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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Origins

This book is based on many years of teaching improvisational skills to advanced level music therapy students, and even more years of developing and incorporating improvisational techniques using the piano and a variety of other instruments into clinical work with a variety of populations. **It is not going to be a book about the theory of improvisation. That subject is very well covered and explored in a variety of different books and articles, both from the field of music and also from the field of music therapy** (Bonde, Pederson and Wigram 2001; Bruscia 1987; Jarrett 1997; Milano 1984; Nettle 1974; Nordoff and Robbins 1977; Pavlicevic 1995, 1997; Pressing 1988; Priestley 1994; Robbins and Robbins 1998; Ruud 1998; Schwartz 1998; Wigram, Pedersen and Bonde 2002).

The music therapy literature is full of explanations, well-documented theories and arguments about the development and value of improvisation in clinical work. This book is intended to function as a **method book** – a tutor, a ‘practice’ book that gives concrete, practical examples in the text (and on a CD) of how to explore the potential and freedom of musical improvisation, and how to use that freedom both in developing improvisational skills and then applying those skills in therapeutic interventions. Many applicants to undergraduate and post-graduate courses in music therapy at universities and conservatoires all over the world have learnt music from either the classical or rhythmic tradition, playing from pre-composed music, or staying within a narrow style. They have not been encouraged or given a systematic approach to learning how to improvise. When children start to **learn to play instruments, particularly the piano, the first priority is almost always to learn to read music. Then one learns to ‘interpret’ the music**, incorporating all the marks of expression that composers write into their scores, and to create feeling and style in one’s

playing. Finally, teachers demand that students learn the music well enough to play without having to look at the score – ‘playing by heart’ as it is sometimes quaintly called in the English language, or playing from memory. One is still reproducing another’s composition, staying (within the frame of one’s own interpretation) true to how you think the composer intended the music to sound. There are two more styles of playing that I found myself exploring as I developed musical skills – playing by ear, and playing ‘in the style of...’ (pastiche).

Playing (or singing) ‘by ear’ is a technique that can function at a very simple or very complex level – depending on the degree to which harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure have been developed and practised. The process involves listening to some music – a solo melody, song with harmony, ostinato rhythm, symphony – and then working out how to reproduce the music on piano, voice or another instrument without ever seeing the music as a notated score. This was certainly my favourite music-making activity when I was a young child, and perhaps the best preparation (I discovered later) for learning to improvise. It was infinitely more fun than the much harder and more laborious task of learning to read the notes.

It is not easy to explain how this skill is acquired. There are, for example, some notable cases of autistic ‘savants’ with remarkable musical abilities in hearing and accurately reproducing music without ever learning to read a score (or indeed to read words or numbers). This skill is certainly enhanced by the acquisition of musical knowledge, but also appears to be honed by considerable practice, and an ability to hear when the reproduction sounds ‘right’ and is the most accurate reproduction of the original. The main reason it helps prepare for the development of improvisation skills is that one becomes quite at home with picking up an instrument and creating music, without relying on the notes in a score. It is most developed in everyday singing, where humming tunes that one picks up is characteristic in every culture, and is nurturing a musical ‘ear’ by developing the ability to listen and imitate, rather than to read, music.

Playing ‘in the style of...’ is different from playing by ear. Here, one gains enough experience and practice in a style of music to be able to improvise in that style. The word pastiche is usually applied to this process in composition, where one actually writes music in the style of a composer, and is more typically applied to classical music where part of music education is to learn how to write Bach chorales and fugues, or string quartets ‘in the style of’ Mozart. Some enthusiastic composers continue to write pastiche music, preferring to reproduce a much loved and understandable style than to try to develop a new one. In the 1960s and 70s there was a marvellous quiz programme on British television called ‘Face the Music’, presented by the incomparable Joseph Cooper. A team of three celebrities tested their knowledge of classical music through musical games that included such gems as the

‘dummy keyboard’ where Cooper played on a keyboard that made no sound, and the team had to try to work out what he was playing by watching his fingers. Pastiche came in the form of the ‘hidden melody’, where Cooper took a well-known melody and disguised it in the style of more than one composer – sometimes up to four different styles in a prepared example. This ‘hidden melody’ was pastiche or ‘playing in the style of’ at its best, and it was fascinating to watch Cooper subtly adapt well-known melodies such as ‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’ or ‘Auld Lang Syne’ into the styles of Debussy, Brahms or Bach.

Improvisation is a much freer and more flexible way of creating music than either playing by ear or playing ‘in the style of...’. It can be more simple, but also more complex, as well as essentially original and idiosyncratic. Learning to improvise is as valuable a skill for children learning music as sight reading and learning pieces from memory. As most musical ‘educations’ do not typically include improvisation, it is also relevant to stress that it is never too late to learn. Therefore the material in this book is specifically designed and presented to build up musical skills usable in improvisation. The ideas start at a very simple level, and develop to more complex models where many different elements of musical technique and therapeutic method are integrated together. These can be valuable for musicians and educators who wish to develop skills in improvising or extemporizing music; however, the main focus of this text is directed towards students and clinical practitioners in music therapy, and offers them a process for how to start, build up and develop from very basic examples to complex and challenging improvisational skills.

