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# **SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL**

This Honors thesis entitled

**“A Musical Exploration of ‘Yes, And...’:  
History and Applications of Free Musical Improvisation for  
College Students”**

written by

**Amy Lytle**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Date

May 9, 2019

A Musical Exploration of 'Yes, And...':  
History and Applications of Free Musical Improvisation for College Students

By Amy Lytle

## *Introduction*

As music majors at universities, students often spend hours a day focused on improving their musical skills. They work on advancing on their instruments, further understanding advanced music theory, memorizing entire works for music history exams, improving their artistic interpretation, increasing their precision, and more. They spend so much time focusing on how much they need to improve while not appreciating where they currently are in their skills or the application of those skills.

It does not have to be this way.

I was inspired to further study free improvisation because I learned firsthand how truly freeing it can be for musicians. In the summer of 2016, I spent a week at a music conference with a group called the Creative Motion Alliance. I had a bad day and took an hour to be by myself, but one of the faculty members, Harold McKinney, came along and had me follow him to the recital hall of our host university. We sat on the stage and improvised together for that full hour. It started simply, but slowly progressed to be interesting, complex, very real music. I felt better afterwards, and it pushed me musically, creatively, and intellectually. I felt a release and a freedom that I had never felt in music, and it reminded me of the joy there can be in music that I had been missing after years of focusing solely on the things I was doing wrong. I felt like a different artist when I left that hall, and that is when I knew I needed to devote time to studying and understanding improvisation.

While there are professors scattered throughout the United States who teach musical improvisation classes, some research exists on the functions and benefits of musical improvisation, and there are certainly historical accounts (mostly in the context of jazz), not much information is widely available on the academic uses and benefits or the professional applications of free improvisation. To many, musical improvisation does not seem like a legitimate way to create art music; the idea abounds in academia and the world of professional musicians that if it is not pre-composed or notated on a page, it is not “real music.” However, many of those who discredit musical improvisation on the surface might also say it is too difficult, that they would not dare to improvise, and let other musicians do improvisation. The reality is, improvisation can be easy if the practice is, well, practiced; just like any other skill in music, it must be rehearsed in order to create better accuracy, confidence, and ease. Additionally, practicing improvisation allows one to flex all their acquired musical skills at once while having to think quickly and creatively, often working with other musicians, making it one of the best ways to help students improve in many areas of their musical study.

In theatrical improvisation, which is a separate practice from musical improvisation but is conceptually similar and is generally less stigmatized in its field, a widely-known, foundational concept is the “Yes, and...” If you are having a conversation with someone and they say, “Remember that time we went down to the farm and Ol’ Jimmy was milking those almonds?” you cannot say, “Nope, don’t remember,” or, “That’s not what happened!” because it stops the action dead in its tracks, the scene is over, and suddenly Ol’ Jimmy milking almonds at the farm seems absurd, boring, and not at all funny. You have to “say yes” and then build on the idea by adding your own idea, replying something like, “Oh yeah, and then they kicked him in the face! Those sure were some angry almonds. Poor Ol’ Jimmy.”

The same concept exists in musical improvisation with a group; if you are collaborating with another musician on a piece composed in the moment, it does not benefit either of you to try to fight for control of the piece or to let the other take complete lead. There is a balance that must be had in cohesive, flowing improvised music by a group which involves “saying yes” to musical ideas and then adding to those ideas.

Whether improvising in a group or alone, a small or large ensemble, or playing an instrument that can sound multiple notes or a single note at once, the same basic “rules” apply, as well as the same concentration, listening skills, and allowance for the music to flow.

Musical-free improvisation is a creative and unique performance style that can be used as an academic tool to help shape the musicality of music students, especially regarding artistic expression, performance quality, and confidence levels. Additionally, understanding the history, past uses, and other current genres of improvisation is necessary to comprehend the differences, development, and present-day applications of free improvisation.

## *Improvisation Through Time*

Before there was musical notation, or written word of any kind, there was music. Crude instruments have been dated back far before the first known written script. Archaeologists have found flutes made of bone approximated to be between 42,000 and 43,000 years old, while the oldest known written language, Sumerian cuneiform is dated to be only 5,000 years old.<sup>1</sup> That means up to 38,000 years of unrecorded music history exists, and until true musical notation was created, music was created without working off of a page.

