

Presence, High-hanging Fruit, and the Singing Self:

Developing a Musical Language in Improvisation

(book presentation "Presens – texter om improvisation och tonspråk" followed by discussion)

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When, in my lean youth, I became captivated by jazz music and improvisation, I often found myself lacking accounts from the musicians' perspective.

It was usually the listener, the recipient, who was called upon to describe the experience of being the final link in a long, eventful chain that unfolds in a fraction of a second.

I have long been interested in trying, from various angles, to shed light on what appears to be genuinely mysterious about the creation of music, and the language and rhetoric we develop to express it.

At its inaccessible core, this creative process remains mysterious, but we can circle round the mystery and perhaps foster a kind of understanding of the process – what it entails, what it strives for, and what it sometimes succeeds in achieving.

When I improvise music, I articulate in every moment how I perceive the present moment to sound.

I articulate this experience through a language that no one else 'speaks', which is almost impossible to understand and which is constantly changing.

A language which, in its finest moments, nevertheless proves to function as a means of communication.

Once we have acquired a language, we have also acquired the ability to improvise – all our verbal communication is, in a sense, improvised.

Our lives have shaped us, carving out a unique starting point from which every thought arises and, to a large extent, travels freely.

Can we be more or less personal in our music-making?

The musical language we acquire and painstakingly develop will reflect our personality. The instrument's timbre becomes the voice that narrates and conveys, a sound source that can attract and entice listeners, but also repel and upset them.

Regularity, repetition, flow, the gap between intention and result, reflection and the need for validation are all factors that an improviser needs to be aware of and relate to.

This is not a textbook.

We cannot transfer or adopt someone else's experiences and insights.

But perhaps this book may encourage someone to ask the questions themselves that might lead to useful insights for those drawn to improvisation as a method of musical expression and a means of communication.