

# PATHWAYS TO VOCAL IMPROVISATION

– to work in an artistic improvisational process with its possibilities and limitations

## Abstract

In this artistic project, I search for pathways to vocal improvisation in solo and duo formats and in bigger constellations. The research question is: What characterizes approaches to free vocal improvisation, and what obstacles are there in the making? I have searched in the literature and interacted with four singers, with whom I have explored improvisation in duo format, and interviews about their approaches to improvisation. Ways to move forward include ideas such as doing it repeatedly and doing exercises in developing courage, expressions, relaxation, energy, pulse, and rhythm, all with a non-judgmental attitude. Both the singers and literature identify fear and self-judgment as obstacles to free improvisation. The rapport also includes exercises collected from world experts to use in the process.

## Introduction

I have always been interested in improvisation as a concept and have, at the same time, questioned rigid systems of how things “should be done” and that certain elitist and competitive norms have been ruling in many places, especially in the Academic world. I have been fascinated by flexible solutions and thrilled by uncertainties, to a certain extent. What if I try another path home from school, how can we change the game, how could one make a speech with the same content but vary it, why must we do the same thing repeatedly when there are other ways to do it? I prefer to improvise rather than follow a recipe when I cook. It doesn’t always turn out well, I must admit, but for me, that risk is minor compared to the risk of missing chances to explore interesting new flavors. I know the value of learning from experts, but after having followed a recipe a few times, I think I can modify it and change it to something different, maybe more colorful, tasty, or spicy. Perhaps I’m restless, maybe I lack patience and stamina, or is it an expression of my love for creating things in new ways? I don’t know.

“Improvisation, in almost all aspects of everyday life, is essential to human existence and a common feature of human experience.” (Steinsholt & Sommero 2006)

Many years ago, when I taught a voice improvisation class at the Academy of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg, I made an interesting observation. I had walked out of the classroom with the feeling that my students held themselves back from their creative sources and their true potential to improvise in a more liberated way. How could I inspire

them and give them tools to improvise from their inner center? Just a minute after I had buckled up my kids in the car to drive them home from school, I heard them individually sing, hum, and play with their voices. They made up rhymes, melodies, riffs, and songs about what they saw through the window of the car, what had happened at the school, or had a conversation with their toys. None of them seemed to listen to the others, maybe they did, maybe not, and maybe the sound of the car's motor was a factor in the music-making. I tuned in and heard a free improvisation from three kids expressing something in the present moment with a serious focus and from a playful mind. I wished I could have recorded this session to bring it into my class at the university as an example of how to be present, fearless, focused, in a flow, and do playful vocal improvisation. My kids had no formal education in music, they were not 'performing', they were just connected within and felt like playing. How could I encourage my students in the improvisation class to do the same? Was that an ability that had disappeared from my grown-up students' lives and from my life too? How could we get hold of it? I have thought of this a lot since then.

There are great books about how to improve your improvisation skills with examples of ear training exercises, useful information about scales-, modes- and chord-progressions, and so forth. I will not cover that field in this report, though I acknowledge that they include important aspects of improvisation. I will instead look at the aspects of communication and self-awareness when we do vocal improvisation together, either as a duo or in a vocal group, or as a singer interacting with instrumentalists in a band. To explore this, I have read books and articles, attended workshops in vocal improvisation, and conducted four interviews with skilled singers. In the interviews, I have focused on duo improvisations, and I have also made a duo improvisation with each singer that I have interviewed that has been recorded.

When I write the words *free improvisation*, I don't mean the genre *Free Improvisation* which has its specific meaning and practice that is closer to an *independent simultaneous action* (Corbett 2016). Instead, I mean a reciprocal and mutual interaction where each musician/singer constantly relates to the activities of the other musicians/singers in terms of pitch, harmony, rhythm, and expression.

My motivation for undertaking this KU project has been to get more knowledge about how other vocal improvisers develop their improvisational ability. I have been curious about how they prepare themselves for their tasks, what their motivation is, and what hinders them from being at their best. In addition to investigating other singers' improvisational paths, I have wanted to write down some methods and exercises that I have explored for vocal improvisation. The research question is as follows: What characterizes approaches to free vocal improvisation, and what obstacles are there in the making?

## Background

While looking at research for improvisation, in general - not specifically vocal improvisation, I've come across many books about how to practice technical competencies, such as instrumental mastery, chords, scales, and skills related to rhythmical time and "feel". I've

also read some studies or inspirational books about other approaches. For example, Lynn Holding (2020) writes in her book *“The Musician’s Mind”* about motor control, working on techniques to be more deliberate in playing an instrument or singing but at the same time have cognitive control and be able to plan, take risks and make active moves. Just these skills that you need to use when you improvise. Guro Gravem Johanssen (2016) writes about her observations of students at university levels, practicing improvisation:

“The participants displayed a high degree of awareness of harmony and scale theory, compositional concepts, structures, forms, and other musical effects. Analytical knowledge and awareness were often gained through deliberate practice on specific musical structures. This kind of awareness seemed to be a pre-condition for later exploration and for engaging in more experimental approaches”.