In ancient times, music was used for ceremonies and rituals, passed down aurally through generations. Music existed outside of those religious events, though, and drums and flutes were made with the purpose of enjoyment, slowly becoming more ornate and decorated over centuries. Archaic folk music did not just come into existence—it had to be created, and if it was not created by writing notes on a page, it was created in the moment through experimentation. From its very first occurrence, music existed solely as improvisation. That origin is the vital, grounding root to the essence of music, even as we practice it today.

In early church music, improvisation was an expectation. From Gregorian chant to complex organ solos, church musicians rarely worked from scores, either memorizing, fully improvising, or building off of a foundational notated figured bass in improvisation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Earliest Music Instruments Found.” BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-18196349>, (May 25, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton, “The Essential Role of Improvisation in Musical Performance,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58, no. 2 (2000): 143

“Improvisation was a standard aspect of both musical training and performance until comparatively recently,” according to Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton of Florida Atlantic University.<sup>3</sup> Esteemed composers such as Mozart and Beethoven could improvise astounding, flourishing works—it was even part of auditions for teachers and interviews for jobs. Outside of the church, even opera included improvisational sections. Improvisation was not just for one type of musician, but keyboard players, instrumentalists, and vocalists all had space to improvise, whether it be in a basso continuo type ensemble or in the cadenza section of an opera or concerto.

We see a gradual shift away from improvisatory performance entering the Romantic era of music. Composers became more particular with their cadenzas or wrote in “suggested” material. The rise of the formal concert hall created a new demand and grander scale for music performance. Additionally, new music that suited the modern tastes of the public became less predictable and more intrinsically complex and varied. As a musician in the Baroque or Classical period, one was expected to be able to improvise well, but only on the current musical stylings; there was a formula for form structure, articulation, and tonality, and if that formula was followed, the improvisation was successful. However, as music preservation improved and the public’s ear became inclined to more complicated music, musicians were expected to be able to play centuries’ worth of musical variety, including the stylings of current composers each with unique and separate voices: there was no longer one formula to follow, but dozens or hundreds.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, being a versatile musician became more important than being a musician able to improvise in a world with established musical scores from several centuries of music demanding to be performed. If a violinist could play Bach, Beethoven, and

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<sup>3</sup> Gould and Keaton, “The Essential Role,” 143.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Brahms beautifully and accurately, they were far more valuable to a symphony orchestra than one who could improvise well.

Unfortunately, with such heavy reliance on established scores and such high reverence for those written mostly by deceased composers, we become staunch and stiff aiming only for the perceived stylistic perfection of the ages and thus lose the connection to music's origin and its true essence: play. We *play* music. Stephen Nachmanovitch makes this distinction: "'Play' is different from 'game.' Play is the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy. Game is an activity defined by a set of rules...Play is an attitude, a spirit, a way of doing things."<sup>5</sup> Bert Konowitz states on a similar track: "The joy of *making music*... should infuse every step of musical growth, from the most primitive utterances to highly skilled activity."<sup>6</sup>

In the 1900s, there was a resurgence of improvisation with a new set of rules—a totally different sound and completely new formula: ragtime. From ragtime stemmed the beginnings of jazz, which over several decades split into many genres itself that varied in their usage of improvisation, from big band (which relied heavily on reading music) and bebop (which was mostly improvisation). The major breakout artists of jazz felt the pull back into free creativity and made the space to perform it. Kenny Werner says in his book *Effortless Mastery* while discussing the rise of jazz, "The world is made up of two kinds of people: the ones who play the right stuff, and the ones who are *looking* for the right stuff to play! Miles Davis was always making the next right note out of the last wrong note."<sup>7</sup> With one foot in the realm of art music and one in the popular, jazz became a musical bridge between styles and types of performers,

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: The Power of Improvisation in Life and the Arts*, (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, ; New York : St. Martins Press, 1990), 43.

