A teacher stands in front of a class of young children holding an outstretched hand with her palm facing the ceiling. When her finger touches her palm, she invites the whole class to sing in unison any note they wish. When she removes her finger from her palm she asks the class to stop. She repeats this five or six times and each time the class of twenty children produce a rich and textured chord. The children are exhilarated by the spontaneous generation of new music. They are also surprised at how conventionally beautiful this exercise sounds. They are all improvising in the sense that they are selecting a note, choosing dynamics, making decisions about timbre etcetera. While this example may not immediately appear related to jazz, it contains the core elements of what might be considered jazz. Improvisation is routinely hailed as a defining feature of the genre. Considered more broadly as a uniquely collaborative, creative, social, and spontaneous generation of music, improvisation can also be at the heart of children’s music educational experiences. These types of activities can therefore be used not just with children but also with adults who have no experience of music making or musicians who are experienced but are somewhat nervous about improvising. Improvisation can thus be viewed as an approach that facilitates the development of new music skills and exploration of creativity. It can also help develop confidence in creative activities and an awareness of collective music making can develop primarily as a result of engagement in improvisational activities.

This chapter outlines some fundamental features of improvisation and attempts to explain why these processes are important. One contention of this chapter is that conventional jazz notions of improvisation could be broadened to include wider musical and psychological processes. Defining improvisation is not easy, and a definitive description that encompasses all improvisational activities will probably remain elusive. Broader definitions that also incorporate mainstream jazz improvisational activities will facilitate a greater understanding of the nature and importance of improvisational practice. In addition to being a defining feature of jazz, improvisation is a key component of jazz musicians’ musical identity. Moreover, in recent years there has been a significant growth in psychological interest in improvisation, not just as a feature of jazz, but as an accessible and social creative process whose spontaneity can facilitate collaboration between many musical genres and across disciplines. This has highlighted improvisation as a contested term. If improvisation is a universally accessible mode of social interaction, this has implications for musicians whose identities and livelihoods may rest upon more virtuosic definitions of improvisation. This chapter will explore how musicians talk about
improvisation. It will also discuss how musicians critique their own improvisation, drawing on data from a study where musicians improvised in trios and immediately commented, in individual interviews, on a recording.

The chapter begins by highlighting the importance of identity, suggesting that identity processes (how we think about ourselves, talk about ourselves, and present ourselves) are crucially important for musical behaviors in general and improvisational behaviors in particular. It then presents a model to describe improvisation across a variety of different contexts and finally offers some ideas about why improvisation is important to health and wellbeing.

Musical Identities

Musical identities refer to how we view ourselves as musicians and also how we use music, our musical tastes, and our music experiences, to construct a sense of self (MacDonald, Miell, and Hargreaves 2017; MacDonald, Miell and Hargreaves 2002). Even if we do not view ourselves as particularly musical, we all have thoughts about our level of musical skill and engagement. Whether that is “I only sing in the shower” or “I can play a few chords on the guitar,” beliefs about our musical skills help shape our musical identities. Of course, professional musicians also employ these types of narrative to help construct their musical identities (for example, “I play cello in the Boston Symphony Orchestra,” “I am a professional saxophonist”). Identity constructs, such as “I can only sing in the choir,” “music is the most important part of life,” “my family do not have musical genes,” or even “I am tone deaf” are all important markers of musical identities and help shape our musical interactions and tastes. This makes studying how people talk about music a valuable focus for research (Miell, MacDonald, and Hargreaves 2005). An important issue is that these identities may not be linked to musical qualifications or technical proficiency but will be influenced by social influences, including family and education environments. Musical identities are therefore universal and constructed in how we think and talk about our musical experiences. Furthermore, when we talk about our musical lives, we are not necessarily describing an objective truth but rather creating narratives that help form our musical identities. This makes talking about music an important part of the overall process of musical communication, since talking about music shapes our musical identities and musical identities influence how we listen to, perform, and engage with music. Within the context of jazz music, how jazz musicians talk about their work, their lives, and, importantly, how they talk about improvisation provides an excellent lens through which to study the nature of improvisation.

Constructing Improvisation

Improvisation is or can be social: nearly all improvising is done with other people; even solo performances are influenced by interaction with the audience. Talk, as our primary medium for social interaction, is inevitably used to position ourselves and our views (Potter and Wetherell 1987), and talking about music is therefore a fundamental part of how we make sense of music. This is particularly important for musicians: identity as musician is a prominent concern for professionals, and talking about music not only describes but also constructs situations and, by implication, influences how music is engaged in. We therefore contend that improvisation can only be fully understood if we take into account how we talk about improvisation.

