

Love at first sound: engaging with Western classical concert audiences through improvisation

This performance is a demonstration of the type of outcomes rising from a series of four concerts and related audience research of my doctorate project on classical improvisation and audience engagement. In the first part of this performance, you will hear a song, *Mausfallensprüchlein*, “*The Mousers Magic Verses*” by Hugo Wolf (1822, text by Eduard Mörike). As a way to illustrate the improvisatory approach, this song is turned into a series of songs by applying the structure of “theme and variations”. First performed as written, with original composition as “theme”, it will then be improvised into a trio (first variation) and followed by subsequent improvised variations, in which the elements of the theme are developed further and further. This song is a whimsical little piece, composed to a children’s poem during Wolf’s early years, and we contribute to its character through imagining the various scenarios in which this comedic text can take place. In the second part of the performance, a group of chamber musicians will present themselves as improvisors-for-hire and create short pieces according to themes and suggestions from audience members.

I came to this project in 2016 as a cellist in my early career, hungry for understanding and expanding those most magical, intimate moments experienced with audiences in concert. Whenever spontaneity or a higher level of personal risk-taking were present, for example through experimenting with improvisation, audiences seemed to respond with similarly more spontaneous and relationally engaged reactions. We know that many elements of Western classical concerts have changed vastly from the time much of this music was composed and first performed, particularly through the disappearing of improvisation practices and the related spontaneous creativity and risk-taking. This, together with evidence regarding the position of improvisation in other music cultures and its impact on both performers’ and audience’s engagement (Nettl and Solis, 2009; Higgins, 2012; Dolan et al., 2018) brought me to question whether there might be something for both performers and audiences to gain through re-introducing improvisation to classical concerts. The questions this performance engages with are: If I, from within the present-day Western classical concert tradition, add improvisation to concert programmes, how would it affect audience engagement? As improvisation is known as an intrinsically engaging activity for those participating in it (McPherson et al., 2014; Pinho et al., 2014; Lopata, Nowicki and Joannis, 2017), how does the engagement of performers change when improvisation is a part of the performance, and is that a contributing factor in audience’s engagement? A sub-question that follows, what and how can I observe about the inter-relations between audiences’ and performers’ engagement?

The investigation has been carried out by designing, rehearsing and performing four different concert programs in a reflective, autoethnographic narrative framework and by including audience research components to these concerts. This has meant placing myself in a continuous process of reconciling my past non-improvisatory knowledge of the Western classical music tradition and repertoire with the improvisatory approach. I have done this by identifying, developing and testing improvisatory practices within and related to Western classical music tradition and by gathering audience feedback through questionnaires, interviews and a focus group. The purpose of this feedback has been to inform the artistic practice and give indication of the concert experience of audience members, particularly their emotional and relational engagement at different points of the programme. This performance demonstrates how the improvisational approach can be applied to both repertoire and free fantasy, and how it impacts upon the development of engagement of both performers and audience members as impulses are given and received in real time.



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Pauliina Haustein is a multitasker of music, a performing, improvising and researching cellist. After graduating from Sibelius-Academy, Helsinki, she has performed across Europe and North America and resided in Los Angeles, London, Helsinki and Turku, Finland. She has established herself as a sought-after cellist, orchestral player, chamber musician and teacher. Having always approached her performing activities with a special heart for improvisation and desire to connect with audiences, Haustein started her doctorate studies on

classical improvisation and audience engagement at Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 2016 with Prof. David Dolan, Prof. John Sloboda and Adrian Brendel as her supervisors. She subsequently became grant recipient of Kone and Wihuri Foundations, who fully funded her research project. Haustein became mother to twin girls in 2018 and has found her improvisation training to be put to excellent use in this role as well. She plays an 1898 Emil Hjorth cello.

[LINK TO THE PERFORMANCE](#)