/4 time. The first staff contains two measures of music: the first measure has notes C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C#5; the second measure has notes C#5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. The second staff contains one measure with notes C#4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C#5. The third staff contains one measure with notes C#4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C#5.

Appendix 5:

Timeline of free improvisation projects

2013

January 7-11, Improvise to Improve in Helsinki

This was a one-week course in improvisation for classical musicians. There were group lessons and workshops, as well as rehearsals and concerts in the evenings. Among the participants were teachers and students from the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, where they have a master in contemporary free improvisation. The improvisation teachers from this academy, pianist Anto Pett and singer Anne-Liis Poll, had a great impact on me. When I played a duo with one of the students from Tallinn, Singer and Clarinetist Jaan Krivel, we got a good musical chemistry. This was the first time I had performed free improvisation for an audience.

April 13-16, free improvisation in Tallinn with Jaan Krivel

My contact with Jaan Krivel led me to going to Tallinn to play more with him. I also had lessons for Anto Pett and Anne-Liis Poll. This time we did not perform in a concert.

May 14-19, rehearsal and concert with Jaan Krivel and Karmen Ong.

During this period me, Jaan Krivel and dancer Karmen Ong rehearsed for Jaan's master exam, a trio for improvised dance, clarinet/voice and saxophone. The exam was supposed to be a 30 minute free improvisation. Me and Jaan also played together in a masterclass for pianist Christoph Baumann.

Autumn

This semester, spent in Iceland, I got to play in many short time collaborations as part of an improvisation course held by Ulfar Ingi Haraldsson.

2014

These last projects were all directed towards my exam concert.

February 1, 6, 16, April 23, Free improvisation with percussionist Kristoffer Linder

During these meetings we played free improvisation, did exercises (*see 3.1.3. free ensemble improvisation exercises, page 11*) and discussed the improvisations. We recorded all the improvisations for later listening and analysis, and that gave us more insight into our skills, weaknesses, habits and taste.

March 26, April 8, 14, May 9, Free improvisation with four singers (Linnea Andreassen, Maiju Kopra, Viktor Rydén and Amanda Larsson)

These meetings were more strictly led by me and we used a similar method of recording, listening, analysing and discussing. The singers were all classically trained and free improvisation was a new concept.

April 29, May 6, Music for quartet (Alexander Rydberg, violin, Jesper Eriksson, saxophone, Emma Augustsson, cello and Anton Svanberg, Tuba)

This was initially planned as rehearsals of three pieces of music I had written. I used three musicians with improvisation experience, and eventually the pieces became more and more improvised. In the end we used the written parts as stable points in one long improvisation. Since we also improvised over the written parts, the whole piece had an improvisational vein.

May 10-12, rehearsal with Jaan Krivel and Kristoffer Linder

A few days before the concert Jaan arrived and we did some rehearsals, mainly playing short improvised pieces. The day before the concert we could meet all three, playing and discussing the coming performance.

May 13, Master Exam Concert

Me and violinist Alexander Rydberg combined our exam concerts, so the program was a combination of classical sonatas and free improvisation. I played in the quintet with four singers, the quartet with written parts and in a free improvised trio with Jaan and Kristoffer. In the end we also added a freely improvised piece with all 11 musicians that had been playing in the concert.

This concert was recorded on behalf of KMH and is attached to this study as an audio-CD that can be found at the KMH library.

Appendix 6:

Timeline of the "approximately four improvisations"-project.

2012

August 7, first meeting with Emil Råberg

Here I presented my idea for a composition for choir and saxophone, and introduced the idea of incorporating different types and degrees of improvisation into the composition.

September 5, October 16, November 15, meeting with Emil Råberg

We continued to meet during the autumn, presenting ideas for each other. Four movements emerged during these sessions, with four different perspectives on improvisation. These were quite divergent meetings, where we could play around with ideas freely.

We had got in contact with choir leader Sofia Ågren who was interested in working with us and could provide us with an amateur choir, Uppsala Vocal Ensemble.

2013

January 26, February 12, 21, 26, meeting with Emil Råberg

We got a date for a workshop with Uppsala Vocal Ensemble, March 2. The meetings had to be slightly more convergent and we focused on devising exercises that we could do together with the choir that would make us able to go through a version of the second movement, "Winter Sounds" with them at the workshop. It was also a lot of work with how to notate the ideas in a way that someone else than us would understand.

March 2, workshop with Uppsala Vocal Ensemble

We got to try out our ideas with the choir in an hour-long workshop. We decided to concentrate on the second movement for this meeting. This was also the chance for the choir to decide if they wanted the piece in their concert. Emil and me led this workshop together. Our ideas worked out like we wanted too, and we got to hear how the different ideas sounded, which was very helpful.