An important and interesting perspective on the art of improvisation, with a particular focus on some of the processes involved in teaching this difficult subject, was recently documented by David Schwartz for his Masters thesis at the University of East Anglia (Schwartz 1998). Schwartz explored the whole process of learning improvisation as a student and teaching improvisation as an educator. He defined his perception of improvisation, the process by which one acquires improvisational skills, the framework and milieu and atmosphere one needs to create in order to teach improvisation, and the structure of an improvisation lesson. This thesis provides remarkable insight into how people experience improvisation teaching, as he undertook qualitative interviews with students and teachers of improvisation.

Learning to improvise can probably be one of the most challenging tasks for any musician, even though one might have thought it to be a creative and exciting experience. This is mainly because you are spontaneously creating music which is your own music, and this impromptu composition can attract the same subjective and objective criticism that any composition attracts: ‘Too repetitive, too loud, too dull, not a good structure, no nice melodies, poor harmonic modulations, limited, confusing, no direction, etc., etc.’. Anybody who sits down to improvise, especially

as a performance for others, is creating music that is essentially drawn from his or her own technical and musical resources, as well as creative impulses. As one of the most significant pioneers in music therapy in Europe during the middle of the twentieth century, Juliette Alvin (1975) once said, 'music is a creation of man – and that is why we can see man in his music'. (Contemporary writing would refer to 'people' rather than only 'men'.)

However, in his consideration of the process, Schwartz captured the defensiveness and insecurities of somebody embarking on developing their improvisation skills when he talked about the fears of failure and the inner voices that can become a paralysing self-criticism to the person attempting to improvise.

Typical messages of these voices are things such as:

'You're no good at improvisation.'

'You can't do this! You're not free enough.'

'You can't find your inner voice/self.'

'It's not nice to play loudly.'

'This is a waste of time.'

'I'm staying in control.'

'This is selfish!/self-indulgent!'

'OK, enough!'

(Schwartz 1998).

With all this in mind, this book attempts to bring the study and teaching of improvisation into a dimension where it is fun, satisfying, fulfilling, achieving, positive, practical and most of all... possible. The book will try to provide beginner, intermediate and advanced musical techniques and therapeutic methods that can be implemented both as tools for practice and also as tools for use in music making and therapy. I continue to emphasize that improvisation is something that can be developed for purely musical reasons as well as for therapeutic reasons. Although I stand now firmly inside a music therapy profession, my first degree was in music and it was through developing my ability to play by ear, and improvise, that I found myself able to enjoy creating music. This was the skill that led me into music therapy and into teaching improvisation.

Format

Each chapter is structured in a format that can explain, exemplify and recommend. I will explain the method (linked where necessary to theory), demonstrate with examples on the CD and then recommend ideas for practice and development. There are notated examples in the text that can be looked at as examples and also used in a practical and developmental way. The examples on the CD provide some direction or inspiration for practising the ideas and developing skills. The process of developing improvisation skills can be slow or fast and, using this book in a practical way, the best approach is to work backwards as well as forwards! This may sound like strange advice, but the idea is that revising some of the earlier techniques and exercises to integrate them in later and more advanced sections of the book is important in developing a fluent and adaptable style. The tracks on the CD not only provide examples of piano improvisation, but also demonstrate the therapeutic methods when clients are playing percussion (drums, cymbals, djembes) and pitched percussion (xylophones, metallophones, glockenspiels).

1.2 Teaching improvisation skills

Whoever comes to study improvisation, young or old, skilled or unskilled, will undoubtedly feel vulnerable right from the beginning. The reason is that improvising is a process whereby one makes up music, and opens oneself to the subjective and objective criticism of the quality of that music. Therefore, the teacher of improvisation has certain important responsibilities right from the beginning and it will be of great benefit to anybody participating in improvisation classes if these are given high priority.

Improvisation is the development of a range of techniques and methods

Starting from this point of reference reduces the anxieties and vulnerabilities experienced by people when they are told to 'Go on...play how you feel, play the music within you'. This can be a daunting request (or challenge) if some essential tools, techniques, methods and frameworks by which one can best 'play how you feel' are missing. The 'left brain' processes may often come before the 'right brain' in terms of planning and structuring improvised music, and ultimately this will lead more effectively to purely expressive playing. Some argue that it is easier for an 'un-trained' musician to improvise 'how they feel' because they are not 'imprisoned' by a need to work within pre-determined musical form, obeying musical 'rules' common to certain styles, and facing technical expectations by the 'musically trained' part of themselves that block and limit their spontaneity and creativity. Yet I do have a