

Jazz and Other Improvised Music Applied to Music Education

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Musical improvisation, a phenomenon transcending eras and cultures, is often linked to jazz but has historical roots in the Baroque period and folk traditions like Irish and Indian music. This article examines the role of improvisation in music education, exploring its significance in the Baroque era, marked by features like cadences and basso continuo, and its integration by composers such as Bach and Händel. Additionally, the improvisational techniques in folk music and jazz are discussed, emphasizing their value and application in educational contexts.

Keywords: jazz, improvised music, music education, Italian music, pop music

Introduction

Musical improvisation is a captivating phenomenon that has spanned eras and cultures. Often associated with jazz in common thought, the art of improvisation has deep roots that trace back to earlier historical periods and places far and wide, showcasing its versatility and relevance in various musical settings. This article will delve into the significance of improvisation in musical education. We will discuss improvisation both in the context of the Baroque period of European classical music, and in the folk music of cultures such as Irish and Indian, highlighting how this art is integrated and valued in music education.

Method

To fully grasp the importance and role of improvisation during the Baroque era, we will begin with a brief overview of the historical and musical context of that time. We will then examine the primary musical characteristics of the period that encouraged improvisation, like cadences and basso continuo. Finally, we will delve into the lives and works of some of the great Baroque composers, like Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Friedrich Händel, to explore how they integrated improvisation into their compositions and performances. Through this method, we hope to provide a comprehensive and in-depth view of improvisation in the context of European Baroque. Similarly, we will reflect on improvisational techniques of folk music. Regarding jazz, we will primarily focus on listening and analysis, with special attention depending on the mode of jazz improvisation being mentioned.

Results

Introducing young people to the intricate and diverse worlds of jazz and other improvisational music forms, such as basso continuo, Irish music, and Indian music, holds the power to deeply influence their development. This kind of musical education goes beyond mere skill acquisition.

Imagine a youngster who, through musical improvisation, learns to introspect deeply, connecting with their emotions. This inner journey not only allows them to understand themselves better but also makes them more

empathetic towards others, offering tools to express and handle emotions in creative and constructive ways. Simultaneously, immersing in complex musical structures can sharpen their cognitive abilities, enhancing memory, focus, and problem-solving. And when these skills are applied in a musical context, learning to think quickly and adapt to new situations becomes almost second nature.

The social dimension of music is equally crucial. Picture this young individual in an orchestra or ensemble: they must actively listen, respond to others' ideas, and collaborate for the performance's success. This ongoing interaction molds them as an individual, teaching the value of teamwork and communication.

Studying musical forms from different parts of the world can also broaden their horizons, immersing them in diverse cultures. This enriches their understanding of the world, making them a more open and tolerant individual.

Every musical practice also demands a significant amount of dedication. The discipline required to hone one's skills, the work ethic, and determination can be applied to all areas of their life. And as they grow as a musician, they develop a unique voice, learning the art of expression and innovation.

Engaging in jazz and other improvisational music forms is not just an artistic journey but a path that can significantly shape a youngster's growth and development, providing a sturdy foundation for a lifetime of learning and creative expression.

Discussion

The art of musical improvisation is not exclusive to jazz and can be found in many musical forms across different cultures.

The art of improvisation, which can be defined as the ability to create music spontaneously without the use of a written score, is a phenomenon present in many musical traditions across different cultures and historical periods. It is not exclusive to jazz, although it is often associated with this genre. Let's see some examples.

Improvisation in the Baroque Period of European Classical Music

The Baroque period, which spans approximately from 1600 to 1750, represents an era of extraordinary creative ferment in the history of European music. During this period, improvisation was not only a common practice, but was also highly valued and considered a demonstration of the musician's mastery.

In Baroque compositions, there was often a space for cadences, which were moments when the soloist had the opportunity to showcase their virtuosity through improvisation. These cadences provided a dramatic contrast to the rest of the composition and allowed the soloist to shine. In addition to cadences, ornamentation (the addition of decorative notes or trills) was often left to the discretion of the musician, who could vary their interpretation each time they performed the piece.

