TEACHING MUSIC PERFORMANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH

EDITED BY
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7. Score-Based Learning and Improvisation in Classical Music Performance

Mariam Kharatyan

Introduction

When I was a student at the Yerevan State Conservatory, Armenia, it was typical to think of the performance of a scored piece of music as a task to reproduce the composer's intentions. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) and the country's regaining of its independence as the Republic of Armenia, authoritative teaching methods continued to dominate. The master-apprentice model, for example, demanded a complex classical repertoire and a high level of technical and musical proficiency in every performance. Even though I had improvisation lessons as part of the classical piano performance curricula at the Yerevan State Conservatory, the common practice was score-based learning. Continuing my performance education in Norway unfolded many new possibilities. I was given more space for reflection and musical freedom, and yet, the core concepts in classical music education and performance practice that I experienced in Norway were still mainly anchored in score-based learning.

The REACT *Stakeholders Requirement Report* identified how the teaching of western art music performance in most Higher Music Education Institutions continues to rely on nineteenth-century values, standards, and practices. It is largely focused on the reification of scores by concentrating on reconfiguring/realizing the composer's intentions.[1] Indeed, throughout decades of classical music education, performance traditions have continuously been anchored consciously or subconsciously in *Werktreue*,[2] as well as in stereotypical understandings of established Classical/

1 Jorge Correia and others, REACT–Rethinking Music Performance in European Higher Education Institutions, *Artistic Career in Music: Stakeholders Requirement Report* (Aveiro: UA Editora, 2021), p. 3, https://doi.org/10.48528/wfq9-4560

2 The term *Werktreue* (Being True to the Work, an approach which puts the score at the centre of performative interpretation) was coined by E. T. A. Hoffmann at the beginning of the nineteenth

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Romantic performance traditions. The continued influence of these two dominant strands highlights the need to explore new approaches to classical music education, seeking ways in which neither the letter of the score, nor the legacy of performance traditions, shall inhibit the potential for individual creativity in each student. Performers' individual musical expression—the whole spectrum of musical shaping through timing, timbre, colours, and nuance—reaches far beyond what any score can possibly indicate. I share my reflections on developing new approaches to classical music interpretation and performance through improvisation, using the departure point of my artistic research doctoral project *Armenian Fingerprints* (2019) and the ongoing artistic research project *Armenian Crossroads*, as well as an improvisation session with students presented through quotations from semi-structured interviews.

Creative Crossroads

I became aware of the impact of *Werktreue* in my piano playing during the four years of my artistic research fellowship project, *Armenian Fingerprints*, an exploration of Komitas's and Aram Khachaturian's piano music in the light of Armenian folk music. When playing the music of these two composers, I felt a deep confusion, as well as a gap between what the written score indicated and what my imagination and interpretations sought to express. I had to delve deeper into the music beyond the written scores, to find the missing lines that connect the letter of the score with hidden aspects of those compositions. This brought me closer to the inspirational sources of the composers and sometimes to the original source of a particular peasant song/folk tune/folk dance melody. The scores in European music notation appeared as if they were an attempt at poor translations of what, in live performance, the music could sound like—with its large palette of expressiveness and the rich cultural traditions and layers of contrast that Komitas's and Khachaturian's music could unfold. Different aspects of improvisation—as well as the improvisational timing of music—have been a vital part of the Armenian folk music tradition from which these two composers received massive inspiration, often basing entire compositions on peasant and folk tunes. Without going into too much detail, I would like to emphasise that one of the major findings from my exploration of Komitas's and Khachaturian's music and its interplay with folk-music aesthetics has been that the improvisational timing of music, *rubatos*, and agogics have been often inspired by the art of folk musicians and troubadours—*ashughs* and *gusans*. When approaching these composers' scores, it was obvious to me that many layers of the music remain dormant, locked within the limitations/restrictions of the notation. I have observed in my piano playing, since that work, that I not only play their music with many nuances not indicated

century (Lydia Goehr, 'Being True to the Work', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 47. 1 (Winter, 1989), p. 57, https://doi.org/10.2307/431993