For example, in 2006, musician and conductor Daniel Barenboim presented The Reith Lectures, an annual series given by internationally prominent figures for the BBC (the UK’s broadcasting organization). Barenboim’s lectures explored the interplay between music and society. Following his first lecture, highlighting the importance of music for society and its potential role in healing, Barenboim was asked by English pianist Julian Joseph about his views...
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Barenboim replied that improvisation was the highest form of art, implying a view of improvisation as an elite pursuit practiced by individuals who have honed and crafted their skills to the highest level and are able to execute lightning musical reflexes to respond to particular musical contexts. A few weeks later one of us (RM) was watching the Johnny Depp film version of *Willy Wonka and The Chocolate Factory* with his two young daughters. In the scene where Augusts Gloop attempts to drink the chocolate river and falls in, the Oppma Loompa factory staff spontaneously sings, “big fat greedy Augustus Gloop is a big fat nincompoop.” The hero Charlie asks Wonka how they could have known in advance what would happen to Gloop so as to have a song about this on hand. Willy Wonka replies that improvisation is a parlor trick that anyone can do. This alternative construction of improvisation emphasizes it as a universal capacity; it also relegates the activity from the highest form of art to a superficial party game. In a similar vein, Bailey’s influential account of improvisation (Bailey 1989) alludes to improvisation as a “doubtful expedient” or even a “vulgar habit.” From a discursive perspective, neither version of improvisation—pinnacle of artistic achievement or sleight of hand party trick—is “true.” Both have merits and both constructions are also problematic: one seeks to position improvisation as an activity only for the initiated, the experienced, or the elite; while the other constructs improvisation as universally accessible activity but possibly a frivolous or deceptive pastime.

Shortly after these instances, RM encountered the well-known Glaswegian comedian Billy Connolly in a fish and chip shop in Glasgow and chatted about music. Connolly asked if he knew a particular Glasgow saxophonist. RM replied that although he had played with this individual in big bands, he now played improvised music, describing this as “unlistenable music that nobody liked” and so didn’t play with that saxophonist any more. Connolly replied: “Brilliant, if those jazz bastards don’t like you must be doing something right.” In this final scenario, improvisation is constructed as something undertaken with particular expectations that differ between groups with a stake in performing it, who may label themselves with terms such as “jazz” or “unlistenable”; Connolly’s response asserts that such oppositional approaches to conceptions of improvisation can bear creative fruit and be used to help develop new ideas.

For Barenboim, describing improvisation as the highest form of creativity also acknowledges the skill, dedication, and virtuosity of those musicians engaged in improvisation; it creates an image of the improviser at a particular peak of artistic prowess and of an improviser as part of an elite group of musicians of similar status to others he has been lecturing on. In the script for *Willy Wonka*, a quick reply to a seemingly impossible state of affairs, the immediate and spontaneous construction of a fully arranged song to accompany a freak accident, offers a satisfactory explanation. Connolly, on the other hand, constructs a version of improvisation as a flexible musical activity that is often practiced within relatively inflexible parameters, but highlights the importance to creative development of the negotiation of these parameters: challenging conservative notions of improvisation is inherently a good thing. Jazz musicians’ musical identity may be tied to a particular construction of improvisation; if what they prioritize is challenged, then this may pose a threat to their identity, leading them to cast those with alternative views as an “out-group.”

Although different, these constructions of improvisation are not mutually exclusive; a social constructionist view would argue that different versions of improvisation will be fielded in support of different identity claims. Rather than each scenario offering alternative and competing truths about improvising, each claim constitutes a different social construction of improvisation to serve particular psychological and social needs for the speaker. Claiming some forms of art as higher or less genuine than others is a means of staking territory for what the speaker wishes to be treated as valid, valuable, or important in music; and Connolly, like any participant in a casual and amiable encounter, would be likely to align his views with what he perceives the other person
to value, to validate that person’s account of themselves. These shifting definitions of improvisation in our talk serve specific psychological purposes for the speaker in creating, negotiating, and maintaining a particular line of argument. This line of argument is linked to the musical identities and broader psychological identities of the speaker. We do not suggest that people consciously fabricate their musical lives in order to create a public image of how they engage with music, but rather that how we talk, describe, and explain our experiences help create a workable version of those experiences. This is influenced by both the discourse analysis and phenomenological traditions (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009).

Talking About Music

One way in which we have attempted to understand improvisation is by talking to musicians about what they think they are doing. We have interviewed musicians in different contexts and asked them about their practice (Wilson and MacDonald 2005).

