

Influence of Stimulus Induced Imagery on the Process of Improvising Freely

Several well-known musicians have claimed that using conscious mental imagery has improved their ability to perform. For some, mental practice is their everyday routine. Among many others, pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin has said that “often the most important work is done apart from the piano”. Miles Davis suggests to “play what you hear rather than what you know.” Some well-known pedagogical books also recommend using mental imagery. Heinrich Neuhaus' book “The Art of Piano Playing” considers the mental artistic image as the most crucial part of creating an interpretation. Concepts on how to benefit from imagery were among others created by Carl Leimer, Walter Gieseking and Chuan C. Chang.

The ideas mentioned above have inspired Jaak Sikk for a while. He has become an active practitioner of conscious mental imagery as a pianist, improviser, researcher and teacher at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater. The research question, for going deeper with the subject is ‘How does the conscious use of mental imagery influence the process of improvising freely?’

Sikk's doctoral research combines scientific experiment based statistical information with the descriptions, derived from the personal experience that he obtained during his doctoral performances and their preparation process. Sikk carried out a scientific experiment in Italy, Lecce. In the frames of this experiment, thirteen participants were divided into two groups from which participants of group B used mental imagery before improvising. The group A was the control group. Five independent experts rated the performances of all participants and the data was later analysed using T-test and ANOVA test. There was a statistically significant difference in the ratings in dependence on the group of the musician.

In preparing for his own three doctoral concerts, for two months Sikk practised only mentally without any playing on the physical instrument. The first time he touched the real piano again was onstage. As the inspiration for preparing for concerts, he used stimuli from the music of Pierre Boulez, African tribal music, Lepo Sumera's compositions and mental practice of group improvisation.

The current presentation is the synthesis of the concepts above, the results of the scientific experiment, and ideas acquired during the doctoral performances and their preparation process.



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Jaak Sikk(PhD) is a researcher, improviser and a pianist. He teaches contemporary improvisation at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theater and music College of Tartu named after Heino Eller. His doctoral thesis (PhD obtained in 2020) “The Influence of Stimulus Induced Imagery on the Quality of Improvising Freely” researched the possibilities of using imagery in the process of improvising. In his teaching methodology, performances and research Jaak aims to

combine philosophical concepts, neuroscience and human psychology with practical actions and artistic experimentation. Jaak is an active performer in Estonia and abroad as an improviser. He participates in the artistic research project RAPP lab, which unites several artistic research centres of Europe. From December 2021 on Jaak is a member of Estonian Youth Academy of Sciences. He is the manager of the collaboration project “MuselA” between Estonian Academy of Music and Theater and Tallinn University of Technology which aims to create an contemporarily improvising AI.