

Variation 1 – Vienna



“You played sovereignly.”

Even though the voice interrupted my chain of thoughts/feelings, I am almost relieved to be taken out of my (as almost always cruel) *post mortem*. I smile to show my gratitude and make a mental note to find out what the German word *souverän*¹ could mean, especially in this context. Even before I can paste the mental note into my memory, the remark pulls me to reflect on how differently my experience is now being construed, depending on whether it was observed from the outside or the inside. I did not feel sovereign. No! My head was not pleased with myself (my self) while playing. My head’s interrupted train of thought/feeling easily finds the tracks again in order to list the substandard aspects of my performance. I was just a composer trying to improvise... Same old story... it happens every few weeks here in Vienna and makes me feel like a rat running a maze. How often this maze does not feel like a learning path!

Then I smile again, this time breathing in the soothing memory of the crisp, rounded acoustics of the Haydn-Saal, so different from the anger-inducing, sensory-overloading CLANGING of other spaces. My left hand mercifully relaxes in a ‘soothing tingle’, an echo of the exquisite mechanism of the piano, while I think of how much of a support it was to perform with this percussionist – somebody who can keep her cool when I lose mine. Peace. But then my thoughts flash to the challenges of other complex social interactions during the months (and years) preparing for this performance, and during some of our ensemble improvisations over the past five semesters. It seems like every experience casts its own shadow! And then... thought/feeling train picking up speed... experiences construed from outside, from inside, from outside, from inside, outside, inside... I can’t find the source of all this tension and friction. Will I ever improvise well? What should I do to figure out how to shape this difficult learning process? Or am I trying something that is impossible? Old dogs... new tricks... square peg... round hole... Outsider!

I think back to the surprise I saw on people’s faces when I answered their questions about the meaning of the English word *fazed*, after we performed the first try-out of the improvisation (or is it a composition?) almost four months ago at the end of June. The thought/feeling train hurries past several stations carrying me with its questions. Now I wonder: did I hide my lived experiences of being fazed, in order to integrate into this brave new world of music and

¹ “... II. *adv* (*geh*) with superior ease □ **etw** ~ **beherrschen** to have a commanding knowledge of sth; **etw** ~ **machen** [*o* **meistern**] to do sth with consummate ease [*or* have complete mastery of [*or* over] sth]”

As I type this quote months later from my bright green PONS Wörterbuch Studienausgabe 2021, I am again unsettled, almost discouraged, about how my own judgements of my own performances can be so different from the judgements of others; how my lived experiences are not harmonised by the observations of others, and how they become invisible. I hold my head in my hands (elbows resting on the too small desk) and sigh when I reflect on the impact that this cacophony of conflicting experiences has on my teaching and learning processes. How much has this sapped my energy over the past two/three years, alienating me from others? Or is the cause of all of this rather my propensity for autodidactic learning? I don’t see much autodidact learning taking place. Is it even possible to learn complex skills to the accompaniment of such a cacophony? Is it simply too late?

movement, of free-flowing improvisations? Or in order to hide? Can the hiding of experiences ever be conducive to the development of artistic expression?

Walking back home, I think about what I wrote concerning my experiences of being fazed in the reflection that I thought of as a meaning-creating assignment that was part of the course. Well, now I realise that the reflections did not help a lot to get improvisation into my thick skull and slow fingers. When... how will ears and fingers find their connections?

...faced this phase, mostly fazed...
Klavier- & Instrumentalimprovisation 06: Reflection
Hannes Taljaard, mdw, June 2022

... *faced this phase, mostly fazed*... the title of this work is autobiographical in several ways.

While Emilia and I were working on the piece during rehearsals, we often had to explore new sound patterns, structural processes, and ways of listening and interacting. Having settled our interaction in one texture (one phase of our cooperation), we had to, for example, find ways to start and then transform another texture. We were constantly moving into new phases, constantly challenging ourselves as performers. This process was mostly not comfortable, and we sometimes felt confused and even overwhelmed. And yet, it was meaningful and often enjoyable.

For me, working on this project this semester has also been daunting, and certain phases of the project were intimidating. There were many challenges, and it was not possible to rely to a large extent on my composition technique or on previous experiences as a composer and performer. I felt somewhat bewildered and often uncertain as to how to act and react. However, I knew that I had to and wanted to pursue this path. This project has been an important phase in my artistic growth.

This artistic project is part of a much larger life process: moving to Vienna and studying here. This daunting change in my life story is a phase that I wanted to face, one that is often still leaving me uncertain. Still, it has been a positive change which has brought about a lot of growth.

And so, I can say on several levels: "I faced this phase, and I am mostly fazed."

When I return home, I start reflecting again, almost unwillingly. What can I take at this stage from this concert? This is clear: I was not successful in my attempts to develop improvisation skills based upon my love for building systems. That didn't work out, and there was just not enough time and energy to do everything that was needed. It's like I'm trying to build a house of cards on a foundation of sand... Picking up, putting down... Rushing from one attempt to the other, trying to stay in the system... Waves crashing ever closer... So, now I at least know where the stress, frustration and the repetitive strain injury in my left arm and hand comes from. Yay!

My sleepy head tries to be honest and attempts to convince me that there were also many positive social interactions, and a few pleasing improvisations. Maybe... It's just that when I come off the stage after a disappointing performance, there are shadows everywhere, and I do not see the objects that do not cast shadows. Maybe I should watch the streaming of the concert in the mdw Mediathek² tomorrow when I wake up, so that I can also observe myself from the outside, in the light.

*Entschuldige, Ich hab' mich verschwommen.*³

² The performance starts at 18 minutes 44 seconds (lasting to 25 minutes 25 seconds on <https://mdw.vhx.tv/konzert/videos/f-v-m-n-akustische-ereignisse>). The event consisted of performances by all students (in that MBP/Rhythmik year group) of compositions that they composed in one course. I opted to not compose, but rather work on a structured improvisation.

³ "Pardon me, I lost my way while swimming." When we were planning as a student group the concert of 10 October 2022, one of us uttered these words, and we all started laughing. I only later realised that this phrase describes a salient aspect of my experiences of my improvisation studies up to that point. The German word 'verschwommen' was the title of the concert (printed on the poster in phonetic writing), and can be translated as *blurred, hazy, fuzzy or vague*.