“Remember, you have a body”: developing presence with instrumental musicians through kinaesthetic methods in higher education improvisation pedagogy

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Abstract

As evidenced in Ruth Zaporah’s *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence* (1995; see also Nisker, et al., 1997), the development of presence is often foregrounded as a central tenet of improvisational practice in the performing arts. Particularly in stage disciplines, improvisation demands a heightened and honed relationship to presence grounded in the body, as well as relational co-presence; it is from and in a state of embodied presence – present, and attentive, to the sensorial here and now – that improvisers create.

In music, although metaphors of body are utilised in well-known improvisation pedagogy – such as in the Deep Listening methodology of Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros, 2004) – and although the body is finding renewed significance in music discourse (Shlomowitz, 2016; Craenen, 2014; Walshe, 2016; Torrence, 2019; etc.), its kinetic affordances are still ordinarily demarcated as secondary to the sonic within improvised music’s hierarchy of expressivity (McPherson, 2023). Dedicated music improvisation pedagogy therefore rarely focuses on presence as embodied and as full-bodied – encompassing the physicality and corporeality of sounding from a human body – in favour of delimited focus in the sonic domain.

This paper will explore the ongoing application of socially oriented, kineaesthetic teaching methods within improvisation pedagogy for instrumental musicians delivered in higher education contexts. It will draw on my experience of developing and delivering improvisation modules and short courses for undergraduate and postgraduate musicians of diverse genre-backgrounds in England and Scotland, and will centre issues of sociality, co-creativity, and kinship as entangled across body-instrument and body-body divides.

Introduction

In this paper I'm going to outline some approaches to kinaesthetic methods used in improvisation teaching, primarily with and for instrumental musicians within the context of higher education. For several years, I have co-run an intensive free improvisation programme at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland where I am a visiting lecturer, as well as designing and teaching classes in free improvisation for UG music students at the University of Huddersfield. I'm going to sketch in this paper some strategies of practice, giving some examples of scores and prompts used in teaching, and offer some perspectives on how we cultivate presence within improvisation pedagogy through a focus on making in the here and now.

Context: What I do

For the purposes of today, Free Improvisation is best described broadly as a practice of spontaneous performance emphasising aesthetic, expressive, and social freedoms. Emerging richly and complexly both out of and in parallel to the performance culture of Free Jazz (McPherson, 2023; Lewis, 1996; Toop, 2016), Free Improvisation is characterised by its resistance to and play with genre; its decrying of binaries and absolutes (right and wrong, skilled and not skilled, ugly and beautiful); its experimental and unconventional approach to using instruments and making sound; its disruption of conventional performative hierarchies (composer, performer, author, audience); its emphasis on collective, in the moment co-creativity; and its underground, community-driven practice-culture.

It is also ordinarily considered a musical practice, or a sonic-centred practice. However, in my work, I maintain a focus not only on sonic experimentation, but on the body and on expressive movement. I do this for students to develop a meaningful relationship to their own kinesiology; to understand it as a site for expressivity in performance; as a way of expanding their creative horizons into interdisciplinary practices; and as an antidote to some of the structures of disembodiment which remain pervasive within certain disciplinary and institutional contexts.

Like all improvisational practices, when we play in FI, our contributions to an unfolding musical form are emergent. Within FI especially, these are greatly variable and highly contingent on the time, place, and people which contextualise the work. In any one session, for example, we might play the drumkit with our elbows, recall a fragment of folk song, crush a plastic cup, whistle a familiar hymn tune and ask everyone to join us, mimic a jazz standard, play the piano, or scream through the saxophone.

In the Academy, institutionally sanctioned forms of free improvisation have begun to coalesce. However, FI *remains a largely underground, DIY, often non-remunerated performance practice most at home in small-capacity venues: bars, clubs, cafes, galleries, temporary art spaces, which is driven by community.* This cultural aspect of free improvisation is emphasised in all the programmes I teach, for two reasons: firstly, FI has fundamentally been subtended by aspirations of social, economic, and political – as much as aesthetic – freedoms for its creators and participants; secondly, FI has historically served a space to attempt to realise alternative social structures and relationships – without people, without the social, FI does not exist.

For these reasons, I describe my approach to pedagogical improvisation as socially-oriented in a historical-cultural, as well as a practical sense.

Improvising and Presence

When we are improvising, we are creating in (and with, and from) the here and now. We bring our histories of practice, aesthetic inclinations, desires, and habitual behaviours into the space; like the texture of the floor, or the sound of the chainsaw in the garden outside my hotel room, these become part of the immediate environment in which we create.

