

UNIVERSITÄT FÜR MUSIK UND DARSTELLENDEN KUNST WIEN

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**Learning, unlearning and relearning to improvise at the  
piano  
– a composer's path**

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## INTRODUCTION

Before starting my studies of MBP/Rhythmik<sup>1</sup> at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna in Vienna (mdw) in 2019, I did not reflect much on how people learn to improvise. Even though improvisation had been by that time part of my life for almost five decades – ever since my earliest childhood years – my own learning path as improviser remained unexamined. This was in stark contrast to my development as composer: my self-directed learning path as composer was deliberate, and well-documented informally and formally.

In January 2023 my deeply disappointing struggles to (re)learn musical improvisation at the piano forced me to examine own learning path as improviser. I needed to form a theoretical understanding of my own growth, an understanding that had the potential to guide my further development in a field that to this day remains important to me in artistic, pedagogic, and artistic-pedagogic contexts. My theoretical examination of this very narrow topic is presented here as an autoethnographic report, and like other autoethnographic reports, it has an uncommon format.

After this introduction, Part 1 of this research report consists of the alternation of ‘Variations’, and ‘Interpretations’. The two autobiographic writings – the variations – present and develop the same six themes in different orders and from different viewpoints. The two interpretations build on the variations and are discussions of the six themes presented in the autobiographic writings. The interpretations present analyses of a narrowly selected part of the literature on the teaching-learning of piano improvisation, analyses that bring published information into relations with my experiences. Because of the limited scope of this report, the selection from the literature was based on a very exclusive criterion: I analysed only sources written by authors who are working in the same tradition as I – the *Wiener Rhythmik*. This means that all authors whose published writings were analysed, are people who studied MBP/Rhythmik at the mdw and/or worked (or are still working) at the mdw. This has the advantage that my personal experiences are brought into relation with the ideas of people who are working (or who worked) in our shared socio-cultural context, which is a clearly

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<sup>1</sup> Music and Movement Education/Rhythmics – *Musik- und Bewegungspädagogik/Rhythmik* (I use the German abbreviation MBP/Rhythmik also when I write in English.) The term ‘Wiener Rhythmik’ is used, for example, in the subtitle of an important publication produced at the mdw (see Hauser-Dellefant & Witoszynkij 2016, translated version: Hauser-Dellefant & Witoszynkij 2023).

delineated social system. This creates a foundation for future research with a wider range. It is likely that important publications by authors within the tradition of the Wiener Rhythmik were not analysed in my research. This will be the result of the limited scope of this research and the limitation on the length of the report.

The variations can be read on their own, and form the foundation and centre of this research, because they recreate my experiences in novel ways that are not possible for others<sup>2</sup>. The variations present experiences that seem to be real experiences. However, while some of these experiences correspond in important ways to actual experiences, other experiences are fictional confluences of real experiences, or real experiences with fictional aspects. Still, fictional confluences or fictional aspects are always based upon real experiences. Each theme is presented multiple times and in both variations, because of the complexity and holistic nature of creative growth.

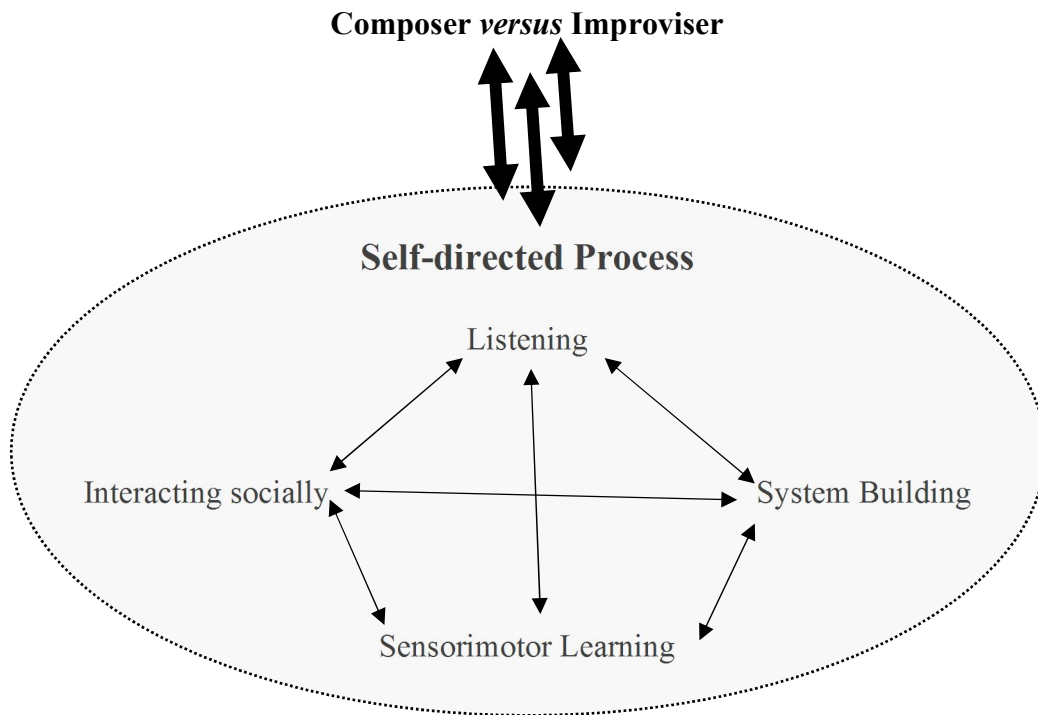
The first variation is titled '*Vienna*'. It is written in the present tense and recreates a seminal experience from my years of studying improvisation as part of the MBP/Rhythmik programme. The second variation is titled '*Potchefstroom*', which is the town in which I grew up, studied music, and worked before relocating to Vienna. In the second variation I trace my learning and unlearning of improvisation in the form of a dialogue in which I am a silent interlocuter, and in doing so I remake my past<sup>3</sup>. In this variation I present insights into relearning improvisation, insights that I gathered while forging my own path. The fictional dialogue presented in the second variation is to be seen as more recent than the more real experience presented in the first variation. At the time of this report, some of the insights presented in the second variation were still being tested out, and so a further 'progress report' might be produced in future. The second variation describes in part my anticipation of future scenarios and possibilities. Duncan (2004, 35) identifies this kind of anticipation as a purpose of autoethnographic research.