in scores—such as agogics, articulations, dynamics, timbres, pedalling, phrasing, and timing—but I also subconsciously add ornaments and other elements as well. This practice is seemingly a result of my response to the folk instruments' sounds and aesthetics. These elements, especially the improvisational timing of the music, gave me a feeling of liberation from scores and bar lines, a freer flow, and a new expression of music. This is particularly the case when playing Komitas's songs and folk dances, with their roots in Armenian peasant songs, dance songs, and instrumental music that the composer collected from rural regions of Armenia, first notated them in the Armenian notation system and later translated them into European notation through his compositional work, presenting his versions of these folk tunes.[3] Komitas, in his research, highlighted the limitations that European notation bears when notating a folk melody, along with the problems of bar-accent and the emphasised syllables in relationship with the downbeat and strongest beat of the bar. The notated, so-called 'finished', or written form of a folk song is entirely uncharacteristic of the nature of folk music, which is created and shaped during improvisation, developing into multiple versions of the same melody.

Improvisational timing and elements of the performance practices of traditional music were vital throughout my four-year study of Komitas's and Khachaturian's music. These experiences led naturally to a further questioning of the boundaries of the written text in my performances, a freer approach to the scores, and eventually to improvising on the piano in response to a particular melody or a composition, as well as exploring free improvisation.

In 2022, I started a new artistic research project, *Armenian Crossroads*, within which the aspect of (free) improvisation as a response to composed and written music are vital elements. It was both an implicit and explicit need in me to embrace music improvisation again. The project involves both explorations through my solo piano playing but also includes a collaborative aspect where classical musicians and students studying at the Department of Classical Music and Music Education and the Department of Popular Music at the University of Agder (UiA) are involved. I grew up playing music by ear and improvising on folk, urban, and pop tunes, all this in parallel with my professional studies of classical music. However, as briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, improvising in my path as a classical pianist has been strongly suppressed by many years of focus on strictly classical repertoire under the impact of *Werktreue*. During the last few years, my return to a pattern of improvising on piano in parallel with my professional classical music performances has felt as if the withheld expression accumulated throughout the years has found release through the artistic research projects *Armenian Fingerprints* and *Armenian Crossroads*. During my improvisation sessions, I experience the feeling of musical timing transforming

3 Mariam Kharatyan, *Armenian Fingerprints* ([n.p.]: Norwegian Artistic Research Programme, 2019), https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/650083/650084

and becoming unrecognizable to me as if entering an unknown and mystical territory. Unpredictability dominates as I find myself discovering hidden angles of music, its shades fading, illuminating, and flowing. All these elements are also present when improvising with others, which creates a new musical space through Listening, Transforming, Responding, and Musicking together—a territory for exploration and experimentation. Silence becomes a vital part of music; it is sounding and expressive, condensed and, at the same time, airy. Just being there and being part of music is a completely different way of being than that experienced during a classical music performance. In the moment, new expressions and timbres are born from within, from the subconscious, from the performer's true self, intertwining with everything and everyone around.

One of the melodies I had as my musical points of departure during my improvisation sessions was *Oror*, an Armenian folk song, a lullaby from Akna, a historical Armenian region. The melody of *Oror* was written down in Armenian notation by Komitas and published as ethnographic material in 1895 in Ejmiatsin (Vagharshapat, located in today's Republic of Armenia). The second melody I had as my inspiration was a tenth-century resurrection hymn *Havun, Havun* by the Armenian poet, musician, and philosopher Grigor Narekatsi (Gregory of Narek (951–1003). Having the nineteenth-century folk melody *Oror* and the medieval spiritual hymn [*tagh* in the Armenian language] *Havun, Havun* [Bird, Bird] as the initial seed and playing through them, I developed these melodies through improvisation. Inspired by and responding to their motives and intonation patterns, I began to transform their rhythms, intertwining the two songs eventually in free improvisation with the two flautists, vocalist, and live electronics. This felt as if I was at a crossroads of the past, present, and future, where the fundamentally different musical traditions—medieval, folk, classical, and contemporary—meet in interplay, intertwined and transformed, reborn in a new creative breath and force.

