Improvisation

Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy
Clinicians, Educators and Students

Tony Wigram

Foreword by Professor Kenneth Bruscia

'This bountiful text by experienced musician and researcher Tony Wigram is destined to become a standard on the shelves of music therapists globally. Packed full of ideas and examples, it breaks down the "doing" of improvisation into simple and straightforward sections... A bible for music therapists who use and teach improvisation – I highly recommend it.'
— *Australian Journal of Music Therapy*

'A unique and excellent book of didactics for music therapy academic education, involving the systematisation (and "quantification") of music therapy procedures with a focus on improvisation, and of a Meta methodology of improvisation – especially in music therapy dyad work.'
— *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*

'*Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* is a landmark publication. It is the first book to extricate improvisation training from specific clinical models of music therapy. It is the first book geared towards musicians who may be beginning pianists. It is the first book that includes improvisation on different instruments. And it is the first book to integrate musical and clinical techniques of improvisation for both individual and group sessions.'
— *from the Foreword by Professor Kenneth Bruscia*

Improvisation plays a key role in the toolbox of the music therapist. Tony Wigram's practical and comprehensive guide and accompanying CD will prove indispensable to students, teachers, therapists and musicians as a book of musical techniques and therapeutic methods. Notated examples allow readers to try out techniques and progress as they read, with audio examples on the CD adding another dimension to the structure and guidance provided for all levels of music student and therapist.

Professor Tony Wigram holds the Chair and is Head of PhD studies in Music Therapy at the Institute for Music and Music Therapy at the University of Aalborg, Denmark. In addition to his teaching, he is Head Music Therapist at Harper House Children's Service (Hertfordshire, England) and Research Advisor to the Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Trust. He is a Research Associate at the University of Melbourne, Visiting Professor at Anglia Polytechnic University, and Adjunct Professor on music therapy courses in Belgium, Italy and Spain. He has published extensively in his specialised areas of diagnosis and assessment, vibroacoustic therapy, Rett syndrome, applied improvisation skills and music therapy education.

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Foreword

The time has come that this book be written, and it is fitting that Tony Wigram is its author. Let me explain.

Improvisation was introduced into the fabric of music therapy some forty years ago, not too long after the profession was born in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the 1960s, Paul Nordoff (an American composer) and Clive Robbins (an English special educator) began developing their way of working with variously handicapped children, with Nordoff improvising at the piano, and Robbins working directly with the child. Their first book, *Art of Music as Therapy*, was published in 1965, and after working with hundreds of children in different settings, they began to clarify their model in three subsequent books: *Therapy in Music for Handicapped Children* (1971), *Creative Music Therapy* (1977), and *Music Therapy in Special Education* (1983).

Meanwhile, in England, Juliette Alvin had also been developing her own way of working with handicapped children, using cello as her main instrument, emphasizing the need for the child to improvise 'freely'. Her first book, a general text about music therapy and its various applications, was published in 1975, and three years later, she released her seminal work on improvisation, entitled *Music Therapy for the Autistic Child*.

It was Mary Priestley working in London, who first explored the use of improvisation in psychotherapy with verbal adults. Taking a psychodynamic approach, using piano, violin, percussion instruments, and verbal discussion, Priestley would base the improvisations on whatever concerns the client brought into the session, having them improvise sound portraits of feelings, events, persons, relationships, and so forth, and often accompanying them as they musically worked through the therapeutic issue. Like Alvin, Priestley's first book, *Music Therapy in Action*, came out in 1975, and dealt with various methods of music therapy in addition to improvisation. Her improvisational work, however, was also evolving through work with hundreds of clients, and in 1994, an anthology of her writings was published, entitled *Essays on Analytical Music Therapy*.

So far the history of improvisational therapy has involved experimentation and discovery (which one might call first stage activities), followed by formalization and communication through publication (or second stage activities). This is significant because, since its inception, improvisational music therapy has been practice-based-

its clinical strategies and techniques have been developed and tested, not through theory or research, but through actual working with clients musically for an extended period of time. It is also significant that these three models were developed somewhat independently of one another, for different purposes, with different therapeutic styles and values, by completely different kinds of musicians. Thus, improvisational music therapy is at once need-based, pioneer-based, and experience-based. It is a form of music therapy that is by its very nature built upon here-now interactions of unique individuals who have their own perspectives, backgrounds, and values. The implications of this are huge, particularly for the third stage, training.

Given this history of individual approaches, it is not surprising to discover that each pioneer trained their own students in their own ways of working. Nordoff and Robbins set up training centres for teaching Creative Music Therapy, Alvin trained students at Guildhall in her approach of free improvisation as part of a larger programme in general music therapy, and Priestley developed her own training model for Analytical Music Therapy. While this makes perfect sense, it conceals some larger educational dilemmas that would evolve as the music therapy profession began to grow: How can music therapists who have not studied with these pioneers (or their protégés) learn about improvisational therapy? And, when there is the opportunity, which approach should music therapists learn? Should music therapists study all three pioneering approaches to really understand the wide spectrum of improvisational practice? Implicit in a pioneer history is the training of specialists rather than generalists, and along with this, there is a hesitance to accept shared principles upon which all forms of improvisational therapy are built.

By the 1980s, these three models had become widely known, the training programmes had produced a number of protégés, and other new 'pioneers' were developing improvisational approaches of their own. The field had become rich with innovative ideas and unique perspectives, and the complexities and challenges of training generalists in improvisational music therapy were beginning to compound accordingly. The time was ripe for some kind of publication that would organize information about existing approaches. In 1987, the present writer authored *Improvisational Models of Music Therapy*, the first textbook detailing and comparing the diverse approaches to improvisational therapy that had been developed to date. From a training point of view, having such a textbook was quite useful for teaching how the pioneers and other music therapists worked clinically with improvisation. And it allowed for the abstraction of general principles.