My interpretation of my own learning process, my growth path, is summarised in the following simple diagram that presents the six themes.

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<sup>2</sup> See Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017, 3

<sup>3</sup> See Bochner & Ellis 2006, 6



The first theme compares and contrasts my identities as composer and as improviser in order to determine how my roles, skills and attitudes as composer and as improviser have been impacting my teaching-learning process as improviser. The second theme highlights the fact that (for me) the growth path of an improviser is largely self-directed. I understand the other four themes as the motors that have the potential to generate movement along my path. Each of these four motors can be to different degrees (in)activated and be functioning (sub)optimally, and they can be in conflict or in synergy in any of their possible combinations during the everchanging phases of the learning process. A framework grew from my research, and it forms the backbone of this report (and thus also of the development of my learning path):

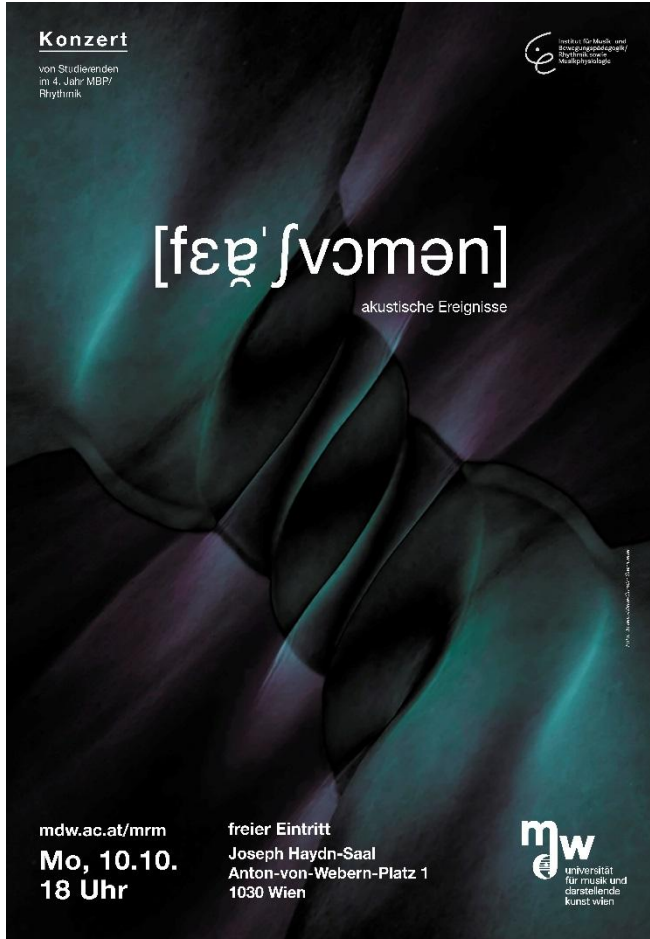
*my development as improviser shows the most growth when the composer and improviser are in multiple complementary relationships, and when self-directed development is based on the four aspects of (1) listening, (2) system building, (3) sensorimotor learning and (4) social interaction, four aspects which are all functioning optimally and in synergy.*

In Part 2 of this report information about the research process is presented and the reasons for choosing autoethnography as the research method is discussed. Reading Part 2, will help the reader better to understand Part 1. The report closes with a list of sources.

As conclusion to this introduction, I express my gratitude to the lecturers at the mdw with whom I studied, the other students from whom I learned while improvising together in music and movement and while discussing our experiences, and to Prof. Meike Schmitz for the input she gave during the writing of this report.

## PART 1

## 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*<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> “... 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 autodidactic learning taking place. Is it even possible to learn complex skills to the accompaniment of such a cacophony? Is it simply too late?

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 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 Mediathek<sup>5</sup> tomorrow when I wake up, so that I can also observe myself from the outside, in the light.

*Entschuldige, Ich hab' mich verschwommen.*<sup>6</sup>

## ***Interpretation***

### *Composer versus Improviser*

When Rudolf Konrad (1991, X & XI) defines improvisation in his *Kompendium der Klavierimprovisation*, he does not mention composition, even though he was a composer. (He refers to his work as composer for film and theatre in the preface of his book.) Konrad (1991, XII) does treat, albeit briefly, the relationship between improvisation and composition when he quotes Keller's ideas in order to point out differences between these two activities, specifically the ideas that improvisation rests upon instrumental technique, and that it unmasks swindling more clearly. In contrast, Paul Hille, who studied with Konrad, argues (2011, 52-53) for the view that improvisation and composition are equivalent<sup>7</sup>. Hille (2023, 103) points to Jaques-Dalcoze as a source of the idea that improvisation is spontaneous composition. Irmgard Bankl (2005, 35-37) discusses – in terms of movement improvisation – the complex relationship between improvisation and composition. Milly Groz, who studied with Hille (and others) points out (2018, 16 & 18) regarding instrumental improvisation that improvisation and composition are often considered as opposites, but that composition can 'contain' improvisation. Groz's discussion makes several relevant observations and distinctions, which points to the fact that the (non)equivalence of composition and improvisation remains a contested topic.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> "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*.