As I felt the urge to experiment and integrate the improvisation on my piano performance practice, it was also evident for me that there is much to explore by including students in my artistic research exploration processes. This could be understood as an attempt to provide the students with alternatives to the *Werktreue* ideals which typically characterise their approach to performance. I will, in the following, discuss two improvisation sessions that were held in 2022, in which I played the piano with live electronics and vocals in collaboration with students from the UiA's Department of Popular Music. During one of the sessions, two flute students joined the same ensemble, participating in the session as part of their studies entitled 'In-depth course: Classical music improvisation' at the Department of Classical music and Music Education at the UiA. After the improvisation session, I carried out semi-structured interviews with the two flautists, transcribed the audio recording of the interviews into text, and analysed the data. In the interview, they were asked to elaborate on questions such as how they feel when listening to the recording of their improvised playing, how

they feel playing in an improvisation session with no preparation or no scores, and what such experiences of improvisation might contribute to their musicianship. They were also asked to reflect on aspects of their playing, their musical thinking, or their techniques, and on the way they listen when improvising. I invited their reflections on how the improvisation session could transform their playing of classical music. Finally, I asked if they thought that improvisation should be part of all classical students' curricula. The interviews had many interesting moments. The flautist with a Norwegian background observed that playing by ear was considered a positive thing while she was growing up but that she never had an opportunity to try any sort of training in the art of improvisation until enrolling on the 'Classical Music Improvisation' course. In the following quotations, she underlines the fear of making mistakes in playing scored music, which is a very common psychological and behavioural pattern among classical musicians conditioned through *Werktreue*. However, she noticed that, through improvisation, new performative possibilities unfolded and a transformation took place:

> I was scared of improvisation, but after being involved in several projects I feel more relaxed, free, and comfortable, with no mistakes and fear of mistakes as it would be from playing written music. You are you, the true yourself kind of reveals through improvisation. My personal expression comes forward more naturally. When I am back to classical compositions, I feel my performance becomes better also here, freer and I can express myself more. My listening has completely transformed, it is easier now for me to listen to others with who I play, and the way I interact with others also has transformed.

> When I listen to myself playing improvised, I feel more relaxed, because when I listen to the written music I play, I always scan for mistakes, right or wrong notes, but when listening to improvised music I play, it feels very free and easier to immerse myself into different vibes of music.

The second flautist, who has a Hungarian background, explained that she had previously improvised with electronics and could relate to my tunes and folk-inspired intonations during the improvisation session because she also gravitates toward folk music from her country of origin when improvising:

> I dare to do more and express much more now. I find more musical details and approach the score more creatively and even improvise over the score, daring to add to the scores. The improvisation changes my perspective. It also feels like me more productive way of working with music, because when I am back from experimenting it gives me more progress in my playing, on the contrary if I would have stayed focused on perfection, repetition, and exact reproduction of the written text. However, I do not dare yet to add improvisation into the written scores during my performances at the concert, I am not yet there, but I feel the urge of experimenting during my practice.

> Many classical friends do not like even to talk about improvisation, they are stuck in the system and completely depend on scores, they do not even like to listen to improvised music, because they are thinking it is not real music, not beautiful, and in my opinion, it comes from the fear of the unknown. I think that improvisation should be part of classical studies

> because it gives so much. Improvisation is like learning about yourself, like a mirror to look into, which makes you naked in front of yourself and others, which is such a vulnerable, intimate and can be a very hard thing to feel such way during playing, but so important.

After reflecting on data from interviews with the two classical flute students about their experience of improvised music playing, I recognised several positive aspects. They reported changes in their performance practice, including heightened creativity, the broadening of their musical perspectives, and accepting their own vulnerability and fears. Both also noted the transformation of their acts of listening, how improvisation sharpened their presence and communication during music-making sessions with other players.