One of the distinctive features of Baroque music is the basso continuo, a constant accompaniment provided by instruments such as the harpsichord, organ, or cello. Musicians who played the basso continuo often had only a written bass line and numeric figures indicating the chords, leaving them the freedom to improvise the harmonic accompaniment.

Many composers from this period are known to have improvised in their works. Johann Sebastian Bach, in addition to being a prolific composer, was a formidable keyboardist and violinist. He was said to be able to improvise intricate fugues on the harpsichord or organ with astonishing ease. Georg Friedrich Handel, another

giant of the Baroque period, was known for his improvisational skills, especially on the harpsichord. During his opera performances, he was known to improvise instrumental interludes based on the opera's themes.

Concepts of Spontaneity and Expression

Improvisation was seen as a means to express spontaneity and emotional intensity, key concepts of Baroque aesthetics. While written compositions provided a structure and framework, improvisation allowed musicians to inject freshness and immediate expressiveness.

Irish traditional music, with its deep roots and centuries-old history, has stood the test of time in part due to the vibrancy of improvisation. While the melodies themselves may date back centuries, every performance of a “tune” can feel fresh and unique due to the musicians’ wit and creativity.

Sessions, known as “seisi úns” in Gaelic, are informal gatherings of musicians who come together to share and play tunes in often public settings, like pubs or private homes. While there are standard and popular tunes that many musicians know, the interpretation of these tunes can greatly vary from one musician to another and from one session to the next.

A distinctive feature of improvisation in Irish traditional music is ornamentation. These are small embellishments or variations that a musician might add to a melody to make it their own. There might be “rolls”, “triplets”, “cuts”, and “slides”, among others, that enrich the tune and give a particular flavor to each rendition.

A fundamental part of sessions is the non-verbal communication among musicians. Since there’s usually no designated “leader” or written scores to follow, musicians rely on visual and auditory cues to coordinate among themselves, especially when deciding to change a tune or when introducing variations.

Flamenco, with its intense vibes and pulsating rhythm, is a manifestation of Andalusian culture and soul. This art form, evoking images of passionate dancers, virtuoso guitarists, and singers with piercing voices, is steeped in improvisation, making each performance a unique and unforgettable experience.

The cante, or flamenco singing, is often the most emotional and profound part of a performance. It represents the voice of the soul, expressing feelings of joy, sadness, longing, and pain. While there are many traditional forms and structures of cante, improvisation is key. The singer might modify phrases, extend certain lines, or change intensity based on their mood or the audience’s reaction. This makes the cante a continuous dialogue between the artist and the listener, with the voice flowing freely, following the emotions of the moment.

Flamenco guitar isn’t just accompaniment; it’s a full-fledged protagonist. Guitarists use a range of unique techniques, like rasgueado (fast strumming with the fingers) and picado (rapidly plucked notes), to create a rich and intricate soundscape. While there are traditional chord progressions and falsetas (musical phrases) that guitarists might follow, there’s also ample room for improvisation. This freedom allows the guitarist to respond to the singer, dancer, or even the audience, creating a dynamic dialogue between the artists.

The beautiful aspect of improvisation in flamenco is its interactive nature. Every component—cante, guitar, and dance—responds to the others, in a constant game of call and response. The dancer might introduce a new step or rhythm, to which the guitarist and singer will react. This non-verbal communication is at the heart of improvisation in flamenco and represents the deep connection between the artists.

In Indian classical music, with its deep-rooted Hindustani and Carnatic traditions, there is a vast universe of expression and complexity. Improvisation plays a pivotal role in both traditions, making each performance a unique and often spiritual experience.

First and foremost, it's essential to understand the nature of the raga. A raga is not just a musical scale, but rather a set of notes with specific rules and characteristics on how they can be played and combined. Each raga has an ambiance or feeling (*rasa*) associated with it, which the musician aims to evoke during a performance.

The Alap (in the Hindustani tradition) or Alapana (in the Carnatic tradition) is the introductory phase of a performance. This section focuses on the slow, meditative exploration of the raga, devoid of rhythm. Here, the musician gradually unveils the raga, note by note, showcasing its peculiarities and nuances. This phase can be likened to a painter sketching the outlines of an image before filling it with color.