<sup>6</sup> Bert Konowitz, *Music Improvisation as a Classroom Method: A New Approach to Teaching Music*, (New York: Alfred Publishers, 1973), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Kenny Werner, *Effortless Master: Liberating the Master Musician Within*, (New Albany, IN: Jamey Aebersold Jazz, 1996), 89.

creating a group of improvisatory-literate musicians. However, jazz certainly has its structure and rules, and there are only so many types of performers who can really participate and succeed in jazz.

Because we live in a modern world with an extensive repertoire, which we do love and want to play and perform to the best of our abilities, we cannot abandon the desire to play music precisely and beautifully. However, in order to play precisely and beautifully, we must do so with “the spirit of play,” and one can most easily embrace this spirit through improvisation.

### *Academic Applications of Musical Improvisation*

*“Improvisation is the spontaneous act of organizing, varying, creating, and performing. For the most part, teachers have thought of improvisation as a specialized musical skill requiring a unique background and/or a very special set of skills. There is clear and overwhelming evidence that these attitudes are unfounded. Musical improvisation is not a mystical, inexplicable phenomenon reserved for an exclusive few. It is a technique of creation and performance which is developed as skills are reduced to seemingly second nature. You can learn to improvise on some musical ‘instrument’ and subsequently teach the skills to your students, whatever their age, grade or level.”*

*-Bert Konowitz, *Music Improvisation as a Classroom Method*<sup>8</sup>*

The seeming illegitimacy of “making up” music is a major deterrent for including improvisation in syllabi. In the academic music realm where students pay thousands of dollars annually to be taught to play Chopin and Debussy, many educators—admittedly fairly—view spending class or lesson time on improvisation as a waste of the students’ valuable and expensive time. While it will certainly not help a student to only improvise when they want to

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<sup>8</sup> Konowitz, *Music Improvisation*, 1.

learn Debussy, it will ultimately not help them to hammer in dictated dynamics and articulation if they are unable to feel it and find it in the music for themselves.

In improvisation, “lack of conscious plan does not mean that our work is random or arbitrary.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, it is impossible for humans to do something random; every action we take is a product of what has happened to us or what we have done before. As Stephen Nachmanovitch states in *Free Play*, “As living, patterned beings, we are incapable of producing anything random...An improviser does not operate from a formless vacuum, but from three billion years of organic evolution; all that we were is encoded somewhere in us.”<sup>10</sup> Gould and Keaton state in their essay, “...improvisation is logically independent of both spontaneity and randomness, even if some improvised performances include both.”<sup>11</sup> Improvisation can have elements of spontaneity and randomness, but it can take place in any and all performances, prepared, planned, or otherwise.

“Improvisation is considered here as a significant tool for experimenting, probing, inquiring, and discovering,” Bert Konowitz explains in *Music Improvisation as a Classroom Method*.<sup>12</sup> “Improvisational experiences represent a way for the student to test complex ideas at the level at which he can perform, control, and evaluate.”<sup>13</sup> This means that improvisation allows students an opportunity to utilize the things they are learning about, as simple or complex as they may be (such as key modulation, asymmetrical time signatures, unusual modes), and experiment with them and find out hands on how they work. Using improvisational exercises with parameters connecting to the subject material allows students to experience the way the concept works by applying it instead of only looking at a theory worksheet or knowing what a certain

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<sup>9</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> Gould and Keaton, “The Essential Role,” 148.

<sup>12</sup> Konowitz, *Music Improvisation*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

chord sounds like. Analyzing Debussy's score for *La Cathédrale Engloutie* can show a student a basic understanding of a certain type of patterned modulation, but when they can improvise in that kind of modulation pattern, the concept is embedded in the student's understanding in the most full way possible.

We should not hold such high reverence to the established composers of old without holding ourselves to the same level of reverence. One such, albeit more modern, established composer, Arnold Schoenberg, said, "Composing is a slowed-down improvisation; often one cannot write fast enough to keep up with the stream of ideas."<sup>14</sup> Any musician is capable of composition and improvisation and can improve through practice. The composers of old were not gods, but humans just like us who practiced and honed their skills to excel in composition.

