

Project Description

1. GENERAL FRAMEWORK | 1.1 Motive

An Austrian job market expert responsible for artists at the AMS employment service is quoted as follows regarding the precarious market position for musicians:

"The thing that is missing is perhaps to admit, or to see that afterwards [after a completed course of university study] you can't live from it, or you can't assume that you'll be able to live from it. (...) Not every graduate will find a job in an orchestra. (...) And this condition has been developing for the last ten years; for this reason even the people who are educated, (...) trained to an extremely high level, who are at the universities – they're being trained, trained, trained according to the old system and no one's taking note of the fact that the market isn't there anymore." (in: Bork 2007)

Embedded in a two-year art-based research project lies the **musical skill laboratory** "Quo Vadis, Teufelsgeiger?" ("Where to, Devil's fiddler?"). This will serve as a meeting point for two contrary characteristics of art music – interpretation and improvisation – for which a new form of encounter will be made possible by a third element, academic exploration. We will analyze what happens when a musician from the classical tradition, conditioned and trained to render a prefabricated work with the highest possible virtuosity, is allowed to play a style of music presently deemed as one of the most liberated forms of musical expression.

The project at hand is motivated by the conviction that this innovative and courageous fusion can bear productive fruit. The objective is the basic academic investigation of this new path in classical music education. A holistic picture of the investigated effects of this artistic praxis, from which ideas and suggestions for the practical **integration of such learning environments in the curricula of modern music education institutions** can be expected in the medium term. Over years of artistic and reflective confrontation with free improvisation, the artistic project partners Gagel und Gstättnner have been able to observe the salutary effects that improvisation in solo and ensemble projects can have on the participants: those who are aware of their musical identity and their unique powers of expression will have an

easier time turning their career dreams into a dream career (Bastian, 2006). This idea serves at once as motivation, occasion, and the main hypothesis in this project as submitted to the FWF.

1.2 Key challenges of the project

The primary challenge of the planned project is to examine how a traditional classical musical training can lead to a progressive and successful career in the current, rather unstable cultural landscape. To achieve this career progress, an element of ever-increasing necessity in the life of a modern musician, we suggest an unusual method: instead of continuing the long process of perfecting already acquired technical abilities our model refers back to the original motivation to play music. It is exactly this devotion to music from childhood that moves a musician to begin this extremely difficult path – and exactly this devotion which, in the course of a professional music education, retreats more and more into the background. With the practice of Free Improvisation, we propose to tap into the individual musician's desire to express him- or herself. We offer a platform, a laboratory, in which musicians can free themselves from the constraints of "learned" material, enabling them to once again feel the joy of making music, the call that they once heard – to "play", in the truest sense of the word. The thesis of this project is that Free Improvisation, this form of authentic music-making, can ease a musician's progress toward a satisfying everyday working routine and strengthen the engagement with his instrument.

The reservations of musicians used to thinking in terms of production or merit and the "I can/ I can't" or "right/wrong" dichotomy are sure to be particular challenges in this project. Such musicians are likely at first to be afraid to approach Free Improvisation which they "can't do", i.e. have never learned, in a field where for years their sole concentration was on achieving the highest possible level of technical perfection. These first barriers and disorientation are to be broken down sensitively through the use of pedagogical finesse and improvisational settings conceived for teaching ("Improvisiakum" Gagel 2008 and "Contemporary Musicians' Awareness" Gstättnner 2009).

We are naturally also aware of the close relationship between art and science – two fields that interact strongly with one another in this project. We intend to do methodological justice to this interrelationship and system of continuous mutual influence in a circular research process, with the help of qualitative methods. Our

motivation to understand the object of research from the inside and thus to be able to formulate an explanation was the deciding factor in our choice of an exploratory, qualitative method setting, which will be described in chapter 3.