We have highlighted that defining jazz, and improvisation in particular, is difficult even for musicians, and that even among themselves competing accounts are accessible. For example, one participant in a focus group of jazz musicians (MacDonald and Wilson 2005) suggested that

if you asked other jazz musicians they would say something different, they might. I’m just saying certain musicians. See they prioritise different things in the music for themselves. I would agree the swing thing kind of is a defining element but that’s me and whoever’s here. You know. There are certain musicians that we widnae work wae. Who’ve got probably different ideas. I mean everybody’s got a different idea of what jazz is anyway I’ll get ma coat.

We have also provided evidence to suggest that jazz musicians view their professional life as challenging in comparison to other types of musicians; another participant stated:

Look at classical musicians, it’s like a different world. You get I, did a couple of classical gigs there. It’s just amazing. How different it is. If you’re out after midnight you get paid more, you get a proper meal at the gig, if you’re out after midnight somebody pays for a taxi take you home, turn up somebody’s put your music’s on the stand in order, if you play a guitar or something like that there’s an amp, a lead, everything sitting there for you. Turn up at a jazz gig and...

We identified two distinct styles of talking about jazz improvisation, framing these in the discourse analysis concept of talk repertoires. A repertoire is a way of describing or accounting for a person or an event that people use in their talk (Sherrard 1997), a form of shorthand to construct ideas about identity where someone tries to position themselves or others people as a particular sort of person. The two repertoires we identified were termed mastery and mystery (Wilson and MacDonald 2005). The mastery repertoire aligns with the notion of studying hard and developing particular skills and knowledge through sustained commitment. For instance, in the extract below, improvisation is contextualized within a mastery discourse as necessarily developed through study and the challenging acquisition of skills and knowledge:

K . . . it’s not always that kind of romantic notion that everybody has, ya know, there has to be some sort of effort.
H Yeah it doesn’t magically happen.
K There has to be effort and there has to be some degree of training.
By comparison, in the mystery repertoire, improvisation is instinctive and uncontrolled, arising from unfathomable (and unlearnable) inspiration. In the example below, the same focus group participant emphasizes more soulful, ineffable qualities of improvisation:

H . . . when you’re truly improvising you’re playing with this intensity. And y-you don’t really care what, mistakes just go by and it’s like, doesnae matter cause you’re playing with intensity and (.) and passion.

Interviews in our earlier studies were focused upon generic jazz or improvised practice or examples specific to each participant that they singled out from their own career. We were subsequently interested to understand more about how multiple musicians described the choices they made in specific shared instances of improvising. With this in mind, we undertook a study asking trios of musicians to play short improvisations. Immediately after each recorded performance, we interviewed the performers individually and invited them to reflect upon their improvisations by listening back and commenting upon the music performed (Wilson and MacDonald 2015). Through analysis of these interviews, we developed a model to describe how musicians in any genre might choose how or what to play while improvising with others. This model is displayed in Figure 36.1.

If improvisation involves an impromptu a series of creative decisions within a social context, this model highlights the key types of options faced when choosing how to interact. These categories are described below in three levels of decision, illustrated with excerpts from participants in Wilson and MacDonald (2015).

**Maintain or Change**

At any moment, an improviser’s immediate choice is whether to continue what they are playing or change. Our results suggested that much of a musician’s time when improvising will be spent
sustaining one figure or sound or texture. A drummer keeping a steady beat must make decisions about when to alter what is played; a bass player playing a walking bass line must make decisions about whether to maintain the line or make small alternations based upon what is being played within the rest of the ensemble. In the extract below, one of the participants outlines how he negotiated this aspect of improvising:

The fact that I’m just keeping that note there I knew at some point they would both be like “Ok he’s going to do something in a minute.” You keep that idea going and the chances are that at some point you’re going to move away from it. . . . I think it empowers you to be the person who does the next change. If you keep doing the same thing people know that you’re probably going to do something quite dramatically different.

**Initiate or Respond**

If a musician decides to change what they are playing, they are faced with two alternatives: initiate a completely new idea, or respond to musical ideas already being played. The initiate option requires musicians to produce, in real time, an unprecedented musical idea. In the following extract (Wilson and MacDonald, 2015), the participant clearly outlines how they would like to introduce a new idea—the phrase “set the pace and the mood thereafter” concisely highlights that the music created should function as a new idea: “I made the decision to fill that gap after the big gesture and kind of set the pace and the mood thereafter.”

However, improvisers more often described responding to what was going on around them.

**Adopt, Augment, or Contrast**

If musicians choose to respond, then they are developing a musical idea already taking place. In this case, there are three different categories of possible decision. Improvisers may adopt an idea already in progress and incorporate it into their own playing. In the extract below, the phrase “we just all hit the squeakiness” describes the other trio members choosing to adopt a sound already in play.

