

'We can do it too!' Small-group improvisation in classical music

Small-group improvisation in a classical music context is a rare but growing practice and an under-explored area of research. Historic sources reveal a prevalence of individual improvisation practice, but scarcely any group improvisation. Several research papers have advocated for improvisation training in the conservatoire, citing potential benefits for musicians and audiences. This raises the question of how small ensembles might improvise in ways that reflect the classical music genre, whilst creating new processes and products. Drawing on performance studies and social science approaches, this research aims to articulate insights into the processes and products of small groups of classical musicians, including the process of group formation from individual musicians, as they develop and perform improvisation.

In a pilot PhD study, as artist-researcher in a trio of improvising musicians, I used practice-based participatory action research as a framework from which to elicit our reflections over several months of development, including rehearsals and performances. A multi-methods approach was adopted that included reflective discussion, video recall and practice diaries. In this presentation, thematic analysis of this data is illustrated with three video examples, drawn from contrasting longitudinal points in the trio's development. These examples are discussed in relation to literature and overall findings from coded data, which shed new light on group improvisation processes.

Initial findings suggest that improvisational processes and products are shaped by emotional and personal factors - including motivations, conflicts, performance experiences and beliefs - and external factors, including training, mentors, artists and audiences. A process of group bonding occurs in which group aims and values are established. Pre-planned and in-the-moment improvisational strategies and approaches emerge, regarding group communication, musical and structural decisions and state of mind.

The study further suggests that improvisation could be a means of decreasing performance-related anxiety and increasing classical musicians' sense of freedom and self-expression relating to performances of improvisation and repertoire. This research will be of interest to musicians, researchers, educators and anyone looking to develop improvisational skills.



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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 classical improvisation. She has lead improvisation workshops and courses at the University of Cape Town, City Literary Institute and the Barbican. Conference presentations include RNCM's Hub for Artistic Research in Performance and GSMD's Reflective Conservatoire. Lindsey studied performance in Cape Town (UCT), Stockholm (KMH), Manchester (RNCM), and privately with Kate Hill (RAM). 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. Performance highlights include soloist with the Johannesburg Philharmonic, and broadcasting for BBC's Songs of Praise and Sunday Worship. Lindsey the leader of improvising ensemble Ad-Lib and a member of soundSPARK wind quartet and Ashdown Duo, who perform on the Musicians in Hospitals and Care scheme.