1.3 State of the art and relevant references

A series of improvising musicians who have transcended the praxis of traditional jazz improvisation, moving into the stylistic and sonic realm of 'New Music', have made Free Improvisation an "acceptable" art form. Their technical and cultural presence are the example which has allowed Free Improvisation to gradually achieve status as a creative method on par with composition. The increasing presence of improvising musicians at New Music festivals confirms this tendency, which has also been theoretically described and distinguished in its essentials (Wilson 1993, Zoepf/Gagel 2003, Improvisation Congresses Lucerne). Above all, the persistent publicity work done by Bernd Noglik, Peter Niklas Wilson and others over years has constituted the intellectual reflection that has accompanied and encouraged the artistic endeavours of improvising musicians. Their writings deal with individual manifestations, with the history, quality criteria and cultural conditions and by the inclusion of scientific opinion they attempt to connect with established music, art and literature criticism and theory. One positive result has been the increased appearance of articles dealing with improvisation in trade publications, including the publication of special issues on improvisation (NZfM, Üben & Musizieren, Musiktexte) and regular sections for the discussion of improvisation CDs. Many festivals now make a practice of offering concerts or even concert series with freely improvised music. The cultural phenomenon of Free Improvisation, one might say, is already evident as an individual artistic subject and is more and more becoming a subject of academic research.

- Critical studies in improvisation, University of Guelph, Canada, http://www.uoguelph.ca/sofam/4h_csi.html
- Mathias Schwabe, ring für gruppenimprovisation, Berlin, www.improving.de
- George Lewis, Department of Music University of Columbia <http://www.music.columbia.edu/taxonomy/term/95>
- Improvisation als „neuer“ Handlungstypus. Eine handlungstheoretische Exploration der musikalischen Improvisation. Silvana Figueira-Dreher <http://www.uni-konstanz.de/soziologie/fg-wiss/?q=node/8>

- Musikwissenschaftliche Supervision: Annegret Huber, Universität für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Wien www.erg.at/iatgm/iatgm-huber.shtml
- Internationale Tagung für Improvisation, Luzern (Ltg. Walter Fähndrich, Christoph Baumann, Peter K. Frey <http://www.improvisation-luzern.ch/>)

The basic idea of this project is to use this fresh impulse from Free Improvisation innovatively to assist the professional musician in acquiring expertise in areas which are at present partially or completely ignored in the current professional musical training environment. In this area of vocational research the project owes an additional debt to the European reception of the posing of problems in the work of institutions for which the education of highly qualified young musicians is a matter of great importance: AEC (European Association of Conservatoires) <www.aecinfo.org>, The Bologna Declaration and Music Organisation POLIFONIA <www.polifonia-tn.org>, the Groninger „Lectorate Lifelong Learning in Music“ <www.lifelonglearninginmusic.org> – to name only the most important. These institutions are concerning themselves with the current sea changes in the musical profession, and the subsequent consequences for music education:

"More than ever before, the future professional musician is confronted with questions of how to function in new contexts and how to exploit opportunities. The purpose (...) is to create adaptive learning environments in which conservatoire students can be trained to function effectively in a continuously changing professional practice. Improved adaptable (life) skills should lead to increased employability of professional musicians in the future." (Peter Mak, Lectorate Lifelong Learning in Music, 2007)

A recent European publication that deepens the understanding of the modern multi-faceted music profession, is Rineke Smilde's "Musicians as Lifelong Learners: Discovery Through Biography." (2009). Smilde's research clearly shows the critical challenge facing musical education today; the urgent need for developing innovative learning environments in conservatories – which should rather function as "artistic, generic and educational laboratories" – becomes obvious. Here Smilde's findings correlate with the practical-scientific investigations of Peter Renshaw (2004), who has experienced and introduced to the public various examples of best practice for learning and teaching in new contexts. Smilde even pinpoints the need for

improvisation as one of the most important issues in higher music education; “(giving) improvisation a fundamental role in music education”. Smilde points out a number of advantages in doing so, not least the possibility “to use it (improvisation) as a strategy for preventing and overcoming performance anxiety” (Smilde, 2009). The recent studies of Heiner Gembris and Daina Langner (2005) have also set new standards in German-speaking countries, pinpointing the current needs of young musicians.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT, PROBLEM CHOICE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary objective of this project is to explore the effects of Free Improvisation in the education and the professional work of classical musicians over a period of two years. With the help of academic tools, the following central research question will be examined:

To what extent can the practice of Free Improvisation assist the classical musician in the acquisition of new and essential key skills?