Certainly at the end of it you can hear this sort of squeaky sound that I’m making, that’s quite suggested from 1A’s [object] squeaking, but then 1B’s on it really quickly as well so we just all hit the squeakiness.

On the other hand, musicians may choose to adapt what is already being played, to modify it in some way rather than replicating it. This is the augment category; in the extract below, “building that idea” signals that the improviser is consciously augmenting or transforming some aspects of an idea that is in progress:

it’s just building that idea and throwing in a few more textual anomalies. In keeping with what the guitars had been doing previously, really, with the long harmonics and the “bup bup bup” sort of stuff.

(5A)

Finally, improvisers may respond by offering contrast, consciously choosing to play something distinct from musical events already in progress, but complementing them in that person’s view. For that person, this is not the same as introducing their own completely new idea; their options are narrowed and suggested by what someone else is doing. In the extract below, the distinction
between “the textures” and “undercurrent of burbling nonsense underneath” highlight the improvisational contrast.

that's sort of leaving space for 3B to sit over the top of that with what she's doing which is nice. So she's providing the textures. We're providing the undercurrent of burbling nonsense underneath it.

(3C)

In summary, this model stipulates that improvisers primarily select whether to maintain what they are doing or else change. Change involves choices either to initiate a new idea or to respond to already emerging music. If responding, this can be to adopt, augment, or contrast the contributions of the other participants. The model offers a different account of improvisation from that in existing literature. The improvisers’ choices suggest a focus on broader structural features of music as it emerges (for example, texture or rates of change) and as such has relevance for improvising in any genre. Indeed, it would be useful for future research to apply this model to different categories of improvising, such as bebop jazz or Indian classical music, for example. In the following section, we move on to consider how this broad model of improvising might influence wellbeing.

**Improvisation Health and Wellbeing**

Improvisation is a fundamental feature of music therapy, an established health profession using music within a therapeutic relationship to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs. Furthermore, improvisation offers an accessible and flexible type of music making that can be based around what clients can or wish to do. Music therapy is available for children and adults globally and is a growing profession with a well-established body of evidence to support its use across a wide range of domains (MacDonald, Kreutz, and Mitchell 2012). Music therapists’ work is predicated on a sensitive and highly nuanced understanding of music as communication, and improvisation is a vital part of this process (Wigram, 2004).

Pothoulaki, MacDonald, and Flowers (2012) report a music therapy intervention focused upon group improvisation in which individuals, all patients at a cancer hospice, attended weekly group music therapy sessions. Participants had little or no previous experience of playing music, and the sessions were focused upon group improvisations involving various instruments. Singing was also an important element. Interviews with all participants before and after the sessions highlighted that improvisation provided an environment wherein participants could communicate with each other in meaningful non-verbal ways. Musical improvisation allows connections to be made between people that may not be possible using spoken language that requires rules of syntax to be followed. Additionally, people with health problems can have difficulty expressing their thoughts and emotions explicitly but may find it possible to express them abstractly using musical improvisation. Engendering group cohesion was also a crucial component of the improvisation sessions, and participants discussed how improvisation helped achieve a positive group dynamic. Participants found the experience of group communication enjoyable and rewarding, noting that they could communicate together and at the same time. Speech requires turn taking, but in group improvising, many voices can be heard at once and people can express difficult and complex emotions in abstract ways and in unison. This separate channel of communication can be therapeutic for the participants. The deep and profound relationship that a skilled music therapist can develop with clients though improvisation thus is not developed around teaching music, but via the connections made through musical expression. Music is by nature abstract sound and therefore ambiguous; this allows anybody performing music to express profound emotions in abstract and ambiguous ways to therapeutic effect.
We published a review of research into improvisation for health and wellbeing (MacDonald and Wilson 2014). Within music therapy it has been suggested that improvisation may be able to produce reductions in stress and anxiety, improved communication, and joint attention behaviors in children with autistic spectrum disorders (Pavlicevic 2000). Images of the brain activity of jazz musicians improvising indicate reduced activity in the inhibiting region of the medial prefrontal cortex associated with self-expression (Limb and Braun 2008; though see Beaty 2015). This finding suggests improvisation provides opportunities for renegotiating a sense of self, including problematic selves (Tomaino 2013). Improvisation may have beneficial effects across numerous contexts because it provides creative and expressive links between conscious and unconscious processes. Many authors have suggested that improvisation can help images and thoughts to emerge from the unconscious and provide a means for individuals to explore aspects of self and identity within a safe and therapeutic context (Pavlicevic and Ans-dell 2004). Procter (2016) and Seabrook (2017) suggest that therapeutic free improvisation can aid the manifestation and communication of inner states, unconscious conflicts, and repressed emotions. These features can help awareness of the relationship between unconscious processes and problems in everyday life. For example, individuals who are depressed often have low self-esteem, and patients with cancer or chronic conditions are often unable to perceive agency in their daily lives. These individuals can regain a sense of autonomy through improvisation (Erkkilä et al., 2012, Pothoulaki, MacDonald and Flowers, 2012; Van der Walt and Baron 2006; Metzner, 2010).