## The complexity of improvisation

The voice teacher Liselotte Östblom (2018) compares learning to sing with learning a new language and focuses on the various parts to learn, as given in Table 1.

In language:	In singing:
- vocabulary	– technique, phrases, expression
- grammar	– music theory, a rhythmic and harmonic understanding
- listening	– ear training, imitation, analyzing what you hear
- talking	– making music with other people, improvise, show and practice your skills” in action”
- visit a country	– attend concerts and shows, listen to music, perform, and meet with other musicians/singers.

**TABLE 1. ÖSTBLOM’S COMPARISON OF LEARNING LANGUAGE AND SINGING**

The bass player Victor Wooten (2006) also compares learning a language with learning music. He claims that there are at least ten elements that need to be addressed in learning music: *notes, articulation, technique, feel, dynamics, rhythm, tone, phrasing, space, and listening*. Wooten writes:

...” in order for me to play freely, I need good technique, but I don’t wanna be thinking about my technique while I’m playing any more than I wanna be thinking about my mouth when I’m talking. So, when I practice, I use ‘concentration’ to learn what the technique is. Then I use ‘non concentration’

to get completely comfortable to use the technique. Combining the two concentration methods allows me to get a complete grasp of the technique.”

Su Ching Hsieh (2009) has mapped out seven elements that she has found to be important in acquiring musical skills and domain knowledge acquisition:

- physiological adaptation
- developing reading music skills
- establishing auditory schemata
- automaticity
- use of memorization strategies
- analytic strategy application
- improvising to a coherent musical structure

She has shown that issues such as communicating to the audience, performance identity, and connecting to the context are essential in the duo improvisation performance. With the support of Poole (1983) and Bastien and Hostager (2003), Hsieh emphasizes a concept of “break-points” that they have experienced taking place during the latter stage of the ensemble improvisation process. These changes occur across three elements: musical structure, social structure, and communicative behavior. She has also highlighted that factors, such as leadership, group member characteristics, information flow, the creative environment, and collateral structure, can influence the quality of group improvisation performance.

Johanssen (2016) writes about *empathic creativity*, a concept introduced by Seddon (2005), that describes something that might be a synergy effect of musical support, mutual trust, respect, and friendship in a group while making a collective improvisation at its best.

“Collective practice was often described by the participants as more authentic than individual practice, as playing in a band provided opportunities for practicing musical responsiveness and learning to develop musical forms collectively. Learning in bands can be interpreted as a kind of collective agency (Edwards, 2009). In interplay and jam sessions students exchanged and utilized musical ideas they would not have come across alone. This enabled the object, the improvised music, to expand and develop through the collective endeavor”. Johanssen (2016)

There is an important fundament in mastering an instrument, having knowledge about music structures and social interactions when you set out to improvise. But apart from these important skills, you also need tools for your creative development.

Johanssen (2016) shows another approach to practice that could be beneficial for a more explorative and creative path where she has applied the concept of *explorational practice*. It is about approaches to practice that do not conform to a goal-directed or fixed structure but are directly connected to creative and open-ended learning processes.

“Deliberate practice was utilized for developing objective skills and knowledge. Explorational practice was characterized as being open-ended and containing improvisation and could lead to a wide range of learning outcomes, including subjective and creative outcomes. Some students talked about this mode as just “playing” – as opposed to practicing with a deliberate character. Explorational practice was experienced as being more authentic in relation to improvisational competence”.

## Self awareness

Johanssen (2016) also highlights the necessity of working with self-awareness:

*“Explorational practice also covered other processual aspects of improvising, such as avoiding mental evaluation while playing and tolerating mistakes that occurred. A quote from Ingrid on trumpet illustrates the latter purpose: “I try to get into a mental state where I can play very simple ideas, it is an exercise in not being scared. (...) Scared of losing control, scared that it will become totally quiet, or scared of ... simplicity.” Thus, open-ended exercises were used to explore and operationalize certain drilled musical materials or muscular patterns, but equally were used as exercises for practicing emotional states that were considered important for improvisation.*

Other authors who have explored techniques for self-awareness are Green and Gallway in *The Inner Game of Music* (1986):

“It is the challenge of the Inner Game that we can learn to avoid our self-interference, tap into this wealth of knowledge, and so gain access to our full inner resources” ...

“...when the interference is gone, our performance matches our potential ...”

They call this relaxed concentration the ‘master skill’ of the Inner Game.

In his book, *The Art of Is* (2019), the improvisational musician Stephen Nachmanovitch uses the words of Suzuki-Roshi to describe a similar state of mind.

“If your mind is empty, it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the expert’s mind there are few”.

This reminds me of a phrase from Tomas Tranströmer’s (2004) poem *Vermeer*:

“The airy sky has taken its place leaning against the wall.  
It is like a prayer to what is empty.  
And what is empty turns its face to us  
and whispers: “I am not empty, I am open.” (trans. by Robert Bly)

But what is it *to be open*? There is an English word that might point to a more concrete explanation of this state of mind, *liminal space*. The word *liminal* comes from the Latin word

'limen', meaning threshold. This is the place between past and future, a place in the present where we can rest and listen to our inner voice before we take the next step into an unknown future. *Liminal space* applies to improvised music making as well as to life in general. We need to learn how to be present without fear or preconceived ideas of how to move on.