What was still missing in the literature, however, was any kind of book that would actually teach therapists, first, how to improvise musically, and then how to use music improvisation clinically. It should also be mentioned that there has been, and continues to be, a lack of agreement on what the instrument of choice should be for the improvisational music therapist. This varies not only according to the model

and client population for which it was developed, but also on whether the work is done in an individual or group setting. Should the therapist improvise on the piano (or equivalent harmonic instrument), the therapist's own instrument (Alvin played cello, Priestley played violin), or on simple percussion? And accordingly, on what instruments should all improvisational music therapists be taught to improvise musically and clinically? Obviously, much also depends on what instrument the therapist in training already knows how to play, not to mention differences in their potential for mastering the clinical instrument of choice.

The first entire book devoted to preparing music therapists to improvise clinically was *Healing Heritage: Paul Nordoff Exploring the Tonal Language of Music*. Based on a training course on clinical improvisation offered by Nordoff and Robbins in 1974, this book was not published until 1998. Though rich in musical ideas and improvisational principles, the course and book focused primarily on giving already skilled pianists guidelines for how to clinically improvise at the piano within the Nordoff-Robbins model. In addition to this 1974 approach to training, Nordoff and Robbins also created improvisation exercises for music therapists, and included them in their 1977 book, *Creative Music Therapy*.

It is interesting to note that, to date, these two Nordoff-Robbins writings are the only ones in the literature specifically designed to train improvisational music therapists, and they both are both from the 1970s. Enter the present book by Tony Wigram.

Improvisation: Methods and Techniques for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students is a landmark publication. It is the first book to extricate improvisation training from specific clinical models of music therapy. It is the first book geared toward musicians who may be beginning pianists. It is the first book that includes improvisation on different instruments. And it is the first book to integrate musical and clinical techniques of improvisation for both individual and group sessions.

What also makes this book very special is the CD that accompanies it. It contains 66 examples altogether, some demonstrating what can be done with the improvisation exercises given in the book, and others demonstrating various musical and clinical techniques discussed. Wigram is the improviser-therapist, assisted in some of the examples by a colleague in the role of client. These are an invaluable accompaniment to the book, as they stimulate the musical ear to hear the myriad possibilities of using each musical element expressively, while also bringing to life musical discussions in the book. Wigram is a master improviser and a superb musician, and it is edifying to hear how fully he explores the expressive potentials of each musical situation at hand.

It is most fitting that Tony Wigram is the author. Tony is a pianist by talent, and an improviser by personality. He studied music therapy with Juliette Alvin, and improvisation with the composer, Alfred Nieman, both of whom taught at the

Guildhall School in London. Thus, Tony's music therapy training was centred on the use of improvisation. It is also significant that Nieman's influence was not limited only to Alvin's students; he also inspired and taught students of Nordoff Robbins, as well as Mary Priestley herself. Thus, Tony's understanding of improvisation, as originally formed by Nieman, is deeply rooted in styles of musical improvisation that were espoused in all three original models of improvisational therapy. One could even say that Tony shares his improvisational heritage with Nordoff, Robbins, Alvin, and Priestley.

Tony is also eminently qualified as a clinician to write this book. He has been working as an improvisational therapist for over two decades, exploring the myriad uses of improvisation in assessment, treatment, and evaluation of various clientele. He has also written extensively about his work, and presented around the world on his approaches to improvisational therapy.

Tony's experience as a teacher of music therapy has also provided him with the insights needed to write such a book. This is not a book that theorizes about improvisation, it is a book that actually teaches someone how to go about the musical task of building one's own improvisatory repertoire of skills, written by someone who knows what the problems are. In the way the exercises and concepts are presented and sequenced, it is clear that Tony has been teaching improvisation for years, and has learned through repeated trial and error what helps students to improvise and what does not.

So far two important points have been made. To repeat the first line of this foreword: 1) The time has come that this book be written, and 2) it is fitting that Tony Wigram is its author. Now there is only one more question that seems important to discuss in introducing this book. To understand the significance of this book requires the reader to understand the significance of improvisation in the therapeutic process.

People go to therapy for myriad reasons, but underlying most, if not all, of them is one basic human dilemma – not having an acceptable alternative to one's way of being in the world. Those who are in therapy because of anxiety or depression have difficulty finding alternative ways of experiencing their lives in a more rewarding way; those who are in therapy because of cognitive or physical impairments have difficulty finding alternative ways of managing these impairments more effectively; those who are in therapy because of a trauma have difficulty finding alternative ways of integrating that trauma into their lives, and so on. Therapy, then, is about the therapist helping the client to identify alternative ways of being in the world, and then selecting the ones that are most beneficial or fulfilling to the client. In short, therapy is about finding, creating, and evaluating alternatives.

When I improvise I begin with what I have given to me – the musical instrument, my body, my energy, my mood, my intentions. And I begin making sounds, then hearing and reacting, varying and adjusting, then reacting again, and trying out something else, continually moving from sound to sound, cluster to cluster, rhythm to rhythm. Once I begin, it seems like the very process carries me forward, not too much different from the way my life has its own way of unfolding. When caught in the moment, I lose my ordinary inhibitions and am swept into the urgency to keep on going. The here-and-now ignores old scripts; its demands are intense and immediate. To continue, I have to abandon old hardware.

I listen to myself, and try to make some sense of what I am doing. What do I intend? What do I really want this to say? What can I do with what has been given to me? I begin to hear retrospectively what I have done so far, and I wonder if I can make it meaningful in some way. How can I make sense out of what I have already done, and what has happened in the rush of the moment? What sounds do I want to keep, and what sounds do I want to eliminate? What is the theme emerging? Is there an idea or feeling that I am expressing? I catch a sound glimpse of it. Yes, what I am doing hangs together. It expresses something quite unique.

I begin to repeat the theme, and rework it. I keep what worked, and what I liked, and I try to extend or expand it in some way, so that it moves toward some kind of completion or resolution. It occurs to me that what happens serendipitously, and what sounds occur intentionally are all somehow the outcome of what I have done with what was given to me. Like life, I have some choices, but not others. I am limited by what I do, and I am limited by what I cannot or have not done. Yet, all these limitations make me search for whatever freedoms I might have. I keep wondering: what are my alternatives, and which do I choose?