<sup>7</sup> Because my view that improvisation and composition are not equivalent, I point to research by Andrew Goldman, a composer, music theorist and cognitive scientist who is active within the field of RhythmicsMM. Goldman (2019, 65-67) presents results of experiments in cognitive science that show that the activities of improvisers and performers differ in cognitive terms. I assume that this would also be true about composers-who-do-not-improvise, and improvisers.

Regarding the fact that psychological aspects can hinder the learning of improvisation, Konrad and Hille agrees. Konrad (1991, XI) refers to ‘psychological blockages’ like anxiety and inhibitions. Hille (2011, 53) addresses teachers as well as students when he writes that these kinds of obstacles should be identified, and that teachers and students should make use of the obstacles.

### *The four Motors*

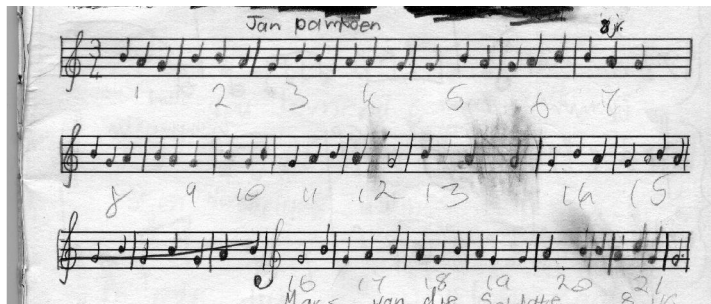
Discussions (in the selected literature) of aural skills needed for improvisation, seem to lack clarity and differentiation. To me the discussions seem similar to my experiences as a student. Konrad (1991, XIV) merely points to the obvious fact that habits of listening will contribute to shaping an improvisation lesson. Hille (2011, 53) identifies hearing as an aspect of the self that should be assessed by teacher and student, but does not give information on how to understand this ‘hearing’, nor on how to assess it. A phrase like “when listened to attentively” (Hille 2011, 53) does not provide the information needed to shape listening skills during improvisation teaching-learning. Konrad’s use of ‘playing/listening’ (*Spielen/Hören* in German) shows the same lack of clarity. Even when he quotes the ideas of Epping and Ferrand on the topic, the information remains general and undefined, and thus not didactically useful.

Konrad (1991, IX) clearly states his opinion that piano improvisation should take many tone systems into account. My experience (also observing other students) that this could be overwhelming to students, are not mentioned.

Hille (2011, 55) points out that interaction makes improvisation easier, that it lifts inhibitions, encourages continuous improvising, and intensifies experiences during improvisation.

## Variation 2 – Potchefstroom

“Thank you! It was quite something to look through your first booklet of compositions together with you, seeing them in your own handwriting. I want us to page again to the one called ‘John Pumpkin’, the one with three pitches. It’s not the first one that you



notated, but I suspect this is the piece that Jaco Meyer<sup>8</sup> refers to when he writes that you started your career as composer when you notated your musical ideas after your third recorder lesson. I remember that you told me last week that your recorder teacher worked on only one note per lesson, and that this turned out to be quite stimulating. You said that by the third week of progressing at a snail’s pace, a question appeared in your mind: what patterns can one make with these three notes? So, you consider this as your first composition, in spite of there being earlier works notated in the book, right?”

[...]

“Ah! So, you think of it as a composition, because it started from this more general idea, rather than from a specific sound pattern, and then it was created through notation, and in ways similar to how one solves a puzzle, and *without* shaping and reshaping it through repeated try-outs with an instrument or through singing. And so it makes me think that some of the earlier works can each be thought of as a repeated improvisation that was written down, right?”

[...]

“Let’s go for a walk by the river, and use our steps to trace a path from your experiences with improvisation.”

[...]

Ha! Yes, indeed – paths are made by walking regularly! *Even when one doesn’t quite know where one is supposed to go*, you would have added if I didn’t. Hey! I’ve just now had a spark of insight: that creating paths is a sensorimotor activity involving the whole self.

[...]

“So, let’s start at the very beginning... I know that reading music notation, as well as singing, playing by ear on the piano and the recorder had been part of your life for a year or two by the time you

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<sup>8</sup> Meyer 2021/2022, 11

started recorder lessons. But improvising started even earlier, right? I have listened a few times to the part of your interview<sup>9</sup> with Jaco Meyer where you talk about how improvising and playing music were stimulated from your earliest years in the conducive social constellation of the family. Uhm... I believe I'm realistic when I imagine that your learning improvisation was not a formal process, and that it was not shaped from the outside.”

[...]

Ah, so it stayed that way until you relocated to Vienna. That I did not know! And this would be in stark contrast to your learning musical instruments, music theory and composition. But, wait... I know that learning to compose was also to a large extent self-directed... I've heard you refer to yourself as mostly an autodidact when it comes to your skills as composer. So, we'll have to talk tomorrow about different learning processes. But for now, the different outcomes are easy to guess... developed skills as composer, also in terms of analytic out-of-time listening skills... clear, strong attitudes regarding the importance of your role as composer... the development of the different systems that you laboriously designed and then used for composing works as diverse as *Four Essays for String Quartet* and *Let the Games begin* and *Riturnelli*... But certainly these systems featured in your activities as improviser? I know that you did not stop improvising.”

[...]

“O.K. So improvisation happened during teaching, when you were working as organist in churches, or – I remember this now! – as a ‘party trick’ when you improvised as a way to give your impression about people whom you did not know. These are clearly social contexts, right?”

[...]