The 'Transparent Performer' and Resistance through Improvisation

With the establishment of the Conservatory of Mendelsohn in 1843, the notion of the 'transparent performer'[4] spread throughout Europe. This entailed being true to the work, adding nothing of oneself, in complete obeyance to the letter of the written score. Not only did this affect leading musicians and performance venues of the time, but it has continued to shape many decades of teaching and learning of music performance. In his chapter 'The Transparent Performer', Bruce Haynes questions the predominant paradigmatic 'untouchability'[5] of the score—a strict notion of performance aesthetics that continues to be fostered in today's music teaching—by pointing out that it was not always the dominant approach; composers and performers in earlier epochs followed different performance traditions. These open a wide space for modern-day discussions in classical music concerning improvisation and exploration and the way these have been implemented as a naturally anticipated aspect of music performance. For instance, in most baroque compositions, the ornaments were widely left to the musical taste and artistry of the performer. Also, parts of large compositions were modified and performed according to the concert situation, or entirely new parts were added by the performer into the composition. A similar tradition can be seen in the concerto genre during the classical period: with the rise of the soloist, players in this role would add entire cadenzas, which, in many cases, were improvised. Singers of the Baroque and Romantic periods, too, had lots of freedom in adding entirely new details, ornaments, passages, and cadenza-like parts in their roles in different operas. Moreover, opera singers were expected to shape the main roles of operas with great artistic freedom and imagination. It thus follows that composers had to tolerate such creative interpretations of the music they composed and the scores they provided. It is known that famous composer Gioachino Rossini did not recognize his own aria 'Una voce poco fa' as performed by opera singer Adelina Patti. After complimenting

4 Bruce, Haynes, The End of Early Music, A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 93.

5 Ibid.

the singer's impressive rendition, he asked curiously, 'who wrote the piece you just performed?'[6]

Haynes further argues that 'Where seventeenth- and eighteenth-century musicians had a casual view of written music, and no doubt "improved" pieces regularly, a modern performer usually feels a definite constraint about altering anything'.[7] The idea of 'improving' the musical compositions that Haynes introduces here, or, in other words, the very practice of altering freely the written scores as performing musicians undoubtedly did a couple of centuries ago, is equally relevant today in the trajectory of music performance education. It is relevant to the discourse and epistemic perception of musical work and performance practice.

> Some improvisers believe that it is impossible to transcribe improvisations. But then, the best performers of written music give the illusion that they are improvising (since to read mechanically is the kiss of death). Besides, composing is often a matter of repeating a good invention, often enough to be able to remember it and get it down on paper. The act of writing down the notes is actually a mechanical process that consists of documenting an idea that already exists. The creative moment has already taken place when the invention or inspiration occurred to the composer while performing or practicing.[8]

The ability to improvise and add spontaneous details to a written composition is an approach to written music which has been a vital part of the performance traditions and aesthetics of classical music up until the nineteenth century. 'By the twentieth century, improvisation was virtually purged from Classical music and "untouchability" was the rule'.[9]

An important parallel in the context of the 'untouchability' of scores came with technological developments and the huge impact of the recording industry. Performance traditions and approaches to written compositions have been heavily influenced by 'text fetishism' and allowed it to firmly dominate classical musicians' attitudes, consciously or subconsciously. A normality of the last two centuries of classical music, one that all classical musicians continue to face, is the need for multiple, almost-identical recording 'takes' in the classical recording process. Further editing the body of music—collecting those 'takes' and representing them as an interpretation of classical works—is part of this practice. Many performers strive to play different takes during the recording as similarly as possible in order to facilitate their editing and assembly. This practice is especially prevalent during the challenging recording processes of chamber music played by different ensembles and of symphonic music played by large orchestras. In those situations, precision is of the utmost importance: in each take, every note by every musician must be sounded almost mechanically

6 Quoted in Clive Brown, cited in Haynes, p. 208.
7 Haynes, p. 207.
8 Ibid., p. 209.
9 Ibid.

and tempos are strictly automated. The score-based playing and performance of the composition must remain uniform.

Haynes suggests an alternative approach:

> A score might also be seen as a gene map of series of potential performances, each differing by individual traits. A gene map is not in itself any single living creature; it is merely an abstraction of what is common between groups of living things. In the same way, a piece of music can be defined as the musical content that is shared in all its performances.[10]