There is a false dichotomy in music thanks to the phrase "practice makes perfect:"

[This phrase] carries with it some subtle and serious problems. We think of practice as an activity done in a special context to prepare for performance or the 'real thing.' But if we split practice from the real thing, neither one of them will be very real...No matter how expert we become, we need to continually relearn how to play with beginner's bow, beginner's breath, beginner's body. Thus we recover the innocence, the curiosity, the desire that impelled us to play in the first place. Thus we discover the necessary unity of practice and performance...Not only is practice necessary to art, it *is* art.<sup>15</sup>

If we treat practice like it does not matter, it will not because we will not be fully focused or invested. If we put performance on too high a pedestal, it will be unreachable and intimidating, impossible to perform well.

In modern music education, though, the perceived gap between practice and performance seems wide. The gap between a freshman piano major and Beethoven in composition or improvisation skills seems cavernous. The gap between the need to ensure that students are prepared for their exams for aural skills and theory and their inherent desire to play and create

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<sup>14</sup> Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, (New York : Philosophical Library : 1950), 98.

<sup>15</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 67-68.

with those very skills seems just as big. The instinct is to dig down, trying harder and longer to make everything work right: “Musicians are frequently trained to reduce uncertainties...uncertainty is the bane of precise ensemble playing.”<sup>16</sup> However, clinging harder to making things work inhibits ability to work efficiently and effectively. Truly, these gaps are not as deep and wide as they seem, and can be bridged with improvisation training.

There is another gap in music that seems much wider than it actually is: that between improvisation and prepared music. “Neither another performance of an improvisation nor a realization of a composer’s score will be qualitatively identical to its model in every respect, but it will approximate it.”<sup>17</sup> Gould and Keaton make the bold primary statement in their essay together, “...all musical performance, no matter how meticulously interpreted and no matter how specific the inscribed score, requires improvisation.”<sup>18</sup> Every practice session and performance is a new “real thing,” and so there will be differences in every new attempt at “the real thing.” If improvisation is an inherently required part of realizing a piece of music each time, improvisation must be something that students practice and become comfortable with.

Music teachers emphasize the importance of good technique (proper bowing, breath control, posture, agility, etc.) and all play vital roles in sound production and ability to perform virtuosic material. However, a musician does not decide to spend thousands of dollars and decades of their lives on training in music because they love a chunk of wood or metal, a bunch of keys, ligaments in their throats, or this thing called “technique;” musicians dedicate their lives to music because they love *music*. “To do anything artistically, you have to acquire technique, but you create *through* your technique and not *with* it.” Improvisation is yet another opportunity

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<sup>16</sup> David Borgo, *Sync or Swarm: Improvising Music in a Complex Age*, (New York: Continuum, 2007), 13.

<sup>17</sup> Gould and Keaton, “The Essential Role,” 145.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

for students to apply their learned technique by creating something entirely original, reigniting their joy for their study.

One of the main goals of this project is to bring the topic to my peers. Knowing firsthand the benefits of improvisation, I aimed to find an accessible way to get fellow students involved in work with it, which decidedly turned into a weekly workshop held on Friday afternoons. In turn, this workshop became a means to conduct research regarding improvisation training among college music students. The first and last sessions included a survey of their thoughts about their musicality and improvisation skills. Ideally, after regular attendance of the workshop, students would feel like they had experienced improvements and the benefits I had experienced (and suspected to be a consistent result of regular improvisation training), and ultimately become better and more confident musicians.

The first several weeks of the workshop involved laying a foundation of basic improvisational concepts and showing people how simple improvisation can really be. In the first session, we discussed what preconceptions people had about improvisation, what different ways it can manifest, and we did a large group exercise that introduced everyone to the practice. In this first group exercise, people were already inherently using improvisational skills without realizing it: they were listening to each other, responding to each other, and adding and building to the group's music with material that complemented what was already happening. In the next session, we discussed the concepts of mirroring (doing the same pattern or idea at the same time), reflecting (repeating a musical pattern or idea later), and what is often called "the third power."