Nachmanovitch (2019) emphasizes the ability to be present and in the flow. He emphasizes coming prepared but not being attached to the preparation. One must be willing to accept interruptions, invitations, and the idea that everything flows in the creative act in progress. You, yourself, are the product of preparation – not your papers and plans. (p.2)

"In this moment, preparing and creating, the technical and the sacred, flow together seamlessly like a devotional dance. And then the moment vanishes. We treat a fleeting encounter with the seriousness of deep play. Our meeting is one of a kind in the history of the universe. It will never be like this again". (Nachmanovitch, 2019, p. 73)

"Listening is touching...Seeing is touching. Speaking is touching. Tasting is touching. There is no separating the active and passive modalities of perception. Active listening flowers in the present moment, utilizes all the senses: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, sense of humor. Such sensitivity is the alpha and the omega of all arts, and beyond the arts, of all skilled activity. To do science, listen". (Nachmanovitch, 2019, p. 146)

Nachmanovitch (2019) stresses that creativity is the property of everyone and not just a chosen few and that the ordinary, everyday mind is expressive and creative. (p. 22)

The singer and improviser Rhiannon describes improvising as "the practice of approaching the unknown" in her book *Vocal River* (2013). She writes that improvisation is a gift, a necessity, a skill, a dance with the unknown and that the path will be revealed if you approach it with curiosity and trust instead of fear. You must stay awake with all senses vibrant and learn to be open to the endless possibilities of each new moment. (p39)

"Learning to improvise in music seems to reverberate throughout other parts of life: how to listen, to harmonize, to stand out or fit in, take the lead and be willing to stand for what you believe or to get in the groove and surrender completely to the sound as part of the ensemble". (Rhiannon, 2013, p. 40)

When it comes to the fear of making mistakes in improvisation the masters have said:

"Life is one continuous mistake", Shunryu Susuki

"Do not fear mistakes, there are none", Miles Davies

"We don't need to make something flawless or even brilliant, just interesting-arousing curiosity, worthy of exploration" Stephen Nachmanovitch

"Fear takes away the strength of what you are doing. Without fear of wrong notes, you would feel the body's craving for more air, and a new posture would emerge spontaneously", Kenny Werner

“Enslaved by ego, we are encased in fear”, Kenny Werner

“In fear, we expect; with love, we accept”, Kenny Werner

“One of the benefits improvisations can offer is that you are not even trying to do it perfectly; it’s not in the vocabulary. It’s not about doing right or wrong. When you are inventing, you give yourself the possibility of something much freer; and when you finish, you have to say to yourself, “I did the best I could”, Rhiannon

“Setting impossible goals creates enormous fear, which creates procrastination, which we wrongly call laziness”, Julia Cameron

### Can improvisation be taught?

Stephen Nachmanovitch (2019) problematizes and discusses if the question itself is a paradox. When you teach, in the sense of transmitting information and methods, you might limit improvisation. He acknowledges that information and methods are important, but he thinks they come in at a different point of learning. He thinks that

the only way to enable improvisation is to step back to create an empty and safe space where the participants can move. If you want to guide someone in improvisation, you must give them permission to open a space in which it feels safe to take risks.

When it comes to learning outcomes, he says that there is no “take-away” that we can carry with us. But there are things we can leave behind, and he mentions the fixed idea of self as a sack with certain contents. We don’t possess qualities of interaction; we do activities that manifest them in a particular place and time.

“We can see people without captions; we can allow music to unfold without attaching labels to it. We can allow our own stories to play out in the complexity of real life”.

(Nachmanovitch, 2019, p. 31)

Kenny Werner is on a similar track in his book *Effortless Mastery* (Werner & Aebersold, 1996) where he challenges the learners to put aside all the theories, politics, and fashion and instead focus on their lives and the personal meaning that music has for them:

“In many cases, the decision to *study* music has robbed them from the ability to *play* music.”

“As musicians/healers, it is our destiny to conduct an inward search, and to document it with our music so that others may benefit”. “If the musician is illuminated from within, he becomes a lamp that lights up other lamps”.

“ When you don’t try as hard to be good, you play better”.

Werner (1996) doesn’t mean that you don’t need to practice and learn basic elements in music. On the contrary, he writes that the way to true growth is to spend enough time to learn something interminably slow and well. Stay with the material until you will be comfortable with it. Practice with love and openness. In that way, you become absorbed in

the moment and lose yourself in the music. But according to Werner, a true master is not just a master of technique or language but of himself/herself.

Gunilla Gårdfeldt, professor emerita in performing arts at the Academy of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg, has written in her book, *Scenkonst* Gårdfeldt (2017), about the necessity of letting go of fixed ideas and mannered tools in interpretation of a song and instead seek for, and strengthen, your emotional- and physical intelligence. Only then will you get hold of your full potential and be able to deepen your expression as a singer, musician, and human being. By working on your emotional intelligence, you also explore and develop empathy. Similar ideas are expressed by Lynn Holding (2020). Holding writes that art and empathy have this in common; they are among our noblest attributes, and both require deliberate practice.