I continue in the process until some kind of closure seems imminent to the idea I have established. It sounds like things have run their course, as if the sounds have plummeted down their own paths, independent of, yet flowing from my own will. The main idea is now spinning out, reaching toward completion. I know now that if I am to continue, I will have to do something else, and take these past sound ideas somewhere else, into a different future. I have to do something different, but what? What can I do next that will somehow be a sequitur to what is past? What freedoms do I have within the limitations I have accepted? Is there anything new I can do?

I strike out in a new direction, and it feels risky. It's not something I have ever done before. These sounds are new to me. The very idea has never flowed from my intention. I have to be sure that I can manage what I do. I am not sure I have the ability, and that distracts me from the task at hand. The sounds I am making are at the very edge of my being, they are at the blade that separates freedom from control. Will I fail, or will I prevail? I discover a way to manage the sound idea, to shape it. I suddenly realize the control that I do have, and with this, comes an urge to play, to take even more risks to extend and express myself. I am beginning to enjoy this now. I find it comforting to know that I can experiment, and find something fulfilling in my discovery. It's even fun.

It occurs to me that these two musical sections that I have forged out of my sheer will to find meaning actually reflect who I am — they sound like how I go about my life. They are parts of me that I have never explored or examined before. They are new motifs of mine that I have chiselled from the already shaped figure that defines my identity. It's a paradox of who I am and who I can be; who I imagine myself to be, and who I intently work toward becoming.

I stop and it hits me. In these simple, few moments of improvising, I have encountered the conditions of being human, the very sound essence of who I am, and at the same time, the myriad possibilities of who I can be. These are the sounds of my life project — to continually seek and create alternatives to what has been given to me, and to what I have done with them so far. Without this project, I will never be fulfilled and my life will never move toward wholeness. Improvisation is the process of continually creating my life anew.

If therapy is about finding preferred alternatives that clients have not been able to discover on their own, then it seems self-evident that therapists have to be personal experts at exploring alternatives, their own as well as their clients'. To teach therapists to improvise, then, is to teach them how to find alternative ways of being in the world; and to teach therapists how to improvise with others is to teach them how to explore and live in the alternatives of others. Improvisation is the very essence of therapy.

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Preface

There is something about improvisation that fascinates some and terrifies others. It can be the most creative experience in the world, and then again the most frustrating and challenging. The art of composition is inextricably linked to improvisation, and the spontaneous creation of music in all societies is centred around cultural styles of improvisation. It has attained some of its most complex expression in the free jazz culture emerging throughout the twentieth century, and the skills of jazz improvisers fascinate and hypnotize their audiences of aficionados. However, it is still considered almost a magical skill by many, a gift granted to the chosen few, while the rest are left with pieces of paper covered in black dots as their 'inspiration'.

This book sets out with the intention of dispelling that particular myth. Musical improvisation, and the ability to participate in it in social situations, has always been the property of all, not just the chosen few. Whether you are creating a multi-layered harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure on a synthesizer, or just tapping simple rhythms on a wine glass with a teaspoon, the potential to 'join in' with a musical experience through improvising is inborn and present in everyone. This is the 'ignored' musical avenue for many children in schools where the teaching of music still concentrates more exclusively on learning to read music, listen and appreciate. It is, however, a chosen path for many music therapists as a primary method of work, in the belief that the sounds we make can represent us, and that improvised music can provide the framework for an interpersonal relationship between a therapist and client(s).

I have lived and breathed improvisation since before I can remember, and the experiences I have enjoyed stimulate my mind and satisfy my soul. In fact, it was my ability to improvise that led my professor of music at Bristol University to suggest I might gain something from attending a guest lecture at a nearby college by a dynamic and charismatic French woman by the name of Juliette Alvin. This great pioneer of music therapy gave us the rationale and theory for improvisational music therapy, which has become the skilled and specialized application of music as a therapeutic tool in clinical practice in Europe. Subsequently I found it hard to try to explain exactly how I developed my own abilities to improvise, but I realized that in order to teach others, I had to find a way to structure this process systematically, explain it verbally, and then teach it through experiential learning.

Here is the result. Some chapters in this book are aimed at explaining and teaching musical improvisation, often centred on the piano, but with ideas that can be adapted to other instruments. Other chapters start to focus on therapeutic method, and the application of musical techniques within the therapy process. There is a structure, direction and intention to the sequence of chapters and the ideas they contain. But this is not a book to read by the fire, or on a train. You need to be close to music, to musical instruments, to a piano – because, as you read, you need to take the ideas straightaway into a musical experience. The demand for this book arose from participants in many improvisation workshops that I have done, and also from the process of supervising clinical work. Yet it is in the practical situation that developing skills in improvisation really comes alive. Music is a living experience, and the love of music inspired this book. The ideas in it are wide-ranging – but the intention is to explain in a way that empowers readers into music…to improvise!

Acknowledgements

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Grateful thanks to Lance Andrewes, the sound engineer, for his expert work on the CD, and to Jessica Kingsley and her publishing house, for her confidence and professional support, both with this and other publications.

Finally, I have learned and developed from all my professional colleagues, both in music therapy and in other disciplines, and not least from hundreds of clients I have seen and worked with in therapy, who provided me with the challenge to meet their needs, and without whom the ideas in this book would not have emerged.

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; Nettl 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 of 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

strong conviction that development into expressive playing relies on the building up of a whole range of skills and abilities that can flow 'as if from the fingertips' out of an improviser without them even having to think about it. Therefore the acquisition of skills and technical tricks is not only important but also helps a person believe in learning improvisation as a method.