I play with my partner; we listen to each other; we mirror each other; we connect with what we hear. He doesn't know where I'm going, I don't know where he's going, yet we anticipate, sense, lead, and follow each other. There is no agreed-on structure or measure, but once we have played for five seconds there is a structure, because we've started something... The work comes from neither one artist nor the other, even though our own idiosyncrasies and styles, the symptoms of our original natures, still exert their natural pull. Nor does the work come from a compromise or halfway point..., but from a third place that isn't necessarily like what either one of us would do individually. What comes is a revelation to both of us. There is a third, totally new style that pulls

on us. It is as though we have become a group organism that has its own nature and its own way of being, from a unique and unpredictable place which is the group personality or group brain.<sup>19</sup>

The idea of the “third power” can be unsettling for many, but it is really a phrase to capture the feeling of surrender to the music. It is like Michelangelo’s rumored technique in carving marble statues: he viewed his work as “releasing the sculpture” from within the marble that already existed, with or without him, rather than him carving a work of his own ideation out of a marble block. “Many improvisers discuss spiritual, ecstatic, or trancelike performance states. Some cite total mental involvement, while others describe a complete annihilation of all critical and rational faculties. Musicians stress performance goals ranging from complete relaxation or catharsis to a transcendental feeling of ego loss or collective consciousness.”<sup>20</sup> Musicians experience this third power in various ways, such as pure synchronicity or like they already know the music being created in the moment, but all feel it. When it is most noticeable is at the “second wind,” when a performer thinks they have run out of material or they are about to be done with an improvised piece, yet they cannot stop playing because the music “will not let them.”

My personal favorite example of this concept in action is a video of approximately five minutes of improvisation between Bobby McFerrin and Joey Blake, which I showed to my workshop participants.<sup>21</sup> The way that they trade leadership in the session, build off of each other’s motifs, shift between styles and keys and tempos, and the way they seem to almost trail off but both agree to end together perfectly exhibits what I believe to be exceptional improvisation. There are many ways to approach improvisation, and that is simply one, but it shows what needs to be shown to understand the possibilities of it.

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<sup>19</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 94-95.

<sup>20</sup> Borgo, *Sync or Swarm*, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Musicians Without Borders, “Joey Blake and Bobby McFerrin vocal improvisation,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6rsUD1qBCrk>, (February 2011)

Later sessions in the workshop were based mostly on certain parameters to stretch or find limits. Exercises included responding musically to poetry, using only a certain number of pitches in a piece, using only certain scales, using only found objects, and using conversation. We always reflected after each session what we noticed, what we liked, and what we wished had gone better or what we would have changed. It allowed for us to have a chance to really absorb and understand the work we were doing. There were often comments about moments of connection between two collaborators or when the music seemed to flow just right; there were also comments about frustration and a feeling of disconnect when collaborators were not in sync with each other or when multiple people felt they had to carry the entire piece. All discussion allowed us to pinpoint the parts that we felt were successful and the parts that were not and why.

In our final session, we reflected on the semester of workshops and what everyone felt they had gained from participating. Many mentioned how they liked the idea that there are no wrong notes. "As you improvise from an expanded consciousness, you discover that, in fact, *there are no wrong notes!* Appropriateness and correctness are products of the mind. Trying to live within those imaginary guidelines inhibits flow."<sup>22</sup> Many said that they liked the feeling of confidence they had gained, even if a piece was not going the direction they thought it would. Making the choice as a performer to commit to the piece and play it confidently, insisting it sounds the way it is supposed to sound, means it will succeed: "...if dissonant notes are played and the player embraces them as consonant, the listener will also hear them as consonant."<sup>23</sup> Additionally, many students in the workshop said that they learned how to better recover from mistakes and even benefit from them. "Mistakes are of incalculable value to us. There is first the value of mistakes as the raw material of learning. If we don't make mistakes, we are unlikely to

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<sup>22</sup> Werner, *Effortless Mastery*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*



make anything at all.”<sup>24</sup> Mistakes are a normal part of life and an inevitable part of making music, and sometimes they can be the best thing for us and for our work. “The power of mistakes enables us to reframe creative blocks and turn them around. Sometimes the very sin of omission or commission for which we’ve been kicking ourselves may be the seed of our best work.”<sup>25</sup>