Improvisation also produces demands on attention and cognitive processes in terms of the particular type of non-verbal, social, and creative interaction involved; this may also produce beneficial effects (MacDonald and Wilson, 2014). Improvisation creates opportunities for creative, engaging, and unexpected interactions to occur; this can produce a heightened state of awareness, placing unique demands on attention and cognitive processes. Improvisation therefore provides absorption and immediate reward for social, psychological, and creative investment (MacDonald and Wilson, 2016). The attentional, social, and psychological engagement associated with improvising may also help distract and divert thoughts for those burdened with problems and/or pain, such as cancer patients (Pothoulaki, MacDonald, and Flowers 2012).

The unique communication features of improvisation also mean that it has the capacity for expressing difficult or repressed emotions without the need to articulate these verbally. Furthermore, co-participants negotiate in-the-moment the musical expressions and responses they create together. This experience has been shown to have positive effects for individuals with depression (Erkkilä et al. 2012), for bereaved adolescents (McFerran and Wigram 2005), and for patients receiving palliative care (Hartley 2000). One key feature is that improvisation provides individuals who have problems communicating verbally an opportunity to communicate without speaking (Gilbertson 2013; Naess and Ruud 2007; Gold et al. 2013). Kim, Wigram, and Gold (2009) suggest that children with ASD experiencing improvisational music therapy undergo social processes without being required to frame their thoughts in verbal language, and their motivational and interpersonal responses are thus facilitated. Thus, as a social and collaborative communication event, improvising offers opportunities to develop interactive engagement skills. Importantly, while improvisation is undertaken in music therapy for clinical purposes (that is, to form a therapeutic relationship not for educational and aesthetic reason), the process itself may produce health benefits to other populations beyond the clinical. MacDonald and Wilson (2014) propose a model outlining how musical improvisation can produce specific positive effects on health within the overall salutary effects of music.

This model emphasizes the importance of musical improvisation to facilitate access to the unconscious, to produce creative absorption and social interaction, and to facilitate emotional expression.
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Conclusion

This chapter has approached improvisation as a unique, accessible, and social form of collaborative creativity and as a fundamental aspect of contemporary music making. It has shown how musicians’ identities are constructed through talk and how talking about improvisation is a key part of jazz musicians’ identities. Improvisation overall is conceptualized as a series of decisions executed in real time. These decisions ensure the music is sustained and generative and enable performers to interact in real time. Conceptualizing improvisation in this way also offers a less daunting challenge to the novice improviser and a potential way around a “block” for creative practitioners. This model of improvisation is applicable across all forms of improvisation, and future research should test how it can inform understanding of improvisation in different types of music, or indeed in other art forms such as dance or theater. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the use of improvisation to promote health and wellbeing, highlighting that improvisation facilitates an engagement with unconscious processes and provides cognitive, emotional, and creative engagement within a social yet non-verbal context. It is for these reasons that improvisation may have beneficial effects upon wellbeing.

Improvisation can be conceptualized as a unique form of distributed creativity in that the creative acts of improvisation do not reside within the individual but rather are distributed among any group of people involved in an improvisational endeavor. Improvisation provides opportunities to challenge existing hegemonies and produce a democratization of shared musical processes. It has this potential as it is universally accessible and provides a context where novice improvisers can legitimately work alongside experienced virtuoso players with valid creative outcomes. Future research should seek to explore further the processes and outcomes of improvisation in contemporary cross-disciplinary practice. Importantly, if broader definitions of improvisation, such as have been proposed in this chapter, are adopted, this could open new career opportunities for jazz musicians. Jazz musicians’ identities and professional practice are related to their understanding of improvisation, and jazz musicians have advanced technical skills within improvisatory situations.
Harnessing these skills within broader contexts (for example, early years music, health, and well-being and community music contexts) could open up new vistas of employment opportunities, career-enhancing situations, and life-changing experiences for musicians who often struggle to exercise the full scope of their vast improvisational skills in lifelong employment.

Notes


References

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