“Thanks for returning my thoughts to the developing of systems. I get it... you were improvising in the familiar common practice tonality. But I think my point of these being clearly social contexts stands firm. I'm just wondering why these social contexts did not exert a stronger influence on you to keep learning improvisation. Somebody once told me that he overheard you and Conrad's sister, if I remember correctly, improvising together on the grand piano in the hall when you were in high school, and that he was impressed. Why didn't your identity as improviser and the related skills play a bigger part in your activities as musician?”

[...]

“Indeed, time constraints and the uncertainty that comes when one doesn't know if you can be successful the next time you improvise. And yes, school was a nightmare for many of us... As an improviser myself, I certainly know that uncertainty, and I know the amount of hours it takes to learn

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<sup>9</sup> Meyer 2021/2022, 23-24; recorded version at [www.jacomeyer.com/resources/composer-interview-series/4-hannestaljaard](http://www.jacomeyer.com/resources/composer-interview-series/4-hannestaljaard)

to improvise at a high level. Easy to see that the sensorimotor learning necessary for improvisation will not happen if one does not put in the hours! But fine... I understand that it was not needed and thus not important in your development or in your career, and that the learning that did take place, happened ‘on the side-lines’ so to speak. Being able to do something reasonably well, often stands in the way of doing it really well, or? Uhm... But your studies there in Vienna did start with a success in *Haus der Geschichte* with the beautiful quartet improvisation. I know, I was there! It was piano, flute, recorder and cello, right? In German we will say “stimmig”, and I have a few more good words with which I can describe it. And I know from looking at your notes and reflections that the attempts to develop tone systems for improvising was something that has been keeping you going on your improvising path until now. To be honest, to me it all seems rather complicated now! Have you managed to make any sense at all of this?

[...]

“That’s a nice, happy smile! So, I would like us to talk tomorrow about how you understand at this stage the listening skills that one needs to develop for composition and those for improvisation. Are they really that different as you suggested yesterday? Can one really develop some skills and not others? Would they not just all develop simultaneously and naturally? Should one even focus on listening skills during improvisation lessons? I have many questions about this!

[...]

“Yea, of course, the majority of skills overlap, as you say. And yes, it’s naïve to think that all listening skills will always just develop naturally. Silly. What would that even be, naturally developing? But you once said that you struggle to improvise, because you often slip into composer’s listening. What’s that? Yea, yea... that’s what we will talk about tomorrow when we have time for a longer conversation.”

## ***Interpretation***

### *Self-directed Process*

Rudolf Konrad (1991, XI, XII) explains the importance of motivation, and from this (and his theoretical work on RhythmicsMM) one can deduce that he understood the importance of self-directed learning. The suggestions by Paul Hille (2011, 56-57) clearly indicates an understanding of the importance of self-directed learning: starting from a diagnosis of the present condition, keeping notes, working on longer projects that start in specific improvisations, and establishing goals.

*The four Motors*

Irmgard Bankl (2005, 27-39) writes in general about improvisation as part of the practice of RhythmicsMM, and these ideas are also relevant to instrumental improvisation. When she writes about the importance of memory in improvisation, she distinguishes cognitive, emotional, sensory and bodily memory. It is possible to understand the four motors partly in terms of these forms of memory. Milly Groz (2018) developed a catalogue of aims for improvisation teaching-learning which is also relevant for the understanding of the four motors. Groz's catalogue is based upon interviews with six teachers. Two of these teachers (Ika Kinsky and Verena Zeiner) are prominently active in the tradition of the Wiener Rhythmik, also as improvisers. However, since the data is anonymous, it is not possible to determine which of these aims are shared by these two teachers. Because the catalogue is compiled from ideas of all six the interviewees (of which only two are working as rhythmics practitioners) a discussion of how this catalogue of aims can influence our understanding of the four motors should be left for a later stage of my research.

Although Konrad (1991, IX & XIII) points out that a variety of tone systems should be mastered by an improviser, he does not mention the role of a personal connection to systems, something that is very important in my framework. Still, the idea of building one's own systems seems to be implied in his thoughts. Konrad (1991, XIII) mentions the danger of becoming 'an epigone of oneself' when the improviser merely juggles fixed formulas.

There are several references to sensorimotor learning in *Kompendium der Klavierimprovisation*: Konrad (1991, IX) posits the touching of the keys at the same level of importance as the sounding tone (during improvisation and playing pieces). Interestingly he points out (Konrad 1991, XII) that the aspect of touch can be made the focus of teaching for a long time. Although he gives no detailed discussion of sensorimotor aspects, Konrad (1991, XII) lists some sensorimotor aspects of piano technique that are identified by other authors. His insistence on the importance of daily practise (Konrad 1991, XI & XII) clearly shows that the sensorimotor aspects of improvisation was fundamental in his approach.

Hille (2011, 53) identifies the ability to connect with others as an important aspect of self that has to be assessed by teacher and student. Hille (2011, 57) points out that a person who discovers or develops something has the desire to share it with others, and that this is also true for improvisers. Konrad (1991, X) refers to a need for 'sensorimotor expression' that is particularly strong in people

between the ages of 15 and 25. I understand this as part of the social component of the teaching-learning process.

For the development of sensorimotor skills, Hille (2023, 102-105) presents a series of activities aimed at training skills necessary for piano improvisation. In the same publication, one finds a more detailed discussion of aural skills, but these are focused on improvisation only a few times.

Discussions by Veronika Kinsky on movement accompaniment (See Kinsky 2009 and Kinsky 2023) are relevant for this research, even though they are not always explicitly formulated in terms of piano improvisation. It is especially the sensorimotor and processual nature of movement accompaniment, as well as its social aspects that are stressed by her.

## PART 2: POSTLUDE (AUTOETHNOGRAPHY)

This second part of my report interweaves information about the research process and the motivation for choosing autoethnography as the research method. Since this postlude is not primarily a discussion of autoethnography in general, all information on autoethnography gleaned from published sources is employed to describe my own experiences and choices during the research process. I report almost exclusively in my own words, and bibliographical references are given in footnotes, in order not to complicate a text that is already dense.