### Human need to improvise

Many improvisers and authors have written about the curse of self-judging and how it limits the creative workflow. Werner (1996) writes that you need a sense of self that is stable, durable, and not attached to your performance. You need to let go of the pressure to sound good.

“The sad fact is that most musicians judge their value as a person by the level of their playing. Therein lies an unhealthy linkage between musical proficiency and self-worth”.

“Without the need of self-validation, talent and acquired knowledge flow naturally” (Werner, 1996)

Nachmanovitch (2019) compares improvisation with spontaneous conversation and emphasizes its natural status in our lives. He says it’s an art of listening and responding, interacting, taking in environmental factors unconsciously but with precision, modifying what we do as a result of what we see and hear, touch, and giving multidimensional feedback. He continues by saying that it’s nothing special about it, but from that nothing arises the opportunity to attain some wisdom and compassion about the world in which we live. It is all about human relationships. He urges us to take art off the pedestal and put it where it belongs, in the dynamic center of our lives. (Nachmanovitch, 2019, p 6-7, 18)

He also means that it connects us to each other on a deeper level.

“When asked to define *improvising*, I say I play music that is less than five minutes old. Yet it is ancient, in that the sounds that attract me have an archaic feel. When it is truly *happening*, I feel I am lightly touching something deep in culture, deep in genetics, deep in our animal nature- a fundamental connections to others. Making art, whether you do it solo or in a group, derives its patterns from everything around us, in an interdependent network. We learn to work as nature does, with the material of ourselves: our body, our mind, our companions, and the radical possibilities of the present moment”.

(Nachmanovitch, 2019, p. 4)



This made me think of Salman Rushdie's beautiful poem *Why do we care about singers?*

"Why do we care about singers? Wherein lies the power of songs? Maybe it derives from the sheer strangeness of there being singing in the world. The note, the scale, the chord; melodies, harmonies, arrangements; symphonies, ragas, Chinese operas, jazz, the blues: that such things should exist, that we should have discovered the magical intervals and distances that yield the poor cluster of notes, all within the span of a human hand from which we can build our cathedrals of sound, is alchemical a mystery as mathematics, or wine, or love. Maybe the birds taught us. Maybe not. Maybe we are just creatures in search of exaltation. We don't have much of it. Our lives are not what we deserve; they are, let us agree, in many painful ways deficient. Song turns them into something else. Song shows us a world that is worthy of our yearning, it shows us ourselves as they might be, if we were worthy of the world." (Rushdie, 2000)

The singer and improviser Rhiannon describes this magical or sacred connection in her book *Vocal River* (Rhiannon, 2013).

"As I deepened my own music practice, I understood that my students and I needed to name the power we feel when we are singing. Without invoking any particular deity, religion or belief system, we practice praying out loud. We want to bless our music work, and we have forgotten a bit how to do that and to remember how many ways there are to pray. We hold shame or shyness about this natural connection with life and energy. That is, after all, what singers do. We sing notes on waves of sound and ripple the air. We acknowledge our place in the realm of all things living." (Rhiannon, 2013, p 34)

Nachmanovitch mentions in his book *Free Play* (1990) the old Sanskrit word, *lila* or *leela*, which means divine play, a play of creation, destruction, and re-creation. It's the delight and enjoyment of the moment and the play of God. *Lila* can for a child be spontaneous, playful, simple, and disarming but for us grown-up the same concept of *lila* might be a complex challenge that right achieved will be a homecoming to our true selves.

The pianist, composer, and author William Alludin Mathieu has written about the spiritual aspects of music and have said:

"...in some sense I have to tell you; all music is spiritual...I just don't like the word... sound is like a conduit to the vibrational world." (Cohn, 2020)

Werner (1996) writes:

"In every way, music is our bond between the material and the eternal".

## Method

I have made improvisations, and interviews with four singers and voice teachers, three women and one man of which two are Swedish and two are US citizens. They have all sung and made voice improvisation since their childhood, and they all have had formal education in voice technique, playing the piano, and improvisation skills such as knowledge about scales, chord changes, rhythmic awareness, and so forth. They all teach voice and vocal improvisation at the secondary school level and at university. Musically they all perform and have experiences from singing and improvising in bigger and smaller bands and also in settings with vocals only, solo, duo, or in a group format.

In all cases we improvised in duo format, in connection with the interview to connect the intellectual discussion to a shared practical experience. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 1997) and focuses on what the interviewees think characterizes approaches to free vocal improvisation and what obstacles they see in the making of vocal improvisation. The interview questions can be found in the appendix. All in all, the improvisation session and the interview took about two hours in each case. During the first improvisation session the singer and I developed a set of themes to limit and inspire our duo improvisations. These themes were used with the other three singers as well. The themes can be found in the appendix.