Following the Alap in Hindustani music is the Jor, which introduces a pulsating, rhythmic sense, but without a fixed beat. The Jhala concludes this section, characterized by rapid rhythm and repetitive note play.

After the Alapana, the Carnatic tradition often features the Tanam, a rhythmic and melodic interpolation that still retains some improvisational freedom.

While the Alap or Alapana is without rhythm, the subsequent sections of a performance often introduce a drum like the tabla (in the Hindustani tradition) or the mridangam (in the Carnatic tradition). This accompanies the melody and provides a rhythmic foundation for further improvisations.

As the performance progresses, singers and instrumentalists often perform improvised sequences called taans in the Hindustani tradition and swaras in the Carnatic. These are rapid, intricate combinations of notes showcasing the musician's technical prowess and innovation.

And here we arrive at a type of music closer to young people and more in tune with their world: jazz.

Jazz is known for its deep roots in improvisation. From its birth to its contemporary developments, improvisation remains one of the central aspects of this art form. Various improvisational techniques have been developed and perfected by jazz musicians over time. Here are some of the main techniques and concepts associated with jazz improvisation.

Motivic development is a foundational principle in musical composition and is especially relevant in jazz, where improvisation plays a central role. In jazz, musicians often take a motif and subject it to various transformations through improvisation, making each performance unique. Here's a more detailed analysis with well-known musical examples along with some types of jazz improvisation helpful for teaching listening:

Repetitions: The motif can be repeated as it is, providing a familiar base for the listener.

Example: The famous song "So What" by Miles Davis starts with a distinctive motif that is then repeated.

Rhythmic variations: The original rhythm of the motif can be altered by extending, shortening, or adding syncopations and other rhythms.

Example: Thelonious Monk was known for his rhythmic variations, as can be heard in songs like "Blue Monk".

Melodic extensions: Here, the original motif is extended by adding new notes or phrases.

Example: In "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane, the main motif is extended and developed in complex ways throughout the piece.

Compression: The motif can be shortened, retaining only its most essential parts.

Example: John Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things" features some segments where the main theme is shortened during improvisation.

Inversion: The motif is played backward.

Though not strictly jazz, the inversion technique has been used by many classical composers like Johann Sebastian Bach in his "Fugues". In jazz, rhythmic inversions are more common than melodic ones.

Other modifications: These might include harmonic changes, modulations to different keys, or even distorting the motif until it becomes almost unrecognizable.

Example: Bill Evans, with his sensitivity for harmony, often re-harmonized melodies or modulated them to different keys during improvisation, as can be heard in his work on songs like “Autumn Leaves”.

To truly understand motivic development in jazz, it’s useful to listen to live recordings or extended improvisations, where musicians have the freedom to explore and develop motifs in real-time. Albums like “Kind of Blue” by Miles Davis or “A Love Supreme” by John Coltrane are great starting points to listen to jazz masters at work with these concepts.

“Call and Response” is a hallmark of many musical traditions, from African work songs to American gospel churches. In jazz, this technique has deep roots and can be heard in many styles, from blues to bebop and beyond.

The “call” is usually a clear and distinctive melodic or rhythmic phrase, while the “response” can be a repetition, a variation, or a contrasting reply. This interaction creates a musical conversation that adds life and dynamics to the performance.

Examples of “Call and Response” in jazz music:

Louis Armstrong—“West End Blues”: Armstrong’s famous opening solo is followed by a clarinet response and so on. This is a classic example of call and response between two soloists.

Reduction of Improvisation

With the advent of the Classical and then Romantic period, the importance of improvisation in European “cultivated” music gradually decreased. Composition became more structured and prescriptive, and the freedom previously given to musicians to improvise was reduced.

Duke Ellington—“It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got That Swing)”: The voice introduces the theme, which is then answered by the brass section. This exchange between voice and brass continues throughout the song.

Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane in “Miles Davis’ Kind of Blue”: In the track “Freddie Freeloader”, there are moments where Adderley (alto sax) and Coltrane (tenor sax) exchange brief phrases in an example of call and response.

B.B. King—“The Thrill is Gone”: Although it’s more blues than jazz, B.B. King often used his voice to “call” and his guitar, Lucille, to “respond”, creating a deep conversation between voice and instrument.