Every improviser has strengths and weaknesses

In practical terms, this means that whenever I start with a new individual or group who want to learn improvisation, I need to listen to how they play first and take into careful account their own abilities and strengths. I try constantly to reinforce these as well as drawing attention to areas where they have difficulties or weakness. Besides motivation and a creative attitude, improvisation requires a lot of confidence, and it is the building up and development of that confidence in trainee improvisers that is most likely to result in them improving over time. The area in which people have to develop the most is in listening to (and enjoying) the music that they are creating. It is very easy to be dissatisfied, over-ambitious or frustrated and experience some level of powerlessness. Given the right model, being satisfied and enjoying the sounds is the most important experience for someone learning improvisation, and will form the foundation for development.

Beta-blockers aren't necessary!

Improvisation classes require people to play in front of each other – guaranteed to raise anxiety levels and paralyse inexperienced improvisers. This doesn't have to be. Classes can be fun and the great benefit of learning improvisation in a group is that you pick up ideas from each other. Therefore the teacher has a responsibility to create a healthy atmosphere of enthusiasm for development in the group with genuine appreciation of each other's playing and a genuine understanding of expectations and potentials. I strongly believe in drawing out all the positive elements of somebody's attempts at improvising, sometimes encouraging people to reflect positively at the end of an improvised performance, and developing other people's abilities to listen to what is in the music in order to give the person who has been improvising a feeling of importance, confidence and greater awareness of what he or she did. All these elements create a positive atmosphere in improvisation classes without which the classes will definitely fail.

The value of practice

It's not magic! Improvisation doesn't come as a natural gift, except to a few. Even those for whom it appears to be an inborn skill will experience limitations in their potential unless they find a way to develop their talent. Most of us work hard at it, building up our skills and abilities, remembering to take into consideration many different aspects while we're playing and incorporating them as we develop more and more complex processes. So the process of teaching improvisation also requires giving trainees homework, realistic tasks which they can work on (as you will find throughout this book) in order to develop and sustain skills. However, it can be quite soul-destroying and rock confidence if, when practising alone, everything goes wrong and creative juices don't flow! People sit at the piano and struggle to think of something new, struggle to develop a theme, struggle to work out a harmonic frame within which they can improvise. When all that doesn't work, they may give up and say 'OK, I'll play atonal music then I don't have to worry about any of those things'. Then can come even greater disillusionment as the atonal music jangles and rattles away without any particular structure, direction or consistent expression that can be recognized. Recording and then playing back an improvisation can help people analyze strengths and weaknesses, and is particularly helpful when the memory of what occurred during a fairly long improvisation quickly fades. For teaching purposes, the Yamaha Disklaver is a helpful tool. This is a modern version of the old style pianola – where an ordinary acoustic piano has been adapted to include a computer that records the production on a diskette. At the press of a button, the piano plays back exactly what has just been improvised, with notes and pedals being depressed and dymanics precisely reproduced. It is like watching an invisible person playing, and is a completely accurate reproduction of what was recorded.

Practising together helps a lot and is something that I often encourage for people who are learning to improvise. Try to arrange to meet and play together once or twice a week, because when you play together, particularly if given specific tasks that involve two people playing together, you will make much more satisfying development in your improvisation skills.

Getting the balance right between supporting and modelling

The role of the teacher is to help a person learn to be a good improviser. This is not a space where the teacher can demonstrate how good he or she has become! I've learned over the years that while it is necessary at times to play to the students to show them exactly what I am trying to get them to do, the greatest demand on my skill is how (subtly) to encourage their ability to do something without simply playing it for them. I have found this to be most effective by improvising with

students and using specific techniques which will be explained later in the book, including frameworking, accompanying and supporting. Often, when I am improvising together with people, I can introduce them to ideas in the music that will inspire them. If they are listening carefully to what I am doing, they will pick up ideas that I am suggesting in my music and use them themselves in their own playing. I can offer them a frame or break up undesirable and rather rigid patterns of playing in order to develop their creativity. This is where a balance is necessary, the balance between supporting and modelling. It is a danger area because students can be very needy for your approval and support and that must be given sensitively, appropriately and with judgement. People need inspiration and examples but they do not need to be overwhelmed (with anxiety) by what are probably more developed and extended skills in their teacher, particularly in this area of learning. A balance needs to be found, and that balance changes as the process of learning develops.

Teaching improvisation is a complicated but an immensely enjoyable and satisfying process. It is like inspiring people to open up their box of 'talents', encouraging them to practise using those talents and then watching them develop into multi-skilled, expressive and creative musical people.

1.3 Learning piano improvisation skills

People who are trained to play the piano

In musical education, children are taught the conventional building blocks of reading, learning from memory and performing music, and it is not typical that they are introduced to improvisation, even when they take instrumental lessons at school or privately. Therefore, a number of people who come to learn improvisation already have some level of competency at the keyboard, and probably training in the basic theory of music. There are a number of sub-categories under the general heading of pianists or keyboard players:

- *Classically trained, basic skills, music bound*: Many people who have studied piano within a traditional, classical framework, have learned how to play pieces from the music, and have some basic abilities in sight-reading. They may never have developed any ability to play by ear, or even learned pieces to play from memory. Consequently the whole idea of sitting at a piano without music in front of them is frightening. They are well able to reproduce, quite frequently in a very musical way, music from written scores, but may not have developed any skills at understanding harmony and transposition in order to play freely.

- *Basic skills, not classically trained – rhythmic or jazz-style pianists*: A number of people come from a different tradition from the classically trained pianist and have accumulated a basic range of rhythmic piano skills in order to play music that isn't complex, often songs where written or figured chords enable them to provide basic accompaniments to the song. Such pianists have developed a technique for accompanying songs in rhythmic group music with a typical 'left-hand octave' and 'right-hand chords' style of playing.