This postlude can be understood as an explanation of the nature of Part 1 and a preparation for (a) repeated reading(s) of Part 1. The ethnographical texts were presented first in this document, so that the reader will be drawn into the experiences, rather than into a discussion of the research process. However, some information on autoethnography is necessary in order to understand this report as a whole.

*This research: multiple sources of data<sup>10</sup>, impetus and goal*

Since starting my studies in Vienna in November 2019, I have often and in various contexts reflected on my own long process of learning, unlearning and relearning to improvise. Some of these reflections were notated, and some were submitted as informal and formal reports to various lecturers as part of the coursework, or as voluntary submissions. Traces of reflections are also found in the sketches and scores of pieces that involve improvisation or pieces that were created through improvisation, as well as in sketches and diary entries that I have been making until now while working on improvisations and while practising.

My interest in documenting and understanding my own creative processes and learning processes through explicit, even rigorous, self-observation and reflection<sup>11</sup> did not start with this research, as is evidenced by the work of a musicologist who has already reported on this through the publication of an interview with me: in an interview with Meyer (2021/2022, 26-27) we discussed the sketches and notebooks that I've kept as composer for several decades, some of which were studied by Meyer before the interview. While writing this report, I studied my various 'field notes' on improvisation again, and added information based upon

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<sup>10</sup> See Duncan 2004: 35 on the construct validity of autoethnographic research.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson 2006:375; Adams, Ellis & Jones 2017:1



my memory of events. Only a small part of the content of these notes were used in the writing of the variations, and almost all ideas were reformulated.

The time-line of this study has its roots more than fifty years into my past. However, active collection of sources and writing additional records of and reflections on my experiences were started only in January 2023. Research on the autoethnographic nature of the research was conducted during the second part of 2023, and the writing of the report occurred from January to April 2024.

The impetus to pursue this research was a drawn-out unease culminating in January 2023, a realisation that I've reached a cul-de-sac in a central aspect of my studies of MBP/Rhythmik. This unease was not mere discomfort – it grew into intense disappointment and desperation that set in when I felt that I had exhausted all possible paths for learning known to me at the time either from experience or from perusing publications on improvisation. Improvisation is an aspect that has been very important to me – academically, artistically and personally – for many years. It was one of the great joys of my early childhood years, before it was side-lined as an unintended side-effect of formal music education in South Africa, and my professional activities as composer and educator. My relocating to Vienna demanded that I give up a meaning-filled life in Potchefstroom<sup>12</sup> in order to learn what I keenly desired to learn: that which was offered in a rich study programme of which improvisation is one of the central pillars. It was clear to me even before relocating to Vienna from South Africa that I wanted to major<sup>13</sup> in improvisation, and that piano improvisation would be an important part of the curriculum. Meyer (2021/2022, 35) reported on my intentions and expectations in the interview which was recorded in February 2020 when I had completed the first three months of the study programme. Four years later, in 2023, laden with feelings of friction and confusion<sup>14</sup> after eight semesters of studying and trying to figure out what to do<sup>15</sup>, it was clear to me that my (likely too high) expectations did not match the reality that developed during my studies. This realisation is not to be construed as negative. It was the result of the

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<sup>12</sup> The university city in the North-West province of South Africa where I grew up (since 1978), where my music studies culminated in a D.Mus. in Composition in 2004, and where I taught from 1993 to 2020 at the North-West University.

<sup>13</sup> In the current curriculum this is a '*Schwerpunkt*' (literally 'heavy point') that a student can choose. My other major is in Singing and Singing Didactics.

<sup>14</sup> Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017, 4

<sup>15</sup> Bochner & Ellis 2006, 2

understandings of a practitioner<sup>16</sup>, of an expert who has a long personal and professional experience based on my own teaching-learning and (guiding) the experiences of others.

From the impetus to pursue this research, grew the motivation to answer my ‘consuming questions’<sup>17</sup> on how to learn improvisation, so that I could forge a path in order to reach one of the most important goals that I was then reaffirming for my studies and for my future career path: relearning to improvise at the piano while at the same time understanding my own learning processes so that I could shape my own path and also help other musicians on theirs. What I realised in January 2023 was this: I had to extend my studies with a year, take two semesters break from studying improvisation with teachers and engage in a deep and personally transformative way with my own growth and with the ideas of others in the field. I realised that I had to deepen my understanding of my own path, sharpen my intentions and take action better to guide my own learning process. I did this by reflecting on how my conflicting identities as composer and as improviser could become complementary and a source of energy, and by trying out new ways of understanding myself. This year allowed me to practise regularly and to follow a self-directed path that was not influenced from the outside, and which I could structure organically in terms of the four motors that I identified, focusing on sensorimotor learning and system-building. The latter of course included the training of listening skills. During this year, there were also a few opportunities to improvise with others, but in ‘relaxed ways’.

### *The research topic; enculturation*

As already stated, the study of improvisation (as a general activity involving music and movement) is one of the central aspects of the study programme of MBP/Rhythmik at the mdw, and indeed of the Dalcroze approach from which MBP/Rhythmik grew. At the mdw it is taught in various artistic, pedagogic and artistic-pedagogic forms in many contexts and in various relationships with other subjects over all eight semesters of the study programme. Students learn to improvise solo and in different ensembles; on different instruments, with voice and in movement, and in many different combinations of instruments+voice+movement. I had piano as first instrument, and so many of the teaching-learning activities involved improvisation at the piano. Courses took the form of individual

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<sup>16</sup> Duncan 2004, 30; Wall 2006, 151

<sup>17</sup> Wall 2006, 148

improvisation lessons or of classes in duos or small groups. Even students who do not have piano as first instrument have to complete a certain amount of credits in piano improvisation and are expected to improvise on the piano in various contexts.