## Result and discussion

When I asked the singers for good tools in improvisation, they mentioned many different things such as active listening, playfulness, a holistic approach to music-making with building blocks such as; rhythmic phrases, melodies, dynamics, articulation, interpretation, musical expressions, sound, register, playing with musical roles/functions, relaxation, courage, curiosity and an open mind and ability to think outside the box. They all emphasized the importance of listening and being rhythmically oriented and aware of what's happening in the music.

Concerning things that hinder their improvisation they mentioned judgement, especially self-judgement. That was something they tried to avoid. They also talked about performance anxiety, negative thoughts, and competition.

“Leave the negative voice/the censor outside the classroom! In a learning situation, you evaluate, analyze, and reflect on the musical outcome but that can be contra productive when you are working with improvisation where one needs to leave that out. It's important to practice ear training and other skills like scales, licks, etc., but use them in a creative way in the present situation”.

Someone of the singers also talked about *space* and the importance of not taking up too much of it. Leaving space and creating silence is part of the musical expression.

We discussed the concept of looking at duo vocal improvisation as a conversation and all singers endorsed that. Someone said:

“It's very much a conversation because it requires deep listening and interaction. It's also more challenging than a conversation because both voices are often going simultaneously. You have to be able to vocalize and listen, give and receive, at the same time. It's a constant, give and take. You have to be able to give support, then take a leading role, then a combined role, and so on.”

We also discussed if there are other ways to look upon improvisation and the singers suggested that it could be a spiritual practice, a type of mindfulness meditation, to become a receiver for the music and keep you completely ‘in the air’/present for the music. It could be something that enables you not to think. A place for playfulness (not necessarily always happy play- it could be serious or sad), for having fun, a channel to explore creativity and boundaries but also a place to empower self-esteem, energy, flow, and compassion.

“On a physiological level, it's a way to develop the brain's neural-networks to enhance resilience, forgiveness, generosity, creativity; to access the deeper, more consciousness-connected parts of the brain. It's a way to develop the skill of deep listening, both to the actual sounds and music around you, and the inner music, or music that appears in your imagination”.

I brought up the issue of ‘taking risks’ in improvisation and one of the singers problematized that. ‘Taking risks’ might be a prerequisite for getting into the flow but at the same time the concept of ‘taking risks’ also can be a norm pointing to a desirable and expected outcome and that not ‘taking risk’ points to a negative experience...which could be contra productive and judgmental.

At the question of what kind of sources of inspiration connected to vocal impro the informants had, there were a variety of things. Someone said, color, shape, light, darkness, emotions/vibes, situations, and people while someone else said; listening to all types of music, especially music in languages he/she doesn't understand. Also listening to the different qualities of the tones, chords, and rhythms and to the relative silence of nature. Someone talked about artwork, philosophical thoughts/ideas, playing with language, and gibberage. There was also a comparison with the way Sami people joik:

“You don't joik a song...you joik a thing or a person”.

Other inspirational influences were of course other vocalists and instrumentalists and examples were; Rhiannon, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRay, Marc Murphy, Al Jarreau, Betty Carter, Kurt Elling, Lina Nyberg, Edith Jefferson, Annie Ross, Nancy King, Bobby McFerrin, Judi Vinar, David Worm, Christiane Karam, Joey Blake, Jenni Roditi, Meredith Monk, Jay Clayton, Flora Purim, Ornette Coleman, Sonny Rollings, Airto Moirera and also classical singers within Avant Garde and Free Form music.

When I asked about performance anxiety, the singers agreed that it can be a huge obstacle in all kinds of music-making and singing, no exception in vocal improvisation. Someone said

that it might be a greater hinder for singers since we cannot see our instrument, press buttons, or strum strings. We must rely on our relative pitch and develop a good kinesthetic sense of what's going on in our throats according to pitch and harmony.

"I think unless you're practiced at self-forgiveness, and practiced at letting go of self-judgment, improvised performance can be very stressful. It becomes hard to stay focused in the present moment if you're always judging your "mistakes." When you get out of the present moment, it becomes that much harder to improvise, and then it becomes a self-reinforcing feedback loop of perceived mistakes and self-judgment".

I asked for recommendations on how to develop as a free vocal improviser and got many suggestions, such as doing it repeatedly and doing exercises in developing courage, expressions, relaxation, energy, pulse, and rhythm, all with a non-judgmental attitude. Stay completely present, let go of what's already been sung, forgive yourself, let go, listen to the air, and keep moving forward. Someone suggested setting up frames for the improvisation that limit and, at the same time, open for creativity. Be aware that every time will be different from the former ones. Work on accepting who you are and be prepared to fall into the shade/outside the group's liking.

To my question about what would inhibit free vocal improvisation, I got similar answers as given earlier in my interview. Most singers said that doubt and self-judgment, tension, fear, poor preparation (not setting the proper mental and physical space), certain expectations from oneself or other fellow musicians, thinking in general but also 'right-wrong thinking'. Someone had experienced that there could be a difference between the genders and that maybe girls were more likely to get stuck in this thinking.

My last question was about what would liberate a free vocal improvisation. They suggested forgiveness, generosity, deep listening, silence, focusing on the breath and body, focusing on giving rather than performing, and focusing on receiving rather than creating. They also suggested seeking fearlessness, playfulness, flow, letting go of the censor and the judgmental attitude, and empowering courage and inner will.