Approximately thirty students attended the workshops I led at least once, but I only administered an end survey to those who attended at least twice and accepted responses from those who completed the end survey within a month of the end of the workshop; fifteen students completed both the beginning and end surveys in a timely manner. The results of the survey were overwhelmingly positive. Students were asked six questions both at the beginning and end of the workshop:

- 1) Do you think you are good at improvisation?
- 2) Do you think improvisation is something you can get better at, or is it inherent?
- 3) How would you rate your confidence as an improviser right now?
- 4) How would you rate your confidence in performances of prepared music?
- 5) How often do you feel defeated in the practice rooms?
- 6) What would you like to get out of this workshop?

Out of the students who completed both surveys, 66% either maintained the personal feeling that they are good at improvisation or believe they got better at improvisation, while 20% maintained they are good at improvising sometimes. 80% of students maintained or gained the belief that improvisation is definitely something people can get better at; 13% said some are more inclined to improvisation naturally but with training you can, indeed, improve, at least some. 66% of

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<sup>24</sup> Nachmanovitch, *Free Play*, 88.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

students saw improvement in their confidence in improvisation as well as performances of prepared music, while 20% maintained their confidence levels in both improvisation and performing prepared music. 53% of students saw improvement in their attitude towards practicing and ability to do well on a piece. Based on these statistics, more than half of participants reported positive results in all areas.

Interestingly, those who completed the survey online three or more weeks after the workshop had ended reported slightly less positive results. Additionally, those who attended the workshop sessions most consistently had significantly more positive results. I believe these two things show a direct correlation between frequent and consistent study in improvisation and improved musicality and confidence. Finally, the majority of students who reported regression in their personal beliefs of their abilities were first-year university students. A common saying I believe to be true (especially in the study of music, or any art) is that you do not know how much you do not know until you learn what you do not know. Essentially, young musicians go into college with a sense of false confidence because they do not realize how much practice and learning they truly have ahead of them; after studying for a semester, they lose that false confidence and can more realistically gauge where their skills are. There is no way to test or prove this, but considering the idea of false confidence, I believe a few students' answers were influenced by it.

The most staggering statistic, though, is that 100% of students reported that their goals for the workshop were achieved, and more. The most common goals were to gain confidence in improvisation and performance, to get more comfortable performing, to understand improvisation better, be more spontaneous, and have fun; every single person who completed the survey stated they experienced improvement towards their personal goals and more. Many

reported building lifelong friendships, finding freedom, gaining acceptance, becoming okay with making mistakes, and gaining confidence in all aspects of life. While having an admittedly small sample of students to survey, it is clear that improvisation can have positive benefits and make a large impact on students' lives, not just their musical abilities.

It might well be that the benefits of improvisational experience go beyond the goals normally established in a music instruction text. The demands of a constantly changing society in the daily life of every citizen suggest that adjustment, even survival, is increasingly dependent on the ability of the individual to be flexible adaptive, and spontaneous.<sup>26</sup>

Life is busy and bustling, especially for college students, especially those studying music, and especially in the technological age in which we live. Many of my workshop attendees told me that the workshop was their favorite part of the week or the only time they really had to relax and let go. Perhaps, in addition to being an incredible tool for music education, improvisation is an equally incredible tool for life.

### *Professional Applications of Musical Improvisation*

Improvisation is more than just a tool to improve one's skills for prepared performance. As was earlier stated, improvisation is a required part of all live musical experiences. It is more than a way to test out theory concepts or stretch imagined limits: it is a legitimate type of music performance in and of itself.

I had the opportunity to personally interview several improvising musicians of varying backgrounds, all of whom I met in various ways, about their experiences with the medium. They all had different stories and different paths in their musical training, but every one of them said

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<sup>26</sup> Konowitz, *Music Improvisation*, 2.

their first experience with improvisation was enlightening, almost addictive—much like my own experience. To me, consciously making improvised material for the first time was like finding the cure for burn-out. None of us had lost interest in music, but none of us were satisfied in our studies or work and felt defeated by it often, until improvisation provided only open doors and possibilities.