This mindset towards written music, if implemented in a classical music study process, opens enormous possibilities for creativity among students, allowing them to be more vocal regarding their understanding of the piece. Additionally, the students can express a strong connection to their musical ideas through the music they play, instead of maintaining a distanced and detached attitude while reproducing already-existing interpretations and performances of the same composition. This, also, would allow them to escape the mechanical repetitions during practising and provoke an evolution from technical perfection towards musical expressiveness, spontaneity, and a strong sense of presence during playing. It is important, here, to shed light on the imperfection of music notation. Stanley Boorman says, that 'no practical notation has been (or has been devised to be) comprehensive or precise. Each notation, and each source using it, assumes a series of understandings on the part of the reader'.[11] It is notable that different performers, even if they do not alter a single note from the written score, can produce very different renditions of the exact same musical composition. There are clear limitations in the relationship between notation and a piece itself and between the composition and the performer that, from an epistemic point of view of music, need to be addressed. It is also important to mention the allusive aspect of music notation. As Boorman puts it, the notation only alludes to the music's composition, as well as to aspects of performance: 'It specifies little or much and leaves the rest to the performer. Given the performer's experience and training, the allusive aspects of notation will readily stimulate certain responses, and thereby extend the hold of the text over a performance'.[12]

The importance of addressing these limitations of European music notation from an early stage of music education could bridge many knowledge gaps that later occur among classical musicians. Being constrained by the written text via our classical musical education directly affects students' approach and their ability to interpret different compositions freely and place themselves in a broader artistic and creative context—skills that are crucial for becoming emancipated, free-thinking performers with distinct musical and artistic voices. Implementing improvisation as well as improvisational

10 Ibid., p. 88.

11 Stanley Boorman, 'The Musical Text', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford University Press, 1999/2001), pp. 403–23 (p. 408).

12 Ibid., p. 411.

thinking and improvisational timing of music in their performance education will nurture an ability to approach the scores as a map to discover the music beyond the written notation.

Improving Scores, Improvising

During the *Armenian Crossroads* artistic research project, I experimented with integrating my own cadenza during a performance of *Lousadzak* [Coming of Light], a concerto for piano and string orchestra, written in 1944 by the American-Armenian composer Alan Hovhaness (1911–2000). This performance took place in March 2023 with the string students at the University of Agder.[13] Having the *Lousadzak* score as a departure point, I not only added my own cadenza but also experimented with responding to the piece through several solo improvisations on piano. Seeking to share my musical ideas and include the string students in artistic research and experimentation, I carried out five improvisation sessions with them, including during the live concert. I have attempted to immerse the students in experimenting with the idea of response-improvisations, creating soundscapes inspired by certain sections of *Lousadzak*, as well as exploring the possibilities of microvariations, effects on the drone notes inspired by the *dam* tradition in Armenian folk music. The students explored the possibilities of expanding the techniques for using their instruments, discovering new sounds, timbres, and expressions in an intense communication that the group-improvisation experience unfolded. We also used musical motives from *Lousadzak* to experiment with the idea of 'improving' the score. Contrary to *Werktreue* and the notion of 'transparent performers' who are supposed to add nothing of themselves to the performance of music compositions, Haynes mentions that performers of the past centuries often modified, added, edited, and significantly transformed the music they performed in such a manner that it was perceived at the time as part of the tradition, as well as an inseparable element of the performance 'language'. It is in Haynes's use of the word 'improving', in reference to the scores, that I find a possible bridge from *Werktreue* to improvisation. From the perspective of epistemic phenomena, if the 'improvement' of scores—through the addition of ornaments, cadenzas, *rubatos*, and articulation not indicated in them—is implemented as a norm in students' everyday musical performance practice, it can act as an antidote to *Werktreue* and help students to develop their ability to improvise. In other words, a freer approach to scores that allows for the incorporation of creative musical elements during playing and into the written scores themselves could take the students closer to improvisation. This would

13 For a recording of the piece, see https://soundcloud.com/armenian-crossroads/sets. ALAN HOVHANESS (1911–2000), *LOUSADZAK/COMING OF LIGHT* Concerto for Piano and Strings, op. 48 (1944), Mariam Kharatyan, piano; Tanja Orning, cello; Helge Kjekshus, conductor The String Ensemble at the University of Agder; The String Students from the Talent Development Programme at the UiA; Recorded live at Sigurd Køhns Hus; University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway, 31 March 2023.

improve their ability to freely communicate in their performance practice with or without scores, strengthen their connections to the music as performed, and help them to master complex technical, musical, and aspects related to the development of their instruments/voice.