While working on the duo improvisations with the interviewed singers, we discussed what different emotions and subtexts meant to us and how we could apply them in our improvisation when it came to expression, interpretation, and creative ideas. We also sometimes talked about how we felt after the improvisation and words such as joy, liberation, force, and craziness came up. We never evaluated or analyzed how the music turned out, only what emotions it brought with it.

When I compare the answers, I got from my four interviewees with the books and articles I had read I could see that both the interviewees and the literature showed similar ideas, and

advocated learning and practicing basic elements in music, communication skills, self-knowledge, compassion, listening skills, curiosity, and courage.

Many authors (Cameron, 2002, Wooten, 2006, Nachmanovitch, 2019, Werner, 1996) as well as the interviewees saw *fear* as a great blocker for improvisation. For example, fear of failure, fear of not being good enough, and fear of not being accepted or liked. They also mentioned self-doubt and problem with the ego as a limiter for a free performance. At the same time, they all highlighted the positive synergy effects of improvisation as a place to empower creativity, joy, self-esteem, energy, flow, compassion, and social bonding. Some also talked about spiritual awareness and spiritual growth. The latter had cultural or religious implications.

To be '*open*' or '*empty*' and to stay present in the moment was a desired state of mind in improvisation. I found out about the notion of *liminal space* that I think captures this essential aspect. This is something I would like to study further in the future. How to be totally focused, in a flow and present did seem to be the challenge that many of my informants and authors highlighted as one of the main challenges.

## Practical implications

I now have come closer to answers about what approaches one could have in doing free vocal improvisation, and about the obstacles, there might be along the way. Using that as a starting point I also want to find exercises that could be useful in working with vocal improvisation.

As Nachmanovitch (2019) and Werner (1996) have written, one could inhibit free improvisation by studying/teaching it in a too ridged way. I think there are ways to explore and practice vocal improvisation in a playful way without being restricted and losing the joy of it. I suppose this path is very individual and each and everyone needs to find ways to practice that suit them. However, I will here give three examples of exercises I find are in line with what I have learned in this project.

### Exercise 1: One Word Story

As a start of my improvisation classes, I often use an exercise that leads to an understanding of how the group members are important to each other. The name of the exercise is *One Word Story*. In a group of 6-10 persons gathered in a circle, they are asked to tell an original story together. Each person contributes with one word at a time when it's his or her turn to add a word to the story. Needless to say, one cannot think of a word to use until the very last second, when one hears the former new word. One must instantly come up with a word that fits the story. With the common story, made up by improvisations in the group, an ensemble can build one big solid idea of a multitude of smaller ones. "Bring a brick- not a cathedral" (Leonard & Yorton, 2015) Kill your darlings and contribute with a word that supports the story instead of a word that makes the participant seem smart, clever, or

unique. Bring nothing preconceived or prepared to the moment. No one can control the development of the story; everyone must just go with the flow.

The exercise teaches us that every contribution matters, it is much faster to build a cathedral together than wait for each one to do it by themselves. It is a safe way to practice handing over control to the group. “All of us are better than any of us” (Leonard & Yorton, 2015) This could sometimes be a tough thing to realize since we live in a very individualistic era, and there is a lot of competition going on in the community of musicians/singers.

During my stay in Berkeley, California, and Big Island, Hawaii, in the spring of 2022 I attended vocal workshops with Bobby McFerrin and Rhiannon, two acknowledged singers, improvisers, teachers, and performers from the USA. They introduced me to the following two exercises.

### Exercise 2: Circle singing

Bobby McFerrin is an American vocalist who, apart from being a well acknowledge jazz singer, composer, and director with a long performing career, has also been the creator of Circle songs or Circle singing. When I attended his workshop in Berkley, he held Circle singing workshops with help of a vocal group to whom he handed out parts or riffs, which then the vocal group and all the participants of the workshop sang together. He created and directed an improvised everchanging musical piece with the help of all the participants. McFerrin and his co-singers/teachers build confidence and trust and nurtured creativity to deepen individual and community musical expression through improvisation. They claimed that the workshop might include harmony, body percussion, music theory, freestyle language, vocal embodiment techniques, exploration of musical styles, and much more, for experimentation at all levels of experience. He also invited individual participants to enter the stage to sing a solo or bring an instrument to jam with. All the participants performed in a very relaxed, playful, and explorative spirit.

The original way of doing Circle singing is to stand in a circle with a lead singer/director in the middle who creates different vocal parts that he/she teaches the participants in the circle. The method of how to teach and vary the call and response parts and building the improvised composition brick by brick can look very different. Some musical factors that need to be addressed are:

- the use of a motor/riff to set the groove, meter/pulse, and pitch
- a bassline
- a contrasting melody to the motor

and after these phrases are in place, there could be melodies, harmonies, body percussion, and soloing on top of that.