Indeed, during one's study and later in the field of RhythmicsMM<sup>18</sup> and the wider field of rhythmics of which RhythmicsMM is a part, improvisation (and especially improvisation at the piano) can be viewed as one of the important aspects of enculturation into the field, and a central pillar of social interaction in the field. Improvisation (as a general activity) is often presented as one of the three corners of the so-called 'Dalcroze triangle' (see Wedin 2015, 14) with piano improvisation playing a prominent role in the Dalcroze approach. In some teaching-learning traditions, such as the one developed in Geneva, piano improvisation is more prominent than in the Viennese tradition, the 'Wiener Rhythmik'. Those who do not develop at least some level of facility with piano improvisation might struggle to fully integrate themselves into the field. I was one of 'those' and my natural inclination to connect<sup>19</sup> myself to others, and to master all aspects of my roles in a field, meant that my educational struggle was also a personal struggle to find meaning<sup>20</sup> and to stay motivated, one involving an important aspect of construing my life in my chosen socio-cultural context. My struggles with the confusing situations<sup>21</sup> engendered by my (re)learning to improvise threatened a loss of meaning in several aspects of my challenging new life phase, and I felt that I could not participate fully in the attractive, new cultural context into which I was integrating<sup>22</sup> during my studies.

### *Research aims, the nature of autoethnography*

The aim of this autobiographical piece that is based upon both analytic autoethnography and evocative autoethnography is to report on my reflections regarding my process of learning, unlearning and relearning to improvise in a way that focuses on piano improvisation and specifically on my years of studying MBP/Rhythmik in Vienna. The aims of this research

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<sup>18</sup> This term refers to the artistic-pedagogical method. The broader field is referred to with the term 'rhythmics' even though many English publications uses the term 'eurhythmics'.

<sup>19</sup> Ngunjiri, Hernandez, Chang 2010, 3

<sup>20</sup> Bochner & Ellis 2006, 2; 5

<sup>21</sup> Duncan 2004, 35

<sup>22</sup> Anderson (2006, 379) states as prerequisite for autoethnographic research that the researcher should be a "complete member in the social world under study".

report are also two of the reasons why I followed an autoethnographic approach in this research:

1. I aim to reveal my tacit knowledge<sup>23</sup> by expressing an important point of view in the domain of music improvisation, and in the field of rhythmic, a view that goes against some of the literature on improvisation, and is thus excluded. For ethical reasons it is particularly important to state that my point of view is deviant in terms of some of the ideas expressed in some of the literature on improvisation and not in terms of the views of my teachers here in Vienna. My positioning does in no way imply an opposition to their practices or views. Quite the contrary – I have always felt that they were supportive of my attempts to forge my path, and it is clear to me that my unease, confusion, disappointment and desperation were entirely of my own making. I am confident that honestly presenting my experiences does not endanger their reputations or my position / positioning in the field, or important relationships with significant people. I trust that expressing my views will be accepted in good faith in the field as an attempt to continue a conversation promoting many views, and an attempt aimed at dissolving sedimented meanings<sup>24</sup> that do not optimally serve the field.
2. I aim to contribute to processes that might lead to changes in a few aspects of the topic within relevant fields and thus within the domain<sup>25</sup> of the pedagogy and didactics of improvisation and so further develop practices in the field. I hope that my highlighting matters that have remained (possibly) unnoticed<sup>26</sup> in the field, will inspire others (also those who are not academics<sup>27</sup>) to reflect with me on the construction of meanings, values<sup>28</sup> and practices. The field of RhythmicMM has certainly been over several decades by now one of which the members have proven their receptivity to change and diversity. Thus, situating my research within this field of practice is promising. The research and this report will, of course, influence balances of power: when students do research into fields that are taught by their teachers, a realigning of influences and roles will likely originate. I am confident that the Viennese tradition of RhythmicMM and the study programme of MBP/Rhythmik

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<sup>23</sup> Wall 2006, 150

<sup>24</sup> Ellis, 2006, 10

<sup>25</sup> In this report, the term ‘field’ refers to people improvising and teaching others to improvise, while the term ‘domain’ refers to the accumulated body of knowledge and behaviours/actions produced or exhibited by those in the field. I consider myself as somebody working in the field and contributing to the domain in a variety of didactic, artistic and scholarly ways.

<sup>26</sup> Duncan 2004, 35

<sup>27</sup> Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017, 4

<sup>28</sup> Anderson 2006, 384

with its constant developments and realignments can be enriched by such an influence. Continuous shifting of balances of power<sup>29</sup> is especially important for the healthy development of the field of RhythmicsMM, because of the way in which the Viennese tradition has been shaped for several decades by now through individual experiences as important contributions to the community of practice.

*Expressing an important, deviant and excluded point of view: composer and/or/versus improviser*

The first aim identified above is the result of my realisation, even epiphany<sup>30</sup>, that simmered for many months and then culminated in January 2023: my expertise as composer limited (and even worked against) the development of my skills as improviser, even though it is often claimed in the literature on improvisation (including pedagogy and didactics) that improvisation = spontaneous composition, as formulated by Frank Sikora<sup>31</sup> (2003, 477) in a publication that is currently playing an important role in the teaching and learning of improvisation in MBP/Rhythmik. I heard this idea in some of my lessons, and it is also expressed by an author within the tradition of MBP/Rhythmik: Paul Hille (2011, 52-53) identifies the “time factors involved” as the only difference between improvisation and composition. It is important to state here that my presenting and ‘working through’ the issue of ‘composer versus improviser’ is not to be understood as my general view regarding this specific aspect, or regarding the topic or field of improvisation. I do not make any claims to the truth content of any other person’s view on this issue, and do not present generalised ideas about this or other topics. I report on my own experience in this document. The point that I am making is this: a prominent view expressed by several authors did not coincide with my personal experience, and this caused dissonance in my teaching-learning process, and hindered my learning.