- *Advanced classically trained pianists*: These pianists usually have a very good technique, and a wide range of classical pieces that they can play either from music or from memory. Advanced classical trained pianists have the best grounding for improvisation because they probably explored music that is written in a number of different keys, have some concepts of harmonization and modulation, have particularly expanded and developed their fingering and chordal techniques and are generally fluent on the keyboard. The disadvantage for this group is that they may actually be quite reactive to having to go to a more simple level of creating music when their experience has been playing complex music that they are able to read from scores written by other people. While their ability to play complex music at an advanced level from a score is immensely satisfying, they may have much less fluent and demonstrably 'advanced' skills when there is no music, and they have to construct their own creation.

All three sub-categories may or may not include people who have trained in music theory, sight-reading, harmonization and transposition skills. Where a trainee in improvisation has undertaken a music degree at university, or music study at a music conservatoire or college, they will probably have undertaken study and training, to a greater or lesser level of competency, in all these practical skills, and also in compositional skills. However, these skills are often taught in isolation, and the integration of competencies to the extent that they can be applied in spontaneous improvisation may not have been either a specific objective or the final objective of the musical education. Therefore while people may be able to play very well on the piano they may not understand how to establish their own harmonic and melodic frames.

People who are not trained to play the piano

Included in the groups I have taught over the years have been several people who have undertaken only very limited and basic training on the piano and for whom piano is not their first instrument. It is fascinating to me that in developing improvisation skills people without formal piano training may often fare better in terms of their creativity and spontaneous playing than pianists with a long training in piano technique, who may experience difficulties in 'letting go' of ingrained styles or modalities of playing. They can often approach the piano in a different and freer way, ignoring or setting aside traditional and expected piano technique (finger play), playing with their fists, their feet, their nose or even lying on the keys! While they may be less fluent in using some of the typically classical techniques such as scales, arpeggios, chordal and melody structures, they may be considerably better at free, atonal improvisation, and perhaps even better at listening to themselves when they are playing. They have less preconceived ideas about how good they are supposed to be and may have less negative self-reflection about the quality of their improvisation when they compare it with the quality of their playing if they were performing a piece by Beethoven. Making such a comparison can be a significant disadvantage for trained pianists who may become extremely frustrated with the development of an improvisation if they compare it with a piece they have learned.

Guiding principles for improvisation

I have established some basic principles to guide anyone embarking on the exciting road to develop creative improvisation skills:

- start with a simple idea;
- listen carefully to one's music;
- practise techniques and specific skills;
- master skills one at a time before attempting to combine and integrate a number of skills.

Above all, I believe the most important and vital element for anybody learning improvisation is to listen to what you are doing and enjoy the experience of doing it.

Besides that, it is often necessary to develop an ability to pause, wait or stop completely. Schwartz refers very appropriately to this where he describes 'Marching onward' (Schwartz 1998, p.44), a phrase I particularly like because it describes so well the way creative improvisation can become trapped in repetitive patterns. This is something that applies to pianists, non-pianists and to those developing improvisation on other instruments or with voice where, when they are confident in how they

play, they then continue to play without necessarily thinking very hard about what they are doing. Schwartz calls it 'marching onward', and he describes it as the 'Student marches on oblivious to the fact that the music doesn't feel terribly important or connected'. In the same section, he also refers to very structured patterns of playing such as playing in rhythmic patterns of four and eight (typical in Western music and very ingrained in a common meter style), and the 'Standard style' where somebody has certain patterns or structures in their playing that recur whatever they might be representing or expressing in their improvised music.

I would also apply the 'marching onward' phenomenon to someone who has no sense of direction in their improvisation, but is trapped in a 'repetitive musical loop' where they have to keep playing at all costs because stopping (pausing) would perhaps represent a failure of sustaining creativity! I have solutions to these types of problems, which are typical in even the most skilled and developed improvisers. They are techniques called transitions that allow a process of change in the music to take place and they are described in detail later in the book.

Improvisation is spontaneous and can rarely be repeated in the same way. So while it is not composed music, it is created personal and individual music which, as Alvin says, represents various aspects of the person. To be more clear, those 'aspects' of a person can, and do, include a variety of different influences and elements, because the musical production they make on any occasion will contain and include the past and the present:

The past includes:

- the musical culture from which they come;
- the musical skills they have acquired;
- musical taste and preferences;
- influences in the way they have been taught, or learned, music;
- associations to the past, and past life events.

The present includes:

- current musical 'fad' or interest;
- life events that influence them currently;
- mood or emotional state at the time;
- personality state and character as it is currently developed.

All these facets and influences combine to form a musical identity that emerges in improvised music making. Music therapy in Europe is founded on a tradition of improvisation as a means to engage with people, and to build a musical relationship.

The musical identity of the therapist meets and engages the musical identity of the clients, and this calls for highly developed and advanced specialist skills in interacting with clients through this medium (Wigram, De Backer and Van Camp 1999; Wigram and Bonde 2002).

1.4 Improvisation in music therapy: A process

I encourage people who are training in improvisation skills to recognize that it is a process – it can be fast or it can be slow, or the speed can vary as in moving through stages of development. Acquiring a range of simple, musical techniques is the first step in the process that then moves on to incorporating those techniques into therapeutic methods, as well as varying musical parameters that can colour and influence the quality and style of the music. Having incorporated these elements into the created music, and developed a conscious awareness of the potential for either variability or stability in the music, a process develops of integrating and extending improvisation skills.

The ability to use improvisational techniques relies on the acquisition of specific musical skills and the integration of those skills into therapy methods. Within the music therapy literature Bruscia (1987), in his seminal book *Improvisational Models of Music Therapy*, has documented a list of 64 improvisational techniques that are appliable in therapy. He divides them into techniques of empathy, structuring, elicitation, intimacy, procedural, emotional exploration, referential and discussion, and they include both musical and verbal techniques. These are all concerned with therapeutic intention, and I have used many of these techniques, as well as extending and adapting some of them, adding some new ideas, and incorporating them into the methods and teaching techniques in this book. Bruscia talks about 'Clinical Techniques', others talk about musical or therapeutic methods, or musical/therapeutic techniques, models and approaches. For the purpose of consistency and clarity, I refer only to *musical techniques* and *therapeutic methods*, and will define what these terms mean in this text:

Musical technique: refers to a way of playing or singing where the style, modality and elements are described by musical parameters.