### Exercise 3: The Orchestra

Rhiannon is a vocalist, performance artist, composer, and master teacher whose musical vision embraces jazz, a cappella, improvisation, world music, and storytelling. She has collaborated with Bobby McFerrin in the groups *Voicestra* and *Gimme5* and has toured and

performed with these and other groups for many years. She has created her own teaching programs used all over the world, and she has also been a faculty member of the Berklee College of Music for many years.

In the appendix to her book, *Vocal River*, she hands out numerous exercises or performing forms for vocal improvisations for solo, duo, trios, or bigger vocal formations. She adds movements, drama exercises, slam poetry/spoken words, and dance to her work with singers and she keeps a vision of music as a vehicle for innovation, healing, transformation, and social change in her work. The first time I met with Rhiannon was in a workshop in Stockholm at the Jazz Festival in the summer of 1989. Since then, she has made a great journey of vocal exploration that she has shared with audiences, students, and singers all over the world. For this artistic project work I have selected some exercises that I have experienced with her in her workshops and then tried them out with my own students at the Academy of Music and Drama throughout the years. She has, among many things, developed some of Bobby McFerrin's ideas/exercises and changed them to shared leadership. These exercises develop trust in each other in the group of singers.

For example, she has an exercise called *the Orchestra* where every singer is given a musical function in the piece that is to be improvised. The Orchestra's functions are the following: a motor, someone to harmony the motor, someone to do an interlocking part, a counter melody, a harmony to the motor or to the counter-melody, a bass line, a percussionist, and finally a soloist on top of the others. Since it's an improvisational exercise the motor just starts off a rhythmic pattern and after that is settled next function adds its part and so forth. There is no time for thinking, just like in the *One Word Story* exercise explained above, only spontaneous melodic- and rhythmical additions that like a brick on a brick build the orchestral improvisation. As a last function, someone gets to solo on top of the music until this same person ends the piece by conducting an end. There are more examples of Rhiannon's exercises in the appendix.

"Let the music tell you what to do". Rhiannon

"Music helps people to listen to each other" Rhiannon

Another practical implication of this project is the use of all the videos that I have recorded during my sessions, workshops, and concerts within the project. These have been used to illustrate the results, show non-verbal acts, and answer my research question in an exploratory way.

Finally, this artistic research has given me a lot of words and explanations for what I might have stated as implicit knowledge before. I still see that music in the making, especially in improvisational settings with or without singers, is a secret language and too complex to seize, analyze or put into words fully. In this work, I have captured some thoughts about vocal improvisation. I'm looking forward to learning more about it and getting new chances to experience musical meetings in the name of improvisation.

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## Appendix

### Interview questions vocal improvisation in duo format spring 2022

1. For how long have you been working with vocal improvisation?
2. In what form have you worked with this, in groups, circle singing, duo, solo?
3. What would you suggest as required good tools if you want to improvise?
4. Is there something that you actively want to avoid or get rid of when you improvise?
5. I look upon duo improvisation as a vocal conversation, what does that apply to you?
6. Other pictures/ways to look at it could be: improvisation as a game, a way to channel creativity, and equality, a way to listen and respond with your whole body and being, and a way to take risks. More?
7. What are your sources of inspiration when it comes to vocal impro?
8. Persons that have inspired you in vocal improvisation?
9. What do you think about performance anxiety and vocal improvisation?
10. How could you develop a free vocal impro?
11. What would inhibit it? What would liberate it?

### The themes for the vocal improvisation sessions with the singers in duo format:

1. Here and now
2. Mirroring – one starts the riff
3. Mirroring –the other one starts the riff
4. Start from an emotion/an action
5. Start from another emotion/an action
6. Summertime – impro over the melody and freely
7. Only consonants
8. Only vowels
9. Fast temp
10. Slow tempo
11. The duo decides

### Examples of Rhiannon's vocal improvisation exercises

- *Cross the Room*: In this solo exercise, you let your voice and body simultaneously work together and show each other the way across a circle of participants. One lets the body give an impulse for a movement that the voice must react to and contribute to. Step by step, movement by movement accompanied by the own vocal responses as one move across the room. It's an exercise that develops body awareness, and it also helps to integrate the whole body in the singing and performing.

- *Porcus Portal*: This exercise resembles *Cross the Room*, but it's made in a group setting. It starts with one person, sitting in a circle/group, suddenly leaving the group and using his or her voice and body movements to walk toward a wall or a fictive stage. When this first person has come up to the stage facing the group, he or she continuous improvising over a rhythmic pattern on the spot while the next person joins. These two persons then improvise

together on the stage while the third person makes their way up to join them and so forth. Whilst up on the stage you stick to a rhythmic pattern that will support or contrast what the others sing. When all participants, approximately 4-5 altogether, are up on the stage the first singer leaves his or her pattern and starts soloing over the other participants' lines and walks back to his or her place in the same manner as they walked up. When that first person is back and quiet, the next person starts soloing his or her way back, and then the next person, and so forth.