José A. Bowen suggests that each performance of a piece of music is bridging the past and the future.[14] The performer becomes part of shaping the tradition of the interpretation of the work in each performance. Further, the shaping allows the possibility of innovation, as resonances of the present are often subconsciously manifested in the 'accent' of the musical 'language'. The performance practice inherent in the performer's time thus transfers to following generations, especially keeping in mind the role technology plays in music creation and transmission. Fostering this idea in today's music performance practice and teaching of music could nurture the ability of students to own their education and to consciously embrace the idea that they are part of a historical trajectory. The essential game-changers in music performance practice would be accessible and their performances could reach far beyond repetitions of what was before them, while unfolding their own potential through a reconfiguring and a reinventing of the past and present, and a reimagining of the musical reality of today and tomorrow. Bowen says:

> While each performance attempts to mediate between tradition and innovation, it in turn becomes part of the remembered tradition. It is easy for an interpretive or accidental quality to become an essential quality of the work for later generations, especially since the advent of recording technology. That is what happens when the novice imitates [any] sample ornamentation exactly. The boundary between interpretive and essential qualities can and does change, and the new boundary is then enforced by tradition. Tradition is, therefore, the history of remembered innovation, and it defines a set of normative assumptions or essential qualities about the work which can change over time. Each performance, therefore, looks both backwards and forwards in time. In other words, each performance is simultaneously both example and definition of the musical work.[15]

While seeking to expand my perspectives on the interpretation of *Lousadzak*, it occurred to me that the process itself is filled with distinct ambiguity. Yet, it offers potential for discovering myself as pianist from angles unknown to me, both through solo and group/ensemble improvisations. By actively using the approach of 'improving' the scores and creating my own response-improvisations, I have transformed my piano performance practice. This result, in turn, motivated me to explore further how tradition and innovation can be combined in performance practice.

14 José A. Bowen, 'Finding the Music in Musicology: Performance History and Musical Works', in *Rethinking Music*, ed. by Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999/2001), pp. 424–51.

15 Bowen, p. 427.

Reconfiguring, Reflecting

Reconfiguring the traditions of classical music performance through innovation involves the potential of interweaving these two aspects. The process is a constant stimulus for reflection and, importantly, fuels my musical creativity. When reflecting on the *Lousadzak* concerto and the two different approaches of interpretation that I have created—one with my own cadenza and one with the cadenza written by the composer—I felt as if I was at a crossroads, negotiating between the pianistic performance traditions and innovation. The integration of an entire section of music into the written composition raised many questions for me about the relationship between composer and performer, not least in what ways does improvising within the composition affect the overall interpretation of the work? This activates notions of co-composing and co-creativity through improvisation within scored music, and it plays an important part in the reconfiguration of tradition. Such a reconfiguration may enable a teacher to address the limitations of learning an instrument merely through European staff notation from an early stage of music education and, by acknowledging these issues, could bridge many gaps. For example, it could help to address the inability to improvise in classical music performance practice that later occurs among classical musicians. Integrating improvisation in my performance of classical music has been crucial and transformative; improvisation has functioned as a tool and method for emancipation from *Werktreue* constraints. I have felt the importance of sharing these insights with students through improvisation sessions and various other techniques in the hope of creating a safe space for them to develop and find their way to becoming emancipated, free-thinking performers with distinct musical and artistic voices.

The students observed in themselves several important responses to playing in the improvisation sessions: (i) it stimulated their musical creativity; (ii) it broadened their horizons of musical thinking; (iii) it made them aware of listening, responding, and communicating through music; (iv) it gave them access to their own vulnerability; (v) it gave them new insight into sound, its colour and timbre, and into the technical and musical possibilities of their instruments; and, lastly, (vi) it increased their focus and ability to be present in the moment of performance.

Score-based learning and improvisation are two parallel perspectives that are both crucial to classical music performance practice. It is of the utmost importance for instructors to guide students to an understanding of the complexity of these two approaches to performance, their correlation, and their impact on forming the identity of a musician. This entails a rethinking of (and, indeed, reacting to) the teaching and learning of classical music performance and the importance of critical thinking and student autonomy. As a concluding note, this chapter suggests that the implementation of improvisation and improvisational thinking in music students' performance education nurtures their ability to think of scores as maps—mere tools for discovering the music beyond them. The approach of 'improving' the scores/notes of compositions opens enormous possibilities within music interpretation and music

performance practice for students. In addition, this practice can shape their artistic creativity in beneficial ways, both as future performing artists and educators as well as in the many complex socio-cultural roles these musicians may occupy in our society.