Therapeutic method: refers to a way of acting and behaving where the intention, approach, or frame is determined by therapeutic parameters.

After the initial explanation and description of a range of musical techniques and therapeutic methods, the book moves on to more advanced techniques such as extemporizing, frameworking, transitions and thematic improvisation.

Finally, the book addresses how to analyse improvisation, involving the selection of 5-, 10- or 15-minute pieces of improvised music as manageable and understandable sections where the musical structures that occur as well as the direction of the music can be notated, analysed and explained.

The process of developing improvisation skills and applying them is a balance between the cognitive and the creative, fusing together the resources of structure and organisation with flexibility and inspiration. When something isn't working for a person who is attempting to undertake an improvisation, I frequently find myself referring them back to an earlier stage in the process and asking them to start again, taking into consideration variability in dynamic, in tempo or in style. It is inevitable that when attempting to create music, people become stuck. A blocked or stuck position needs to be 'freed up' or overcome, which is not necessarily very easy unless you have incorporated the elements of the process along the way.

1.5 Musical elements – the language of musical expression

Music is often described as a language, a language with syntactic and semantic aspects. For it truly to be a language, there would have to be a much clearer structure of symbols in it that are recognizable. Science-fiction movies, such as 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind', have suggested beautiful scenarios where aliens actually communicate with humans through a melody that at first appears to be a code, but quickly evolves into a melodic and harmonic improvisation. Melody has many of the components of spoken language with its inflexions and its phrasing. However, my premise is that the foundation for meaning in improvised music is usually specific to the person who is creating it, and the empathic level of sharing that goes on is not precise but is nevertheless truthful in reflecting moods, emotions and attitudes.

Skill in varying and balancing musical elements plays a tremendously important role in developing improvisation skills, and the exercises and processes explained and exemplified in this book will refer consistently to the core elements of music: pitch/frequency, tempo/pulse, rhythm, intensity/volume, duration, melody and harmony. The combination of these elements in musical material determines the style and quality of what one hears. The balance of melody against harmony, the use of pulse and phrasing, the structure of the harmonic frame and the influence of harmonic change or modulation colours and enhances music in an aesthetically beautiful dimension, which contrasts with the more 'primitively exciting' elements of tempo and rhythm. The variability and flexibility with which a person who is improvising can employ and integrate all of these elements is what characterizes

improvised music, and it is an essential part of any training in improvisation to be constantly aware of the variability or stability of such musical elements. Watching trainees start down the path of creative improvisation, I frequently note that the initial musical production can be quite flat, dynamically. This is because much attention is placed on what notes to play, and melodic and harmonic structures in the music, whether playing on a piano or other instruments. Tempo often remains rather fixed throughout, with equally little variation in meter, intensity, pitch range and typically without the presence of pauses, rubatos, accents, accelerandos or ritardandos. This is not unusual, and in fact it is often noticeable in the music of clients with whom music therapists work. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. After all, the process of creating music is hard enough, without simultaneously having to pay attention to adding expression and dynamic.

But the potential of any musical production is that it incorporates enough expression and dynamic, changing either subtly or dramatically, to convert what is initially a combination of frequencies played with different timbres into an expressive and communicative experience. If the improviser takes away some of the elements, reducing the number that can be employed, frequently the result is to enhance the communicative potential. For example, given a drum or tambour, two individuals, or a group, can play around with rhythms, tempo, meter and accents, and put aside harmony and melody. 'Drum talk', used in group improvisation, can be a more exciting and communicative medium of expression than when potentially more complex and expressive instruments such as metallophones, guitars and pianos are the tools of the experience. For this reason, when teaching piano improvisation, the first tasks I give to trainees are to simplify and reduce the potential material, and help a person explore his or her creative potential with very limited musical tools.

1.6 Defining musical improvisation and clinical improvisation

This book is concerned with offering ideas and examples for learning and developing improvisation skills, but also with applying those skills in the clinical field of music therapy. Improvising together with clients, individually or in groups, is where one begins to employ all the techniques, tools, tricks and skills of improvisation in order to meet their needs and engage them at a therapeutic level. Here I am starting to refer to 'clinical improvisation' as opposed to purely 'musical improvisation'. In England in the 1970s there was much discussion about what was meant by the term improvisation and the level at which that 'improvisation' was taking place with a client in terms of musical content and therapeutic intention. In order to clarify and

define an emerging terminology in the profession, a small working group[1] was set up to formulate and offer definitions for everyday expressions used in music therapy. The first and major challenge was to define what we mean by improvisation, and the different levels at which this was understood. The first stage was to offer a broad definition of musical improvisation for the purpose of music therapy, and the definition that emerged was:

Musical improvisation: Any combination of sounds and sounds created within a framework of beginning and ending.

This allowed all sorts of noises to be included and defined as musical improvisation, and strongly underpinned the philosophy of one of the founding pioneers of music therapy in England, Juliette Alvin, who argued that since Stravinsky, dissonant and atonal sounds had become the 'new music', with the consequence of allowing those sounds in free improvisation. We then discussed how a definition of musical improvisation could be adapted to describe the use of it as a technique in clinical work. As part of this working group struggling with defining these (and many other) terms that are used in music therapy, I well recall the arguments that came up as to when a client could be considered to have started improvising. One person suggested that there should be a musical frame of some sort, to separate accidental (or even intentional) noise making from what we would describe as musical and clinical improvisation. Another proposed that the creation of any sound upon a musical instrument of some sort would separate musical from some other form of sound making. Mary Priestley, the pioneer in Analytical Music Therapy, stressed that from the moment a client entered the music therapy room, or space, any sounds they made may be intentional or unintentional forms of music making. She gave an example of a client who leaned back in his chair and started tapping his finger against the side. It seemed that the production of sound could be interpreted as musical and improvisational provided the context was clearly therapeutic. Therefore the definition that emerged was:

Clinical improvisation: The use of musical improvisation in an environment of trust and support established to meet the needs of clients.