In connection with this core question, the following dimensions will be explored:

- **Self-concept and -contextualisation:** What can Free Improvisation do for the self-concept (*Selbstkonzept*, Hemming 2002) of the modern "classical" musician? What influence does it have on the musician's placement of him- or herself between artist and artisan?
- **Primary motivation:** Does Free Improvisation reach or have an effect on the basic motivation for musical activity (for most musicians anchored in childhood)? If so, how?
- **Effect on technique:** Does Free Improvisation affect technical ability and basic skills of music making such as intonation, rhythm, phrasing and voice leading? Does it affect the general perception of one's own ability (self-assurance)? If so, how?
- **Psychological effects:** Does Free Improvisation affect the musician's handling of pressure to perform, stage fright, stress management and musician-specific physical ailments? If so, how?
- **Artistic effects:** Does Free Improvisation affect the individual's ability to improvise in classical music? (If so, how?) Can transfer effects from the improvisatory attitude to the interpretive attitude of playing be observed and described?

- **Social interaction:** Can improvising with others improve the social skills of the participants? If so, how can that affect the individual-versus-group problem in orchestras? (training as a soloist during the course of study > collective subordination in orchestral work)
- **Vocational perceptions:** What ideas or notions of the musical profession do the musicians have at the outset; do these develop or change during the course of the project?
- **Creativity:** Does Free Improvisation make one creative, or must one be creative to improvise? Do the individual musicians feel more creative as a result of their experience with improvisation? If so, does the effect last?
- **Gender aspects:** Can a female-specific approach to improvisation be observed and described? (This aspect is important for improvisational artist Maria Gstattner's planned dissertation, which will stem partially from this research project.)
- **Academic study:** How can artistic improvisation be integrated into university study - concretely, how are the various offerings and formats received? What are the qualitative differences between periodic workshops and continuous instruction in improvisation?
- **General:** How do the participating musicians accept the improvisation? What problems of understanding appear? Can improvisatory thinking and action be reconciled with the classicist's musical understanding? What form does resistance and criticism take; what forms of enthusiasm and positive reactions can be described?
- **Lasting effects:** What consequences do the project's results carry for the training of professional musicians? What lasting effects are imaginable for cultural and concert life?

3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES | 3.1 Scientific methodology

The conventions and quality criteria of qualitative social research form the methodological background of the project's design.

The main information-gathering tool here is the in-depth interview (Flick, 2005). In the course of this project the interviews will be conducted in a specific manner, with the **ideolectic discussion** technique. (from ideo = own: discussion "in one's own language" (<http://www.idiolektik.de>) Through the orientation of the questions on the individual's capabilities, a communicative basis will be built which will allow the complex individual world and life realities of the interviewee to unfold in an authentic

manner. As in the dissertation "Traumberuf Musiker?" (Bork, 2007), the suitability of this innovative ideolectic discussion technique for use in empirical social research will be explored.

Analysis of the collected data will be conducted using **Mayring's qualitative content analysis**, a method commonly used in cases involving evaluation and large quantities of interview material (Mayring, 2003). The computer analysis program MAXqda2 will be used for this purpose (Kuckartz, 2005). However, it seems fitting that for the subject at hand – artistic experience – **Bohnsack's documentary method** (Bohnsack, 2003) be used to complement Mayring's analytical method:

It is the goal of interviews to collect the articulation of experience and orientation. In the interviewee's process of relating and reflecting on experience in his or her narration, material is generated with which the researcher can reconstruct the experience of the interviewee – the goal of the documentary method. This method can provide information about the subject's reactions and thus insight into the attitudes and orientation of the interviewee in the context of an individual or collective life concept. This method aims to reconstruct the basic metaphorical and the implicit orientational frames the subjects employ when asked to express the improvisational experience. With the help of these methods, several interviews will be analysed in order to achieve a perspective on the musicians' living environment other than the strictly content-analytical. The results will take the form of qualitative case studies.

In addition to the interviews, the method of participatory observation will be utilised (Schöne, 2005). The **triangulation of the chosen methods** follows the comparison of internal and external perspectives: the self-evaluation by the musician as recorded in the interviews and the external perspective of the observers on these processes. Participatory observation as a scientific method of data collection differs from normal forms of participation and observation in three ways: purpose, selection, and analysis (Schöne, 2005). In a participatory observation, the observer(s) join the setting to be observed and participate actively. The notes and transcripts taken during the process are then systematically analysed, again using Mayring's qualitative content analysis.