My thoughts on my own (mostly unnerving) experiences of relearning are expressed in this autoethnographic piece in the personal and personally invested voice of a member of a minority group within the field of the pedagogy and didactics of improvisation: in the voice of a skilled composer who studies piano improvisation in a late stage career change. This is

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<sup>29</sup> Wall 2008, 49

<sup>30</sup> See Adams, Ellis, Jones 2017, 7 as well as Bochner & Ellis 2006, 5

<sup>31</sup> It is important to remark here that Sikora is a Jazz musician, and that he is not connected professionally to the field of RhythmicsMM, unlike the other authors whose ideas are analysed in this report.

the voice of one who had uncommon, even deviant, experiences. Voices like these are unfortunately often silenced, even if unintentionally. The experiences I describe and my reporting on them are not negative, even though they were uncomfortable. Engaging with my experiences proved to be very stimulating and energising – and so the current research is not a kind of therapy or ‘working through issues’<sup>32</sup>. The current research is a report on how I responded to, reacted to and resisted<sup>33</sup> certain aspects of my learning process, and a hopeful view into a future in which the challenges have brought about positive outcomes.

*Initiating a process of change: the wider goal*

The second aim stems from my conviction that some of the practices of instrumental improvisation teaching in general (those not specifically related to the practices in MBP/Rhythmik) should be critically examined for their taken-for-granted<sup>34</sup> exclusion (from the teaching-learning process) of some of the experiences of several important groups such as trained composers, experienced dancers and choreographers, trained sound artists, multimedia performers, etc. – people who may be drawn to study MBP/Rhythmik. I hope to contribute to laying the foundation for including their experiences and to developing the practices of improvisation teaching specifically within the traditions of RhythmicsMM, but also in other fields of Music Education. If one subscribes to the notion that musical improvisation is so important that all or most musicians should (re)learn it, then aspects of the current practices of those teaching and learning improvisation need to develop further. When learning, every person creates a variation of an abstract path, a variation that can be more conventional or more divergent. This happens even though, or even when, some paths are invisible or repressed. I hope that the personal nature of my making experiences “available for others to witness, encounter and engage”<sup>35</sup>, even though it might seem self-absorbed to some readers, will contribute to sympathetic understanding of how teaching-learning processes can lead to loss of meaning and crises in the lives of students, and then to a commitment to change<sup>36</sup>. In this regard it is important to keep in mind that since an explicit aim of RhythmicsMM is to celebrate the diversity of paths in all contexts, the teaching-learning practices ideally also incorporate diversity of learning paths.

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<sup>32</sup> See Wall 2008, 48

<sup>33</sup> Ngunjiri, Hernandez, Chang 2010, 3

<sup>34</sup> See Ellingson & Ellis 2008, 448

<sup>35</sup> Bochner & Ellis 2006, 8

<sup>36</sup> Anderson 2006, 385

### *Creative development and concurrent research*

The third reason for choosing the autoethnographic approach, is the most important one. I intended my bachelor studies (and specifically my studies of improvisation) to be a further training phase, a part of my long creative path. This intention demanded finding an approach to conduct and present my research during the last two semesters of my studies that would not have negatively impacted my creative growth. I had to follow a flexible research approach, because my own creative development was (and remains) more important than the research process and product – and because the development of creativity is particularly hard to study as part of the researchers’s own life. Furthermore, the development of creativity is possibly threatened when systematised *in medias res*. Creative development is a fuzzy, messy, sensitive and complex process. Attempts to systematise it into a more traditional research method could have interfered with my creative growth. That was my intuition and I believed that attempts to systemise my creative processes would have involved a risk that I was not willing to take. (Meyer 2021/2022, 29 reports on this.) The insights of Holman Jones (2016, 4) regarding autoethnographic research are particularly important in this regard: “...this knowing, being and acting is less about creating stable, coherent, finished and identifiable knowledge, and more focused on engaging with the world as shifting, partial, unfinished and animated by feeling and imagination.” Still, even autoethnography has demands that can draw one away from the full experiences necessary for working creatively<sup>37</sup>, something that I certainly felt and regretted during the research process.

### *The analysis of literature on the topic*

The interpretations that follow the variations reflect on the lived experiences presented in the preceding variation, specifically through a critique of part of the extant literature<sup>38</sup> on the themes. In these critiques, the views of others are brought into relation with my personal experiences vividly presented in the preceding variation, by discussing the themes in a more systematic way. The analyses of literature are to be understood as my dialogic engagement<sup>39</sup> with others in the field, specifically those working in the tradition of the Wiener Rhythmik. As was made clear in the introduction of this report, I could not accept important aspects of

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<sup>37</sup> See Anderson 2006, 380

<sup>38</sup> Wall 2016, 5

<sup>39</sup> Anderson 2006, 385

the experiences described by others as mirrors of my experiences, and thus the confrontation with the literature is a confrontation with ‘different others’ and ‘contrasting others’, as well as with ‘similar others’. The literature on improvisation has unfortunately by now already codified experiences and this is moderating, and even policing, learning paths. My current challenge to the balances of power lies in my opposition to certain views expressed in the literature and not (as already noted above) as opposition to the views and actions of my teachers. I do not claim authority for my views, but I do insist on their validity.

