

**Fifteen theses on the topic**  
**“(Free) Improvisation in Reflection Mode”**  
**Georg Ruby / 10 Nov 2024**

Musical improvisation is an aspect of the ability which is integrated into human action to create diverse solutions spontaneously. As modern brain research shows, in this creative process *the involuntary* is always faster and more decisive than *the conscious*. On the other hand, it is always interesting to find out how this *pre-perception*, this default setting, can be utilized for other creative processes, including musical improvisation. In which way is it possible to add a process of *forethought* to this *pre-perception*, so that these two states enrich each other? It is well known that working permanently and systematically on and with involuntary processes activates new *networks of experience*, reactivates existing experience, *recontextualizes* it and, thus, produces something unexpected. New things are created by *re-networking* and *recombining* what has already been known and heard.

(Musical) learning in improvisation also arises from the re-networking of what has been played before. Every episode of our experience - the music we have heard up to that point, whether improvised or not, as well as the music we have produced up to that point - is stored within us and can be called up depending on the situation. *Hepp's law*: “Cells that fire together spin a web with each other, when they are (then again) networked, they also fire together (smell, sound, etc).”

The following fifteen theses on the subject “(Free) Improvisation in Reflection Mode” are intended to describe the mixture of arbitrary and involuntary processes at the level of musical creation and to illustrate their effects in the area of concrete improvisation processes.

01. The ability to improvise musically is often portrayed as a talent that is only reserved for very specific individuals and could not be learned, but was apparently genetic. It manifested itself in the structuring of the improviser's activity without any element of “planning”, “conscious decisions” or “active intervention”.

02. In contrast to this misconception (see #01), the apparent improvisational instinct, the situation-related actualization of possibilities in improvisation, presents itself as a mode of spontaneous selection within the improvisational process. It is not only an unconscious, emotionally driven implementation of improvisational parameters, but is also fed by the sum of everything that has been musically learned so far. Due to this sum of all previous successful or less successful musical experiences and improvisations, their selected parameters are then implemented in the improvisation process as

conscious or reactive variation, not so much as an unprocessed idea, but brought about in an active manner.

03. The basis of (free) improvisation is a highly energetic, uninterrupted auto-scan of the improvising musician during his playing. During this creative process, his state of mind, his reservoir of energy, as well as an open, intensive perception in the areas of hearing, feeling and seeing are important.

04. A good improviser will of course always use his active auto-scan to compare the ideas that come to him in the second of practical performance with the parameters he has already played improvisationally in order to keep the quality of his music original and - even for himself, the improviser - surprising.

05. Therefore, improvising means choosing spontaneously from a reservoir of ideas. This also means that certain parameters can be spontaneously avoided or replaced, e.g. a sequence that presents itself in the flow of ideas, is pleasant in terms of fingering, but may have been played (too) often. Thus, the perception that an idea has been presented several times before can lead to its avoidance in a certain situation. This avoidance is also a selective technique of improvisational creativity, which can be consciously and structurally effective in spontaneous creative playing.

06. On the other hand, in another playing situation, structuring the flow of ideas can lead, for example, to the principled and situational realization and thus decision to present a (motif) idea as a sequence very often one after the other in order to create a magical rhythmic pull effect through this decision to repeat.

07. The art of (free) improvisation involves not only the perception of one's own playing ideas and reactions, but also a forced anticipation of the contributions of the other players. This (as yet) unperformed forerun, the musical pre-thinking or pre-perception appears almost more intense than the musical execution of an idea or sequence that is produced later, because it can be potentiated and energetically charged in every direction in the as yet unrealized utopia of playing.

08. In addition to the spontaneous *idea of the moment*, the level of thought and reflection also forms a basis for creation within a dialectical process of creation, selection and avoidance.

09. Thus, for example, the decision to **stop** playing for a certain section of the group improvisation at a certain stage, and to let the other musicians continue playing instead, is an active improvisation parameter that leads to a clear change in the impro-

visation process and the ensemble sound. This social dimension of improvisation within a musical group process sometimes produces in this way a even more radical change in the ensemble sound with the conscious non-playing than a more intensive or louder or more rhythmic playing.

10. Since one's own improvisational parameters are always composed of a reaction to the ideas and energy of the colleagues playing along - as mentioned above -, every good improviser will on the one hand spontaneously refer to these parameters (energy, motifs, dynamics, sounds), but on the other hand also very often consciously deal with them in the selection process, continuing and reflecting them back. These processes always correlate with each other in every improvisational situation. Therefore, all played, improvised musical idea parameters are always also a conscious offer of communication to the improvising, co-playing colleagues.

11. With an adequately high, trained attention, musical ideas within the (free) improvisation always emerge a brief moment, milliseconds before their possible execution, so that in addition to the general "spontaneity of the moment", a further, second spontaneity level, that of the *auto-scan of supervision* is possible and necessary in reacting to these ideas/inspirations and their selection.

12. The spontaneous generation of ideas almost always presents several patterns at the same time, among which a (quite conscious) spontaneous selection and thus a preference for and sometimes creative avoidance of idea material takes place.

13. If successful, the course of these processes signifies a successful collaboration, a combination of musical spontaneity, the *inspiration of the moment* on the one hand, and active, deliberate intervention in the improvisational structure on the other. These processes are dependent on the energy of the moment, the players' openness during the musical-social process, on opening up to external and internal (not only acoustic) influences and perceiving them as intensively as possible. Many parameters in the execution's quality of these process contents are easy to train and place the perfection of the synchronous combination and awareness of these parameters in first place.

14. The linear awareness of one's own improvisational structures produces a constant interactive exchange of roles among the players, but also a constant exchange of roles with the listening audience, as seen from the players' perspective. The ability to perform a virtual, constantly reflective change of position between the role of the active musician and that of the listeners, to always spontaneously and consciously mirror the presentation of one's own material from several perspectives at the same time, is a basic prerequisite for the success of a successful and original improvisation. The time levels for these processes are in the range of milliseconds.

15. A complex multiple awareness during the improvisation and interaction process consists of simultaneous playing/invention **and** intensive perception:

- listening to and reflecting on one's own ideas/flow of energy,
- listening to and reflecting on the flow of ideas/energy of fellow improvisers,
- the atmospheric participation of the audience,
- the spatial mood and aura of the concert room,
- the improvisation already played as an active or avoidance pattern in relation to the further improvisation section and/or the role within the ensemble,
- the constant change from an equal playing style within the ensemble to a short-term, active leading role in the zone of hearing, seeing and feeling.

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