Charles Mingus—“Haitian Fight Song”: Mingus plays an aggressive bass line which is then answered by the brass section, creating palpable tension through the call and response technique.

Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker: During their collaborations in bebop, it was common for them to play with the call and response technique, quickly exchanging complex phrases and responding to each other.

The “Call and Response” is not just a technique, but also a representation of the communal and dialogic nature of jazz. It invites interaction and conversation, which is at the heart of jazz improvisation and its cultural history.

Modal jazz marked a significant departure from the predominant bebop style that preceded it. While bebop focused on rapid and complex chord progressions that musicians improvised over, modal jazz proposed a different approach, reducing harmonic complexity and focusing instead on scales and modes as the basis for improvisation.

Origins of Modal Jazz

The interest in using modes in jazz began in the 1950s. Musicians like George Russell started exploring the idea of improvising over extended scales or modes rather than specific chord progressions. Russell also wrote an influential book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, which explored these ideas.

“Kind of Blue” and the Rise of Modal Jazz

In 1959, Miles Davis released “Kind of Blue”, which is often cited as the archetype of the modal jazz album. Davis and his collaborators (including John Coltrane and Bill Evans) used specific modes as the basis for improvisation rather than traditional chord progressions.

Examples From “Kind of Blue”

“So What”: Based on the Dorian mode, the song has two sections. The first is in D Dorian and the second in E flat Dorian, offering a clear example of how modal jazz works in practice.

“Flamenco Sketches”: This track uses a series of five different scales, and each soloist can improvise freely on each scale for any desired length of time before moving on to the next.

Other Examples of Modal Jazz

After the success of “Kind of Blue”, many other musicians began experimenting with modal jazz.

John Coltrane—“My Favorite Things”: Although it’s a melody from a popular song, Coltrane transforms it into a long modal jam, mainly leveraging the Dorian mode.

Herbie Hancock—“Maiden Voyage”: Each of the compositions on this album is built around a specific mode or scale, creating distinctive sonic environments for improvisation.

Wayne Shorter—“Footprints”: Even though it has some chord changes, Shorter’s melody and solos are deeply rooted in the modal sensibility.

Modal jazz offered musicians a new freedom and direction. Unbound by traditional chord progressions, soloists had a broader canvas on which to paint their ideas, leading to fresh and innovative sonic explorations. This period also marked a fusion between jazz and other musical traditions, like Indian and African music, which were intrinsically modal in nature.

Bebop Harmonization

The harmonization of bebop marked a significant development in the history of jazz. Unlike earlier styles like swing, which tended to focus on simple, danceable melodies, bebop prioritized complexity and virtuosity, putting the musician’s improvisational abilities at the forefront.

Complex Chord Progressions: Bebop often used chord progressions derived from the circle of fifths but with additions, alterations, and chord substitutions to create increased tension and resolution.

Chromatic Passages: Bebop musicians inserted chromatic notes into their melodic lines, often as passing notes, to create more sinuous and unpredictable lines.

Use of Arpeggios: An arpeggio is a technique of playing the notes of a chord in succession (and not simultaneously). Bebop musicians often used arpeggios to outline the harmonic structure of the music.

Outside Playing: This involves playing notes that are outside the current key or chord, creating a feeling of tension. This tension is then resolved by returning to notes within the chord or key.

Pentatonics and Exotic Scales: Many jazz musicians incorporate pentatonic scales and other “exotic” scales into their improvisations to create unique colors and sounds.

Rhythmic Figures: Improvisation in jazz is not just about the notes but also about rhythm. Musicians often play with rhythmic figures, syncopating and accenting in unexpected ways.

Interplay: This refers to the interaction between musicians, where improvisation becomes a conversation.

Conclusion

Jazz, with its deep roots and its historical ability to adapt and evolve, along with other forms of improvised music, represents an invaluable resource for music education. Introducing these musical forms into the curriculum can offer students a unique and dynamic approach to learning, not only developing their technical skills but also their listening, interpretation, and collaborative abilities. In an ever-evolving world, it is essential that music education also adapts, and the incorporation of jazz and improvised music into the educational process is a step forward in this direction.

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