### *The format of this report*

The format of this report might be new, possibly even strange, to readers who are not yet acquainted with autoethnographic research. This format is, furthermore, unlike the format of other published autoethnographies, because it grew from my engagement with my personal experiences, and emerged as a way to present a truthful, lively, and believable version of my experiences. The format is still in line with what is expected and accepted as an autoethnographic document, and was developed in order to create a literary (artistic) product. This is entirely in line with the aim of the study programme of MBP/Rhythmik – to be pedagogic and artistic at the same time.

### *Conclusions drawn from the research*

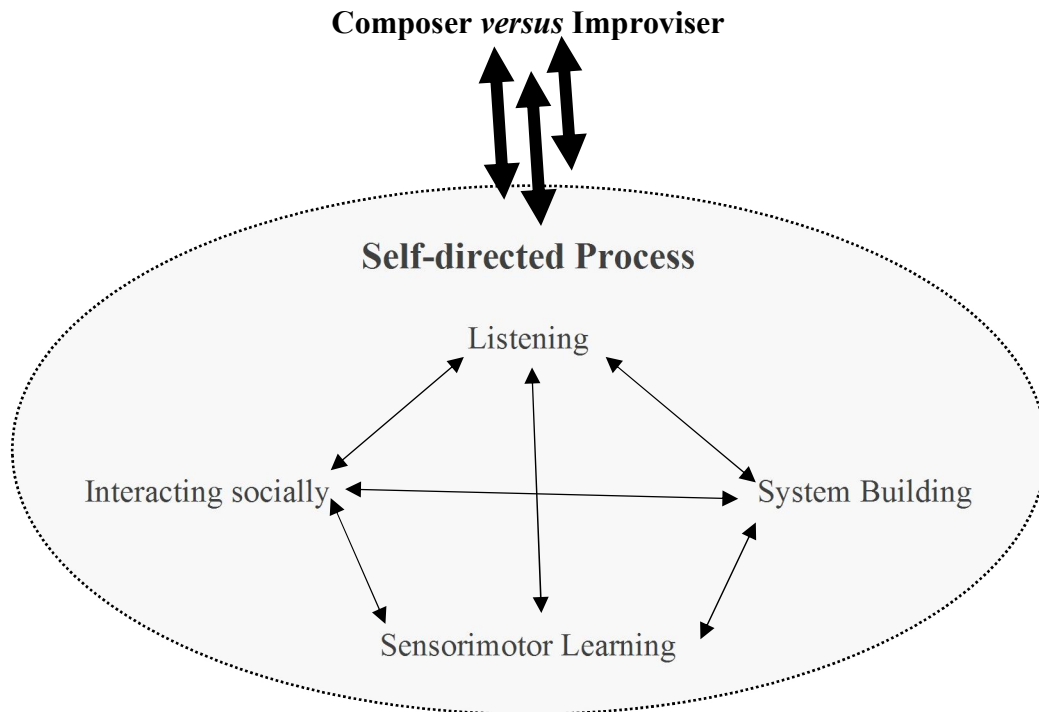
This dissertation does not close with generalised conclusions on the teaching and learning of improvisation. Because I report on my own experiences, no generalised conclusions can be drawn from this research, and I do not attempt to build any general theory. Still, a few specific conclusions can be drawn from it, and in order to do so, the diagram with the six themes and the resulting framework for understanding and guiding my own development are presented again as they were in the introduction of this report. *My development as improviser shows the most growth when the composer and improviser are in multiple complementary relationships, and when self-directed development is based on the four aspects of listening, system building, sensorimotor learning and social interaction, four aspects which are all functioning optimally and in synergy.* This framework for understanding is theoretical (even though it is not a theory) and is the result of my goal to transcend the personal data<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Anderson 2006, 387



presented in the variations, and also the engagement with the ideas of others in the field, presented in the interpretations.



From the interpretations that follow the variations it became clear to me that my experiences are not as deviant as they felt before I embarked on the research. Still, the specific condition of my dual identity as expert composer and learner improviser (articulated from a compelling ‘insider’s view’) does contradict a dominant and potentially harmful<sup>41</sup> view in the field of improvisation: the view regarding the equivalence of composing and improvising. It is now clear to me that conceptions of liminality, rather than of deviance, form a better (or at least an alternative) framework for understanding my experiences. (See Anderson, 2006, 378-379.) It seems, for example, as if the four ‘motors’ have similar roles in the teaching-learning experiences of others, and that learning to improvise is (at least in ideal circumstances) a self-directed (in greater or lesser degree) process for everybody. The uniqueness of my experiences lies in the profound confusion, conflicts and tensions that my role, skills and attitudes as a skilled composer brought to my learning path, and to my socio-cultural situation, and in the fact that this was a late-stage career change. Confusion, conflicts and tensions made it hard to follow a self-directed process and interfered with the synergy of the

<sup>41</sup> Adams, Ellis, Jones, 2017, 3

four motors. It is possible that other students of improvisation might experience other conflicts that impact their growth path in similar ways.

It seems to me that the uncovering of this uniqueness of my experience, and then placing it in a more abstract context, is the contribution that my research can make to the field<sup>42</sup>, and specifically to the shaping of the teaching-learning processes of improvisers (and specifically students of MBP/Rhythmik) who are already advanced practitioners in other fields. This leads to another hypothesis, which is the final conclusion of this research, and which points to the external validity<sup>43</sup> of the research:

*Understanding how the source(s) of conflict and tension in the learning process impacts the self-directed nature of the process as well as the ways in which relevant motors (identified by those involved in the actual teaching learning process) function, will contribute to the shaping of an effective learning path.*

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<sup>42</sup> See Duncan 2004, 35 on the instrumental validity of autoethnographic research.

<sup>43</sup> See Duncan 2004, 36

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# 1 Ehrenwörtliche Erklärung

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Daniel Johannes Taljaard, Wien April 2024