On the self and ethics in musical improvisation: what can we learn?

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# Abstract

There have been many attempts to draw wide-ranging conclusions on the knowledge offered by the specific type of musical practice that is summarized by the word improvisation. The fact that we in the West tend to specify improvisation as the exception to score-based music, a norm situated at the center of Western high culture, is odd considering that most music was based on improvisation long before musical notation was invented. This view contributes to the understanding of improvisation as a practice that deviates from the rule, a fringe alternative on the outskirts of other, more dominant musical practices. This is further emphasized by the structural and economic differences between, for example, free improvised music and Western classical music.

At the same time, the discussion concerning improvisation has often excluded many non-western types of music that are improvisatory by nature, and instead mainly focused on its practice in Western musical styles. For that reason, I believe that the stylistic delimiter *improvisation* can be problematic. In this presentation, I will mainly discuss improvisation as a possible catalyst for individual, as well as more general knowledge formation closely related to ethics. I will introduce ideas about how improvisation can be part of a method with which different values may be proposed. Values that may offer an interesting opposition, or tension, to those proposed by the capitalist structures currently dominating the world. These are not necessarily 'better' but can help to reveal how a multiplicity of perspectives can be applied to questions concerning what it means to make *good decisions*, and to be a *good human being*.

The point I will attempt to pursue is how ethics in artistic practices, that is, the moral values that are expressed through artistic practices in music, specifically improvisation, may complement traditional views on ethics. Furthermore, the hypothesis is that the results of such exploration may contribute to the understanding of ethics in a more general sense. In turn, this could potentially have an impact on how improvisatory practices are esteemed in contemporary Western societies. The notion of the *Care of the Self*, as discussed in Michel Foucault's Volume Three of the *History of Sexuality*, is used as a method to approach this complex area.