However, the multifaceted nature of our performing environments does not necessarily mean our awareness is able immediately to encompass their full diversity. Cultivating openness to a wide array of sensory information is therefore one of the trajectories of skill development for improvisers. In Free Improvisation rather than focusing on, say, a given way of expressing framed within a value system of 'appropriate or not', 'good or bad', we focus students on developing an adaptability to diverse potential stimuli and their concomitant expressions.

Malleability, fluidity, the capacity to move between different arenas of practice contingent on the happenings of the moment – these are the things which we emphasise. To become confident in this form of *movement*, I advocate that we must open ourselves beyond sounding and approach our practice understood as wholly embodied, full bodied, drawing across the sensory domains. While we work with and in the present, and are at degrees familiar with it, we must develop a full bodied presence which can accommodate the diverse stimuli with which we come into contact.

The Body in Music

I wrote in my PhD that "The kinesiology of instrumentalists is intimately linked with performing acts of sounding" (McPherson, 2023, 52), to such an extent that we orient ourselves near automatically towards sounding embodiments as the centre of our performing activity.

Scholars such as Jennifer Torrence (2019) have picked apart the performer-instrument body-body relationship comprehensively within the concert context, questioning the extent to which in today's 'expanded field' (Cicilani, 2017) of practices, we need remain beholden to sounding as our singular expressive domain. However, even though artists such as Jennifer Walshe assert quite accurately that "the bodies playing the music are part of the music […] inform[ing] our listening whether subconsciously or consciously" (Walshe, 2016) a pervasive version of sound-oriented musicianship, reinforced within institutional training, funnels our understanding of the body towards sounding as the final, and most desired outcome. This, I propose, can have adverse impact when attempting to ground practice in a fully *embodied* sense of presence.

When I work with movement for musicians, then, I am conscious of resistances. Against a disciplinary and cultural backdrop of sonic primacy, I must allow that there will be those who do not take immediately to the idea that the body – their body – is a site of potential expressivity. In the conservatory context especially, the demonstration of instrumental competency – body oriented towards sounding – is hugely significant, both to students and to the mythology of the institution. It is the primary marker of accomplishment, and the ordinary site of assessment for the majority of student learning pathways.

Within concert hall performance traditions at large, the body has been historically highly regulated for all parties:

> "The common convention of all-black 'concert-dress' (with the ordinary exception of soloists), for example, quite deliberately defeatures the individual bodies of musicians, rendering them backgrounded to the sonic experience; although bodies are (of course) present on stage, the audience is directed not to focus on them and the myriad of individual identifications they possess or might suggest. The uniformity of 'concert-black' engenders a forced visual *ordinariness* […], by which the significance

> of body is neutralised. The rituals of silence, of sedentary directed listening, scheduled and proportionate expressions of appreciation […] *contain* the movements of audience members and cultivate an atmosphere of bodily and kinetic regulation (of both self and other) in service of an ephemeral, disembodied sonosphere."
> (McPherson, 2023, p.45)

Inviting emphasis on the kinetic, rather than the sonic, can represent a form of disciplinary, institutional, and cultural divergence. It is one thing to become conscious of the kinetic while performing, to be invited to understand the body as significant. It is another to move with your instrument, and quite another to move without one. Degrees of detachment from the instrument can induce vulnerability and, at times, trouble an established sense of practice identity bounded in the instrumental relationship, which a student may well have developed over decades. As a teacher, it is not my role to challenge or tear apart these identities; what we do, as a group, through collective movement and centring the body in our practice, is gradually reframe and recontextualise our identities.

Additionally, although everybody has one (and in this sense everyone has some point of access) moving with the body is not a democratised or neutral activity. Bodies are arenas for conflict and contestation, acted upon and conditioned by structures of institutional and systemic power. Societally, daily as in performance, not all bodies are *permitted* to move in the same way, nor is their movement read in the same way by onlookers; a complex intersection of gendered, racialised, sexualised, able-ised, and class-based signals and biases are realised in the interactions between bodies, between audiences and performers, and between groups.

Moving together, at times in more overtly legible terms than sound, can foreground the complex sociality of our bodies and their relationships. With students, I draw explicit attention to the need for reflexivity in this practice – for an acknowledgment that diverse bodies have diverse experiences which are as much at stake and in play within improvisation as anything else.

Score Number 1 – not worrying about thinking

To bring attention to the body, the room, and relationships, we can prompt students in a way which nudges them to deprioritise extensive cognitive problematising and what I sometimes refer to as 'mental gymnastics' – *what do I do, how do it do it* (etc.).

