

**The Social Experience of Collaborative Classical Improvisation:  
Group Flow, Wrong Notes and Magical Moments**

Collaborative improvisation is often defined as a social activity (Monson, 1996; Berliner, 1997; Wilson & MacDonald, 2012), and frequently linked with the psychological phenomenon of group flow (Sawyer, 2007). Associated with peak performance (Sawyer, 2003), enjoyment (Czikszentmihalyi, 1997), creativity (Sawyer, 2007) and empathy (Hart & Di Blasi, 2015), group flow seems a highly desirable experience.

In Western classical music, where, despite considerable evidence for historic solo improvisation practice (Gooley, 2018), improvisation was almost completely absent in 20th century performance, collaborative improvisation is rare, and an underdeveloped area of research. As such, no study has yet examined the presence of group flow in collaborative classical improvisation.

Sawyer (2017) describes group flow as ‘the magical moment when it all comes together... and the performers seem to be thinking with one mind.’ Yet, in my experience, improvisation is not always magic – and sometimes, it includes ‘wrong notes.’

How does group flow manifest in collaborative classical improvisation? And what does classical improvisers’ understanding of ‘wrong notes’ and ‘magical moments’ reveal about the nature of group flow?

In my doctoral research, I have improvised within two small ensembles over several cycles of performance preparation and practice. Using a framework of participatory action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) I have elicited our reflections on our improvisation processes and performances, and explored our understanding of group flow. My methods have included reflective discussion and video recall interviews, with data analysed using reflexive thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

Initial findings indicate the importance of balancing risk and vulnerability with ‘psychological safety’ (Edmondson, 1999) in an improvising group. Further, it seems that collaborative improvisation may create a less judgemental, more creative and nurturing learning environment, in contrast to debilitating performance anxiety and perfectionism that can arise in classical training and performance culture (Butković et.al., 2021; Blier-Carruthers, 2020).

This presentation will include video footage from the research study. This will be of interest to performers, improvisers, educators and anyone looking to develop their improvisation, creativity and ensemble skills.

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**Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana (Ljubljana, Slovenia)**

Parallel Session



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Lindsey Fillingham (flautist) is a doctoral student at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, carrying out performance-based research on group flow in collaborative classical improvisation. Lindsey co-founded improvising ensemble Ad-Lib, who has performed in several commissions for the Barbican and Guildhall, and was a member of soundSPARK wind quartet and Ashdown Duo, performing for Musicians in Hospitals and Care. She has lead improvisation workshops at the University of Cape Town and City Literary Institute. Conference presentations include EPARM (2021), RNCM's Hub for Artistic Research in Performance and GSMD's Reflective Conservatoire. Lindsey studied performance in Cape Town (UCT), Stockholm (KMH) and Manchester (RNCM). She has played with the likes of the Hallé, the Cape Philharmonic, and Orchestra of the Swan in venues including the Royal Albert and Bridgewater Halls and St Martin-in-the-Fields. Based in Lancashire (UK), Lindsey particularly enjoys improvising new songs with her two young daughters.