Note

1   Association of Professional Music Therapists (UK) Terminology Group members: Abram, K; Caird, S; Mure, M; O'Leary, C; Wainer, H; Wardle, M; Wigram, T; Williams, A; Zallick, S.

Basic Concepts in Improvisation

2.1 Musical techniques and therapeutic methods

Exciting, stimulating, creative and aesthetically interesting, music can be improvised by anyone, on any instrument or perhaps even just on a chair, a table, glass, on one's own knee or on the door of the bank when you are waiting for it to open! Creating music is a musical process and involves musical technique. Therefore, for anybody reading this book who just wants to explore their creative skills in making up music, we can call this process *musical techniques* or *musical improvisation*. There will be examples and exercises of musical ideas ranging from very simple techniques to more complicated and integrated styles of playing. The chapter on advanced musical techniques introduces extemporizing and frameworking – improvisational methods that can stand alone for purely musical purposes, or be applied in therapeutic contexts with *therapeutic methods*.

For people working in music therapy, these musical techniques are then connected with a range of relevant therapeutic methods. The musical techniques are employed within the framework of different therapeutic methods, and are exemplified in each chapter with different ideas of how to develop improvisation both musically and clinically. When working with clients, one also applies both the musical techniques and the therapeutic methods within a framework which is sometimes, but not always, determined by the creation of 'play rules' or 'givens' (Bruscia 1987). The appropriateness and application of musical techniques, therapeutic method and the use of play rules (either independently or in combination) is decided by the therapist when working with the client. This may have been predetermined, with some prior thinking regarding the client's very specific therapeutic needs, or it may spontaneously, intuitively and quite rapidly occur during the therapy process. Music making is a temporal process, and in the improvisational

approach there is an inevitable and ongoing process of evolution over time, whether the music remains consistent, stuck or subject to continuous and rapid change.

2.2 Creative simplicity as a starting point

Every individual who creates improvised music brings his or her own musical techniques and style to the created music. Consequently, the music they create will be influenced by their own technical skill, cultural background and musical preferences (previously described as 'past' and 'present'). In music therapy we try to learn a wide range of musical styles, idioms and techniques in order to meet the idiosyncratic preferences of all of our clients, thereby establishing an effective musical relationship and therapeutic alliance with them. Consequently, there will be many examples in this book of different idioms and styles where the musical techniques are at a simple level, designed to help the musician and therapist to establish a musical relationship that includes a variety of skills and abilities.

To start with improvisation needs, frequently, to be grounded by a simple idea.

Improvisation is most effective and creative where a simple idea is repeated, varied, extended and creatively expanded.

For me, this is an important issue as I have often watched people improvising where they have run from one musical idea to another, frequently changing the music in order to meet an imagined ideal that the music needs continuously to change and develop. Therefore, the techniques that we will work on to begin with are some very basic and simple ideas. These methods are based on developing improvisation skills on a keyboard instrument but can also be adapted to other instruments:

- 1-note, 2-note, 3-note and 4-note improvisations;
- improvising on a single chord;
- improvising with just one hand;
- melody improvisation alone (on pianos or pitched percussion);
- simple rhythmic dialogue.

These are musical exercises rather than therapeutic methods, and are primarily intended to be used for building up and developing the creative skill of an improviser by limiting material or style. However, they can apply in clinical work, especially the concept that working with creative simplicity is a good starting point both for the therapist and for the clients with whom they are working.

Musical techniques will include many other exercises using specific parameters, such as how to establish and lose pulse in the music; how to establish a meter, change

a meter, or abandon the structure of meter in the music completely; how to develop a 'recitative' style of playing and then move into a pulse; and how to develop simple harmonic accompaniments from which one can improvise freely. Many of these techniques are extremely useful and applicable in therapy work. Musical technique will also include adding in different dimensions to any of the above techniques by varying volume, tempo, timbre, rhythm, duration and pitch.

2.3 Play rules and 'givens'

Improvising just for the fun of making music and creating a composition doesn't necessarily require any play rules or givens, particularly if one is improvising alone, and there is no need to agree a style or structure with another. Groups of musicians who meet together to improvise, most typically jazz musicians, have probably already established the musical frame and style within which they want to work, using well-known, well-practised musical structures from the wide variety within jazz music. In music therapy, working with clients who are frequently not 'trained' musicians, it is often necessary to establish some structure and predictability in the music with play rules or givens. These play rules can be musical. For example:

Play rule: Let's start very softly, get extremely loud and then go back to being very soft.

They could also be thematic in nature. For example:

Let's think of a place where we feel safe and comfortable and play that feeling and then gradually step outside the door into a dangerous and difficult world. When we start to feel too insecure in our difficult world, let's move back into our nice safe, comfortable space.

Both improvisations might, in the end, have a very similar style but the play rules for one are purely musical whereas the play rules for another are thematic.

Play rules vary tremendously in therapy work from one situation to another and from one client to another. They also vary in terms of the point at which clients are in their own therapeutic process. Most of all, play rules are structured in order to give some sort of sense of meaning and direction to the improvisational experiences that are going on, either at a purely musical level or at the more therapeutic level where musical improvisation is applied in clinical work. They can add a dimension of containment, safety and security to an experience that may well feel both challenging and unsafe for the client(s). The musical techniques and therapy methods that will be explained in the next four chapters can also be understood as having the character of play rules, but I will return to play rules that can be used in structured, semi-structured and freely based improvisation with groups or individuals in Chapter 7.

2.4 Clinical application – the therapy process

This final section of this foundation of basic concepts is primarily directed towards therapists, and concerns the significant factors that influence therapeutic process and clinical improvisation. The application of improvisation in clinical work can be understood as a process that involves different functions. Many have developed a short, memorable acronym to describe a method or concept that represents their theory, and for the process defining the function of improvisation in music therapy I have used perhaps the most obvious word – MUSIC.