April 22, May 6, 20, rehearsal Uppsala Vocal Ensemble

It was decided that the piece in its entirety was going to be performed at three concerts in the end of May, beginning of June, together with other pieces sung by the choir and solo saxophone pieces played by me. Many of the train-rides between Stockholm and Uppsala became meetings between me, Sofia and Emil where we talked about how the music should sound, and how to conduct it. The rehearsals where led by Sofia and I was present for the solo part and Emil was present to sometimes explain the compositional ideas to the choir directly. Some parts of the music required a lot of rehearsal time, and Sofia had to prioritize between the different movements and the other pieces the choir would perform. Some of the difficulties were classical choir difficulties of finding the right written note in fast and hard passages, while some other difficulties were to find the right behavior for the choir members in the improvised sections. It was hard for the singers to follow the unorthodox score, look at the conductors unusual conducting, listen to each other and be free with their singing at the same time.

May 27, premiere, Mikael kyrkan Uppsala

June 1, Choir Symposium

June 2, The Örbyhus Orangeri

The premier took place in Uppsala in the church Mikael kyrkan. The theme of the concert was songs about dusk and dawn, with "Approximately Four Improvisations" in the middle. The second performance was at a choir symposium on an outdoor stage, with amplification, where only the Råberg-piece was played. The third performance was part of the same program as the premiere.

July 11, Emil and Sofia Ågren, evaluation

We had an official evaluation meeting to talk about what to do next. This meant how to make the score more suitable for publishing.

Appendix 7:

Timeline of other events 2012-2014

2012

August 20-30, NAIP summer school in Sigtuna

The first week of the NAIP-master was spent in Sigtuna, Sweden, together with all the first year students. I learned about ways of leading a big musical ensemble into making a musical piece together, which later has been very valuable.

November 6, Slaget vid Lützen, saxophone concert

I wanted to do a saxophone concert my own way, putting the saxophone in different musical situations so I made a program of a minimalistic sextet with string quartet and two saxophones by Philip Glass, a saxophone duo by Paul Hindemith, a modern piece for saxophone and flute by Paul Hayden and a piece for wind quintet and saxophone by Darius Milhaud.

2013

February 17, Levnadsbanor

From September 2013 to February 2014, I was part of a project exploring the combination of acting and music. With actress Sofia Landström and composer/writer Karl Appelgren we made short pieces with me and Sofia on stage. We combined speech, saxophone and pre-recorded material, as well as worked with improvising over pre-determined intervals.

March 16-23, Hedvig, Theatre in Gothenburg with Sofia Landström

Actress Sofia Landström wrote and produced a monologue at the Academy of Music and Drama in Gothenburg, where I was playing, composing, improvising and doing various things, on stage.

April 2, Johannes Jaretegs classical jazz orchestra

I was part of an orchestra where jazz pianist Johannes Jareteg had arranged classical symphonies and piano music into a fusion of jazz and classical music. The group had piano, double bass, drums, violin, cello, flute, clarinet and saxophone, and featured improvisation over the original harmonies.

May 7, Recording improvisation around Alfie Atkins with Timo van Ruiswijk

Jazz drummer Timo van Ruiswijk had a project where he recorded duos. The musicians he played with chose a tune from their childhood, which they then improvised around. I chose to use the theme music for the cartoon Alfons Åberg (Alfie Atkins).

June 15-July 2, Tour with the Scandinavian Quartet

The fourth tour with the saxophone quartet "The Scandinavian Quartet" took us to Minnesota for the second time. This tour, which we produced ourselves, went to an area with dense Scandinavian heritage. We played a mixed repertoire of music, but with a strong Scandinavian foundation.

August 10-16 Roche Continents

Roche Continents is a program of seminars, workshops, concerts and more taking place in Salzburg, Austria, during the Salzburg Festival. The aim of the event is to explore the common grounds of creativity and innovation in the arts and in science together with 100 students from these fields.

September 30-October 4, Westfjords Creative Music Camp

During my exchange period in Iceland, I went to a camp with some students at the music department. I got to lead the whole group of about 15 students in some compositions I had been working on. I used methods I had picked up during my first year of NAIP, for example splitting the group to do specific tasks and save time, and letting them compose their own material together. It ended with a performance of the piece.

2014

January 31, The Improvised History of the World.

This is a project produced by Pawel Klica of the Royal School of Speech and Drama in London, described as an interactive, immersive musical show where audience members are given a chance to shape a new version of history. This day, me and four other musicians met with Pawel and dramaturg Jazz Flaherty to try out a concept where we freely improvised transitions between composed pieces.



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