- *Mirroring*: This is a duo exercise where one is accompanying the other while he or she is soloing. It starts with the first singer improvising a rhythmic and melodic phrase like a loop. Make sure it's a loop that can be sung for a while concerning sustainability. Pauses may be included. When this loop is settled the other singer takes on and continues keeping the loop going while the first singer instead starts soloing accompanied by the second singer. After a while, when the first singer is done soloing, he or she falls into the loop melody. That is the signal for the second singer to let go of the loop and start soloing instead. After the second singer is finished soloing, he or she will go back to the loop which now will end the improvisation.

- *Duo solos*: This is a similar exercise to *Mirroring* but without the loop. Both singers improvise at the same time, and they simultaneously create a musical landscape. Each singer needs to support the other, and at the same time, they will lead the way to new paths. It's a good exercise in trading places, taking and giving space, and leading and following each other.

There is an advantage in doing the exercise *Mirroring* before this *Duo solo* exercise since it's easier to improvise over a non-changing loop where the singers could take it, step by step. Then they can move on to the *Duo solo* exercise where they both are freer to improvise together.

- *Solo Over A Form*: two singers work together e.g. on the song *Summertime* by Gershwin. First, both singers sing the head together, then one singer sings the melody without the lyrics while the other is soloing around that melody, then they trade roles on the same exercise as just explained, then both will take one solo each (no accompanying), and finally, both will solo together but then bringing in lyrics in the soloing.

- *Turns 5*: Five persons stand with their faces towards a wall. The rest of the group will be the audience, places opposed to the wall. The five singers are only allowed to sing when they turn around and face the audience. The music-making in this exercise needs to rely on each participant's contributions, and everyone's adding to each other's rhythms or melodies, contrasting to one another's phrases in a communicating spirit, and all this without making eye contact. Each singer can just turn around to the wall and quit singing, wait, and then turn around back into the music again. This makes the music dynamically varied. If you feel that you get stuck or need a break, you can just turn to the wall as a refuge. Even though you're not to have eye contact with your fellow singers, you'll use your peripheral vision and follow other singers' inhalations, movements, dance patterns, and so forth.

- *Three Face Forward*: Three persons stand with their faces forward on a line. The rest of the group will be the audience, places opposed to them. This exercise resembles the exercise *Turns 5* but without the turns and only with three singers. The three singers listen carefully to each other's contributions, and they blend, stand out, contrast, start movements, follow movements, and change energy and dynamics simultaneously without keeping eye contact, only using ears and peripheral vision.

- *Spirulation*: This is a group exercise where we work on the sense of form, rhythm, time, and musical memory. One person starts to sing a rhythmic phrase that everyone picks up and sings. This is going to be *the main theme* (A). Then someone starts a new rhythmic phrase (B), that could go with the first one (A) but when all the participants have picked up the new phrase (B) they sing that phrase for a while until they on a simultaneous signal move back to *the main theme* (A). Then someone else improvises a new phrase (C) to the main theme (A), and after that has been stabilized as the new phrase, they on a simultaneous signal move back to *the main theme* (A) again and so forth.

- *Murmuration*: All singers stand very closely together on the floor. Then one singer starts a rhythmic phrase or pattern and connects it with a movement that everyone is following. This movement and singing could lead the group to a new position in the room and goes on until another singer stands out from the group singing a new phrase together with a movement that everyone must follow. This results in something that looks like a slowly moving flock of starlings that move and mumble/sing through the room with a mutual/collective action. Sometimes two singers start new phrases at the same time and then one might be followed by the group while the other will be a solo excursion.

- *the Orchestra*: This exercise is described before in this work. Before the singing starts, every singer is given a musical function in the piece that is to be improvised. The Orchestra's functions are; a motor, someone to harmony the motor, someone to do an interlocking part, a counter melody, a harmony to the motor or to the counter-melody, a bass line, a percussionist, and finally a soloist on top of the others. Since it's an improvisational exercise the motor just starts off a rhythmic pattern and after that is settled next function adds its part and so forth. As a last function, someone gets to solo on top of the music until this same person ends the piece by conducting an end.

- *Travelling Quartet*: This exercise is for four singers who carry the functions of a motor, an interlocker, someone who sings a harmony or a melody or a bass line, and a soloist. After one round the singers trade roles and everyone gets a new function. It's easily done by swapping functions to the next one in line. Do this until all four singers have tried all parts or functions. The traveling part of this exercise. Some parts may seem to be harder to sing, improvise, or figure out, so it's important that all singers get the chance to try all parts/functions.

- *Secret Language*: This is an exercise where one gets the chance to work on an uncensored, existing, or non-existing language. It can be gibberish or nonsense, or it can have a meaning

for the singer even though the words don't make sense. It could be done in an existing language performed in an incoherent, stuttering, or exaggerated way. It could be spontaneous spoken words, slam poetry, or just improvised singing exploring lyrics. We are used to vocalizing or scatting without real words in vocal improvisation, so in this exercise, one develops the musical toolbox with words. Very often these spontaneous words and meanings tend to sound very funny even though they might not have been intended to be humorous. Maybe this exercise hits a spot in us where we show weakness in a way that we normally avoid. If you normally have the safety in improvising with scat-singing or vocalizing but now must add words instantly you might feel out of comfort which can lead to a vulnerable spot. Not at all bad but it is challenging. This too needs exercise.