Table 2.1 MUSIC – a process

M	Motivation	Why should we go into this experience?
U	Understanding	What does the experience mean for us?
S	Sensitivity	How are we going to experience this together?
I	Integration	In what way can we relate to, and integrate the experience?
C	Containment	What can I put into it – is it safe to enter this experience?

'M' represents Motivation

Here one looks for the motivation for making music together, or individually. Why should we do this? What do we need to do? What does the client expect to get out of this, and is he/she open to the idea of improvising? Do we need at least to formulate a framework and describe play rules in order to create a foundation for playing music together?

'U' stands for Understanding

The therapist's responsibility is to listen to the music of the client, or the shared music, and to understand the implications of what is happening musically, taking into consideration the client's clinical background, problems and needs. At the same time, the therapist works with both concrete and intuited awareness of the client's feelings through understanding body language, verbal and facial expression, and interpreting his or her musical and non-musical behaviours.

'S' indicates Sensitivity

When listening to and playing with clients, it is essential to be sensitive to their style and approach to music making, what their body language says and the timbre, quality and phrasing in their expressive playing. This is the part of the process where the music can be experienced as a form of communication, with contour, form,

dynamic and expressive characteristics, and consideration of how to respond in a sensitive way to what the client is doing musically relies on the listening perspective and skill of the therapist. Sensitivity to the intentionality of the sounds the client is making is based on both knowledge and intuition.

'I' stands for Integration

Integration here refers to the process of connecting the music of the therapist and client, engaging and recognizing separate musical identities, and integrating within a shared musical experience. Mutual timing, direction of music, structure of music and the flexibility or freedom established in the music starts to come into the frame and, overall, one is becoming aware of how the client's specific problems, characteristics and personality are evident in his or her music making and are actively influencing the experience of mutual engagement through music. The improvised music and the therapeutic process integrate and develop.

'C' stands for Containment

The therapist often has to allow herself to be open to all the transferred and projected feelings of a client, and to accept and contain those feelings. The music of the therapist and the therapeutic methods used in improvisation provide a multilayered and many-roomed container that allows the client a space and context within which he or she can work with a very wide range of feelings and needs. Containing a client is part of the process – which might involve allowing some quite important and unusual experiences to occur.

Finally, a word about silences and 'endings'. The experience of music making, as the definition explains, involves something happening within the framework of beginning and ending and the silences at the beginning and at the end are equally important in order to establish the value of the musical pieces that are being created together. It is not always easy (or relevant) to establish silence before an improvisation begins – and spontaneity in the experience adds to authenticity. However, good attention to the process of ending is critical, and pausing for silence and reflection afterwards is very much a part of the whole process.

2.5 Summary

This combination of musical techniques, therapeutic methods and play rules will be applied in the next chapters, where exercises and examples of improvisational skill building are documented and exemplified. I have attempted to work through these ideas in a logical sequence, building up from simpler ideas to more complex ones. However it is not intended as a hierarchy, but rather a process where the ideas

presented earlier need to be incorporated into later methods. In teaching, I have found myself writing out a 'reminder list' of earlier methods and techniques, to ensure that the acquisition of skills does not get lost as the process becomes more complex. What to expect can be summarized briefly as follows:

Chapter 3 looks at basic piano improvisation techniques (many of which are adaptable to other instruments), starting with simple exercises and developing to musical skills that have more relevance in clinical application.

Chapter 4 defines and describes some of the most useful basic therapeutic methods, such as mirroring, matching, reflecting, grounding, dialoguing and accompanying, where the musical techniques are given a therapeutic direction or objective.

Chapter 5 begins to explore more advanced improvisational techniques, both for use in music making generally and for the purpose of therapeutic interventions. Extemporizing and the development of musical frameworks in improvisation are introduced here.

Chapter 6 introduces the use of transitions in improvisational music making, presenting and illustrating different types of transition, and explaining why they are so important in therapy.

Chapter 7 introduces the concept of thematic improvisation, where a small theme or 'leitmotif' containing rhythmic and melodic characteristics is used as a basis for developing an improvisation. Rhythmic and melodic forms of thematic improvisation are exemplified, and the influence of transference and counter-transference is discussed.

Chapter 8 presents some ideas for group improvisation, either using instruments alone or in combination with piano. Some of the author's ideas for 'warm-ups' are described in detail, following which improvisational frameworks are explained, giving a format of elements that can be drawn on to promote group process. Concrete, abstract and emotional themes are introduced here.

Chapter 9 presents two specific models of musical analysis that can be used in music therapy for describing or analysing the music in improvisations. This final chapter is intended to provide just two models that have been developed to look at and document the material that emerges in improvised music making, and identify either musical or therapeutic salience.

Musical Techniques

3.1 Basic piano improvisation techniques

This chapter will present and describe a series of improvisational exercises that I use to promote and develop creative improvisation on the piano. The ideas can be taken and adapted to other instruments. The exercises are just as useful for people who have absolutely no training at all in playing the piano as for people who have studied piano, reached Grade 8 and are playing Beethoven Sonatas. The exercises are illustrated with notated examples in the text, some of which give a 'starting pattern' from which to begin. There will be examples of most of these musical techniques on the CD that comes with the book.

In order to develop our skills of improvising we find out most by listening to what we do. It often sounds very different when you listen to an improvisation that you have recorded compared with what you were aware of when you were actually participating or playing. It is a very good idea when trying out these exercises to record something you do and then listen to the sound you have made.

1-note and 2-note improvisations

The starting point I always take with improvisation is to *limit the material*. I notice a common mistake is the novice improviser's assumption that the more notes used – on a piano, guitar, xylophone or any other instrument – the more exciting and creative will be the improvisation. Actually, this often leads in another direction – into the land of chaos and over-production. My first challenge to any new improviser (or even someone quite experienced) is to be able to improvise creatively using only one tone, as exemplified in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Example of 1-note improvisation

Figure 3.2: Example of 2-note improvisation