It is pertinent to mention that the University of Agder already has integrated improvisation into the curricula of classical students from 2021. This implementation includes consistent and long-term projects that immerse students into the processes of improvisation and different aspects related to it, giving them a possibility for deeper understanding and knowledge within this field. The official name for the newly implemented curriculum is 'In-depth field: Classical music improvisation', and its description on the webpage of the Department of Classical Music and Music Education explains what instigated the need for the implementation of improvisation in students' studies:

> As notation became more detailed and elaborate in the 19th century, a greater distinction arose between composer and performer, and these roles became better defined. Respect for the score, the Urtext, and the composer's intention (Werktreue), have led the performance tradition down a narrower track, where the performer's creativity has been subordinated and even stifled under the idea of the Work-concept.[16]

Classical music improvisation at the UiA aims to cultivate musical individuality and freedom, as well as to develop creativity among students and an interest in playing their own music. Students are encouraged to explore different types of improvisation in classical music through the use of historical examples as departure points, improvisation within existing compositions and structures, as well as contemporary music improvisation and various forms of free improvisation. The learning and explorations within improvisation are carried out through one-to-one music sessions and through solo and ensemble playing. Listening is emphasised as the fundamental basis of music improvisation practice. The practitioners in this field seek to

> provide students with knowledge and skills via a variety of methods, techniques and strategies for practising and performing improvisation, and the confidence to improvise independently on their main instrument, developing their expressive vocabulary.[17]

In an interview held in November 2022, professor Jørn Eivind Schau, the Head of the Music Performance Programmes at UiA, reflected on the role of improvisation in the curriculum development in the Department for Classical Music and Music Education. He noted, in particular, how the programme may respond to today's challenges and opportunities:

> Today's job market for musicians is complex, largely international, and rapidly developing. A learning outcome in our courses is that the students will develop their personal expression and artistic profile as musicians. Our department continuously seeks to strengthen its prerequisites to develop and improve a diverse way of sustaining performance education in classical music. Here, during recent years – classical music

16 The University of Agder, In-depth field Classical music improvisation, https://www.uia.no/en/studies2/classical-music-performance/in-depth-fields/in-depth-field-classical-music-improvisation

17 Ibid.

> improvisation within early music and contemporary music has become important. The work on improvisation is implemented as an instrumental main area on bachelor's, as a performance in-depth field on master's, and in regular projects for students across instruments, programmes, and genres and in chamber music and different ensembles.[18]

Even though improvisation has only been integrated in the curricula of classical performance music at the UiA for only a couple of years, the positive impact of such an approach is already manifesting. The students feel more and more comfortable with each new project related to improvisation and are unfolding their musical potential more fully. Meanwhile, we need to accept that such a significant change is not easy to implement in larger HMEIs and their established curricula.

To summarize the findings from semi-structured interviews with the two flute students that joined the improvisation session performing with me and the electronic music students at the UiA (as part of my ongoing artistic research processes), it is pertinent to highlight that the students recognised such important moments as (i) the improvisation stimulated them towards a more daring and creative approach in their musical practice; (ii) it provided broader horizons of artistic and musical thinking; (iii) it promoted active listening and interaction with other players; (iv) it demanded that the performers accept their vulnerability and fears; (v) it provided new musical insights; (vi) it increased their focus and sense of presence. It is important to allow the students from a very early stage of musical education to deviate from the established pedagogical routine. The educational process anchored in score-based learning is crucial, but so is helping students dare to play music by ear as well, thus giving space to more creative and artistic thinking from an early age. The process of improvisation and experimentation is perhaps the most important aspect, avoiding the one-sided, narrow, conservative approach to music. Regardless of which direction students prefer to take in further performance practice, the improvisation sessions create space that broadens their perspectives and horizons of understanding in music, as well as offering a deeper perception of all aspects that are connected to performance practice and music interpretation.

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18 Jørn Schau, personal communication, November 2022.

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