To invite focus on the moment, we can use a prompt like "listen closely, and only play when it's necessary". Initially, a student's response is often to question: "when is it necessary? When do I play? How do I know? When will it happen?"; often what happens is that something *happens* – some kind of stimulus occurs and the student suddenly finds themself responding in a way which is less rooted in cognitive anticipation and more in tactile, proximal experience. The prompt it not so much an instruction to be followed as a primer which readies the student for action in both body and mind.

As an additional layer, we can also be at least superficially contradictory. "Play until you have nothing left to say / then continue playing". What happens when you're in a space of not knowing? Well, you have to work with what's here, with what's to hand.

From an ethical perspective, because this process can be at times disarming, we could add to this prompt, something along the lines of "don't worry about it, just play"; this can also help to background the habit of forming value-judgements on one's ongoing activity. When facilitating I also work towards holding the improvising space as one of safety, by emphasising that if students want to, they can withdraw, then can go and sit in the audience, they can stop playing, they can sit back, etc. providing this doesn't impede or negatively impact on someone else's activity (which it rarely does).

Through shifting emphasis away from anticipatory cognition – as a site of understanding 'what to do' and 'what is happening' – towards immediacy, responsiveness and just 'doing', we can begin to invite closer attention on the emergent situation, and thereby on a full bodied presence here and now.

Throughout a few days of work, I gain a glimpse of students' tendencies and learn something of their stories – their embodied histories of playing. Watching their performance in small-group workshops, I get a sense of who likes to disrupt, who takes control, who aims to support, who dominates, who needs to let loose, who always plays for 'too long', who waits until there's space.

I gauge who is wedded to their instrument, who seems itching to shed it, who needs close guidance and who is best left to explore independently. These differentiations are important. While they are, in many ways, standard practice when facilitating they are particularly significant when practice identities are at stake.

Before undertaking a movement only workshop, I prime the students through conducting exercises using only objects (no instruments), through environmental listening exercises, situating their bodies and tactile interactions within the space without explicitly emphasising the body as the site of expression or aesthetic interest. After two or three days of expanded listening, and spatialised play with instruments, we can begin the process of moving without them.

Score Number 2: "Enter and wait"

We set up a stage in a rectangular configuration with open sides (so that people can come in and out). I invite students to stand along the edges and lead them through a brief (and non-strenuous) warmup. I explain that we will be working with movement, and encourage the group not to stare at each other, but to maintain a soft focus, and use their proprioceptive skills and peripheral vision to understand their proximity to others. We then begin with walking.

The score for this workshop is "Enter, and wait // once you have waited, leave" (McPherson, 2024). I demonstrate walking into the space in a straight line, finding a place to stand, then leaving in a different direction across the rectangle. We do this for 10 minutes. As the piece progresses, I invite attention on different aspects of the walking, encouraging students to focus on their pacing, speed, gait – using musical terms – as well as the relationship to other students walking in and walking out. Constellations form as duos, trios, groups, enter and exit – it feels a bit like a train station concourse.

We perform several iterations of this piece, extending the duration each time (10 minutes, 15, 20). We add changes in levels, in speed, in freedom of movement – no longer only straight lines, but allowing for diversions and getting lost. I encourage attentiveness to proximity, to the choreography, to the shape of groups, to the lines drawn between students on the floor as well as to sound. Gradually, we begin to use the upper body, gesturally, with the arms, hands, torso, and face becoming significant. I invite students to pay attention to each other, and if they like, to follow someone else's movement – copying, contrasting, or offering a complement. Quite a complex choreography begins to build with students coming in and out, having relational interactions, mirroring each other's movement, offering kinetic gestural material into the space.

As we continue I add prompts like:

- Can you recall a movement we have already used already, and reinsert it into the space?
- What happens if you decide to stay with just one thing for a long time?
- Don't worry about when to come in, let the space tell you.
- When you've had enough, just leave.

We finish the workshop around the 2 hour mark, by introducing the topic of 'change'. At any point, anyone can say 'change', and everyone on the stage must leave. We cleanse the palette, we allow new forms to emerge.

I enjoy this exercise because quite quickly, participants commit to a bodily, choreographic understanding of their relationship in space, and to others. By paring things down and focusing on walking – entering and exiting – we can democratise the movement space. By adding layers slowly, we can softly transition into a more holistic expressivity.

Doing this workshop after several days is strategic – having explored sounding relationships in space, this allows us now to occupy it, to own it – particularly relevant in the concert hall and other spaces which carry disciplinary conventions, traumas, baggage…

Score Number 3 – remember you have a body

The openness of FI to a diversity of performative forms, means that once you have done something in it becomes part and parcel of the aesthetic world that is being co-created in that moment.