In the construction of theories, we proceed according to the **grounded-theory-approach** to qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 2008): the research will shuttle back and forth continuously between empirical and interpretative work steps, i.e., will

employ a theoretical sampling strategy. This methodological process of theory construction is the best match for the circular process of our research setting.

Preliminary findings or results will be published regularly during the course of the project; the project itself, in its final analysed form, will be presented to the public within the framework of an internationally organised academic-artistic **symposium** including a concert of improvised music.

3.2 Artistic methodology

I never made a painting as a work of art, it's all research. (Pablo Picasso)

As the academic methodology has been described above, we now present the background and methods of the artistic procedure, designed according to the concept of "**Improvisation als soziale Kunst**" ("Improvisation as social art form", Gagel 2008).

The project "Quo Vadis, Teufelsgeiger?" sets the following artistic goals:

1. To introduce the participating musicians to the art of improvisation, to further their potential systematically and build up a versatile competency in improvisation.
2. To group the participating musicians into teams, allowing them to work independently and innovatively toward developing their own artistic products/results.
3. To develop the expressive form "performance"; to strengthen the ability to act and react musically in "real time".

During the project, these goals will primarily be reached through ensemble work and teamwork, according to the concept "**Improvisiakum**" (Gagel, 2008). In this concept the desired artistic creation is strongly grounded in the free development of individual ideas and the mutual communication between ensemble members. This activity is accompanied by questioning, supervision, documentation and collective reflection; the accompaniment is thus not only receptive but an active part of the artistic process. We are convinced that the production of art by a collective must be systematically developed and, in addition, requires personal accompaniment and supervision (> interviews/coaching). At the centre of the project's artistic director's interest is the systematic investigation and pinpointing of the musical material and the possibilities of musical communication. Improvisation, which is not pre-organized or

discussed, can only take place because the characteristics of musical sound allow it. The nature of all musical parameters (pitch, rhythm, timbre, dynamics etc.) is such that one can use them to communicate. Gagel's method is not based on knowledge of scales or patterns but on increasing familiarity with such musical material and its communicative unfolding in the improvisation process. Thus, improvisation has both a sonic and a communicative element; it depends on musical thought, alertness, sensitivity and listening.

Gagel's methods apply invariably to work with other musicians and ensembles. In his dissertation, he presents academic, artistic and pedagogical thoughts which augment his method and connect them with the concept of "improvisation as social art form"; artistic work in an ensemble or team. He has utilised this method with many professional musicians, both university and younger students and amateurs. It develops and strengthens the ability to improvise in a stylistically nonspecific manner, describable as "nonidiomatic improvising". Here Gagel concerns himself particularly with the real-time character of improvisation: musical motives and forms are created out of the combination of the sonic characteristics of musical material with the interaction and creativity of the musicians. In addition, exercises assist the further development of focus, intensity and creativity in real time situations. The resulting experience and the explored sound material then offer each individual a plethora of possibilities out of which musical structures can be improvised, alone or with others. The method also strengthens important musical skills such as listening, alertness, the ability to react and phrasing, as well as encouraging independent creativity and the joy of playing.

3.3 Interface Art-Science

The present proposal describes an Arts-based Research project grounded on the ideas of qualitative social research. At the juncture of artistic praxis, innovative experimentation and essential research in the sociological field of music production (specifically the area of the professional musician), we expect to garner knowledge about the influence the introduction to Free Improvisation may have on the artistic skill, motivation, and job satisfaction of professional musicians and how it may assist in improving their employability. The scientific/theoretical tools chosen for this task form an important part of the project – much more than a simple before-and-after evaluation, the scientific presence in this case is in the field of inquiry; its spiralling, circular interaction with the object of inquiry stands equal to the artistic process itself.

For this reason the accompanying in-depth interviews, supervision, documentation and mutual reflection are not only receptive but form an **active part of the artistic process**. We are convinced that the production of art by a collective must be systematically developed and, in addition, requires personal accompaniment and supervision: we suggest the hypothesis that the current narrow concepts of action and latitude, influenced by cultural and educational factors, as well as the related quality of the evaluation of one's own abilities can be greatly enhanced through careful reflection, paired with accompanying personal coaching.