Dr. Harold McKinney, the Creative Motion Alliance faculty member who introduced me to improvisation as its own art relayed this transcendental audience experience that compelled him to pursue more in improvisation.

[The first time I heard] what I was really interested in, it was really incredibly beautiful improvised chamber music that didn't shy away from tonality yet did not have to be tonal, and it really sounded like a lot of music that I played off the page, except it came in the moment and came with incredible magic and beauty, and I wept.<sup>27</sup>

He performs and travels with an organization called Music for People, a group that brings improvisation into new spaces.

Dr. Justin Isenhour, professor of music at Winthrop University, emphasized in his interview with me how he has increased his use of improvisation in his classroom. As an educator, he understands his students' need to be able to think on their feet in a performance setting as well as their deep desire to create; however, improvisation helps him in his role as educator. If there is a need to go over a topic in class that he has not prepared to go further in depth with, he is capable of using improvisational skills to provide examples of what need more attention. As a professional trombonist who performs on a regular basis, Dr. Isenhour sees the need for new, creative spaces to be created for improvised performance. "I just got back from playing a gig tonight, and at that gig, they paid me to play what's on the page, not to come up

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<sup>27</sup> Harold McKinney interview, (March 21, 2018)

with my own stuff,” he said, and goes on to say that there needs to be new, atypical spaces established for improvised music instead of relying on the places that already exist to change their ways.<sup>28</sup>

In my conversation with Matthew Frereck, a peer of mine from high school who is now finishing his music degree with an emphasis in improvisation on string bass at Oberlin Conservatory, we discussed why specifically free improvisation is powerful. “You’ve got beyond twelve notes, you can get into some weird stuff, at least that I associate with free improvisation, and sometimes the twelve notes [mean nothing].”<sup>29</sup>

Frereck performs improvised material frequently in the Dallas/Fort Worth area as well as in Oberlin, Ohio. He collaborates with fellow classmates and others in the improvised music scene throughout the country with whom he happens to cross paths. His social media presence is filled with experimental, sometimes even avant garde improvised music. “I’ve made connections with other improvisers through social media. Really, if you’re looking for an improv community, you can easily find it online.”<sup>30</sup>

Young performers like Frereck are finding ways to connect with each other and make the kind of music they want to make in that moment. Older, more academically established musicians like Dr. McKinney, who understand the importance and allure of improvised performance, are out there and working to create spaces to bring those performances to the surface of art music.

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<sup>28</sup> Justin Isenhour interview, (April 14, 2018)

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Frereck interview, (August 10, 2018)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

## *Conclusion*

Musical free improvisation is a creative and unique performance style that can be used as an academic tool to help shape the musicality of music students, especially regarding artistic expression, performance quality, and confidence levels. Additionally, understanding the history, past uses, and other current genres of improvisation is necessary to comprehend the differences, development, and present-day applications of free improvisation.

Improvisation is a vital and inherent part of all musical practice and performance. If it is not practiced in the same way as prepared music, prepared music will not reach its full potential. Incorporating improvisation to music education can better prepare young musicians for the duration of their education and professional work in music. Some ways to do this include exercises in theory and aural skills classes relating to the current topic of study, including pieces with improvisational sections in ensemble repertoire, assigning studio students a certain amount of improvisation time in their practice each week, and even having weekly workshops or ensembles dedicated to improvisation.

Without the spirit of play in one's musical practice and performance, their music will always be lacking or they will not feel fulfilled. Improvisation is a powerful way to cultivate that sense of play and reignite love for music. Saying, "Yes, and..." while making music allows one to truly listen, comprehend, respond, and add to music all at once, which is every step of the music making and music receiving process in one step; though it seems very complex, it feels inherent and simple. While it is not necessary in the sense that it was in early church music, improvisation is still vital to modern day musicians in their performances and thus should be

practiced like any other skill or technique. Music training with improvisation allows freedom from strict rules and freedom to discover, play, and continue to love making music.

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