For a performer to introduce a mode of expressing such as speech, for example, not only represents and aesthetic aspect in itself, but a laying down of parameters, of characteristics for the improvisation as it unfolds.

> "In the liveness of improvising, once I do something, it cannot be withdrawn. My activity within this frame of live, spontaneous performance, is rendered immediately as a parameter of *diegesis.* […] through my or my colleagues' 'doing', activity is asserted functionally in two ways – as something that is both *possible in* and *now part of* this improvisation" (McPherson, 2023, p.203)

Introducing an expressive modality is comparatively easy, but withdrawing one is harder. When movement has been offered into the space by a performer, it heightens the audience's sensitivity to kinetic expressivity as being 'possible in and now part of' this improvisation. If student A is dancing, and student B is playing the guitar, both sound and movement are active in the space; the sounds of the dancer, and the movements of the guitarists, have the potential to be noticed – as Lehmann puts it "received as [signs] in the sense of a manifestation or gesticulation obviously demanding attention" (Lehmann, 2006, p. 82). In interdisciplinary work, where a deliberate blurring often takes place between activities ordinarily read as belonging to certain disciplines (movement = dancing, sounding = musicking), the scope for noticing is even greater. Therefore, when inviting students to work with the body, in addition to sound, I reiteratively emphasise the need to be sensitive to the diversity of expressions which have already been introduced into the room.

A history of expressive modalities can also be retained within a physical space, within a working history for a given ensemble, or indeed within the practice of one individual. When I have played with improviser Maggie Nicols, for example, Maggie is known for her virtuosity in a very broad sense, not just as a vocalist, but also in assuming whatever modality of expression arises in the moment – I know, when playing with Maggie, that movement might be on the cards, and therefore I read her activity always with the idea that movement is potentially significant – something to watch, something to appreciate.

I am standing in front of the stage in a medium-sized concert hall. Around me, about fifteen conservatory students are beginning to perform a collaborative, sonic free improvisation. There are violinists, guitarists, pianists, saxophonists, singers, even a harpist, all playing in the same space – they sound using their instruments, music stands, their voices, the floor, the concert chairs, creating a chattering, richly textured sonic environment. It reminds me of a dense forest, or perhaps birds at dawn.

I watch the students moving, walking, standing in the space, some at their instruments, others in an exploratory process of detachment – of shifting away from their familiar playing configurations, holds, and stage positions. After five minutes, I feel a shift in the soundscape – a thinning out, a falling away, a move into something very subtle, very intimate. At this moment, a guitarist stands abruptly and strides across the space to change the settings on an amplifier; floor creaks, clothes rustle, air is punctuated by limbs, hair, guitar strap; other students look; disruption. Immediately I offer into the room the prompt "remember, you have a body". A pause, a heightening, a reengaging of focus. Everything is active – body, floor, clothes, air, creaks, piano, guitar, strap, ears, eyes.

Closing Comment

A fundamental skill of improvising, if it has fundamentals, does not lie in the successful or 'perfect' execution of a specific playing technique; it lies in offering something that is intimately emergent from context – as one of my research participants put expressed during my PhD research:

> "Not everything goes. […] *potentially* everything goes. It's true. Essentially, anything I do can be the exact perfect thing to do at that moment, but only if it's in the context. Only! Only if it really belongs to that moment."

The systems of judgement by which we might assess what 'belongs to the moment' are as diverse and contingent as the moments themselves. What is required then, in all our improvising contexts, is to be present. It's being as closely as possible *open*, aware, responsive, responsible, recognising your relationality to all of the other things that are happening at any given moment, and critically, being free enough to navigate the changes and see how you might contribute to them meaningfully. This means you have to be *there*, you have to be *listening*, and you have to be *ready*.

It has been my experience with musicians that by turning to movement practices as musicians, we can reframe the experience of performance in multisensory terms, across the whole technology of the body. Reestablishing the visual and kinetic, in addition to the aural and tactile, as explicitly significant for us can ground the whole body in the space, enhance an understanding of relationality to co-performers, and provide a multimodal stimulus for our improvising activity.

Pedagogically, it allows us also to reprioritise the individual behind the instrument and allowing the potential for bodily signs to become aesthetically, performatively significant (if desired). It allows us to problematise the culture of bodily occlusion within concert music practices. And finally, it permits us to expand the aesthetic and practical horizons for performance practice, questioning the received system of sonic primacy and suggesting alternative avenues for holistic expressive forms.

Thank you very much.

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