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Something in the Air: Journeys of Self-Actualization in Musical Improvisation

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative, abductive, and phenomenological inquiry was to develop categories based on participants� perceptions of their improvisation and listening experiences. As using improvised music in clinical music therapy is an important method, this study expanded the knowledge of and language needed to describe this very sensitive and insightful communication process. If there is *something in the air*�what is it and is it something significant? Research questions included: 1. What kind of process is experienced when one improvises with an unknown person in an unfamiliar musical style? 2. What is *in the air* during live interactive improvisation? 3. What are the links between processes of self-actualization and *peak experiences* introduced by Abraham Maslow (1968) and the experiences described by the participants regarding their live improvised/interactive musical processes? The data of this study consisted of two audio-taped improvisations, three interviews, and the written reflections of six participants who participated in interactive live improvisation sessions. Ferrara�s method was adapted for the data collection and analysis. Research results are presented in the form of descriptive categories which give a clearer picture of what happens during the process of musical improvisation.

Introduction

When one hears a great performance of live solo or interactive improvisation, there often seems to be *something in the air*[3]. But what does this imply? What are we referring to exactly when we speak of something being in the air?[4] After participating in a session of live improvised music, the participants of this research described their experiences with such words as "awakened", "insightful", "heightened", "meaningful", "significant", or even "life changing." Could these musical experiences be comparable with Abraham Maslow�s (1968) notion of *peak experiences*, which is described as moments of great wonder, feelings of oneness with the universe, moments of seeing the definitive truth, and the ultimate fulfillment of self-actualization?

The aim of this qualitative, abductive, and phenomenological inquiry was to develop a clearer description of this phenomenon, based on participants� perceptions of their improvisation and listening experiences. Since the use of improvised music is an important tool for music therapists (Bruscia, 1987; Lee, 2003; Wigram, 2004), it is hoped that the results of this study will help music therapists gain a deeper understanding of the subtle and complex communication process inherent in such an activity and enhance the vocabulary needed to discuss such abstract experiences.

Relation to Existing Research and Literature

Several research studies have already analyzed improvised music in the music therapy setting (i.e. Arnason, 2002; Bruscia, 1997; Erkkil�, 1997; Kenny, 1989; Lee, 2003; Pavlicevic, 1997; Wigram, 2003). Lee (2003) and Arnason (2002) also analyzed and categorized the music listening experience. Bonny (2002) introduced the guided imagery and music (GIM) method and categorized different levels of imagery (see also Bruscia & Grocke, 2002). Lowis & Touching (2002) investigated different levels of emotional experiences during controlled listening experiments and identified some main trends. Ahonen-Eerik�inen (1999, 2004, 2007) introduced the similarity between dreams and images created during music listening.

Music has long been compared to a language as it is capable of communication, especially on an emotional level (Ruud, 1998; Stige, 2002; Sawyer, 2007). Sawyer (2007) contends that everyday conversation is mostly improvised, and thus musical improvisation could make use of similar processes. He considers the idea of problem making and solving one of the chief elements

which makes up *play*. Ruud (1998) focuses on the communicative and cultural aspects of music and musical improvisation. Matravers (2003) concentrates on musical expressiveness and its power to evoke emotions. Emotions are no doubt a main aspect which affects musical improvisation and vis versa. However, it remains unclear how exactly this happens.

Along with language and communication comes the attribution of meaning and metaphor to music. Coopman & Davies (2001) explores different ways of approaching the concept of *meaning* in music, starting from *formal meaning* (musical form and syntax on their own) and one�s perception of it. Then the concept is broadened by discussing *meaning for the subject*, a more personal kind of meaning which is associated with ontological meaning: that is, consciousness and the relationship of a work of art to a person�s life world. Finally, the concept further broadens as it considers music and its meaning for large social groups in general, or the idea of *meaning for us*.

Formal meaning is no doubt a more tangible kind of meaning as it usually involves concrete musical notation. Although it has been examined in depth in traditional classical compositions, it is now being researched in the realm of musical improvisation (i.e. Erkkil�, 1997; Lee, 2003; Wosch & Wigram, 2007). Hodson (2007) reveals the complexities of musical interaction involved in jazz improvisation. He examines the group interaction of jazz quartets and treats every musical element separately from melody and harmony, to form and rhythm. He demonstrates that indeed (apart from stylistic conventions) there are subtle hints and cues in the musical utterances of each musician that appear to mutually influence each group member. What is remarkable is that soloists appear to react instantly to these details, whether consciously or not.

Regarding subjective ontological meaning, Ferrara (1984, 1991) proposed a phenomenological analysis of music which was first applied in music therapy clinical improvisation analysis by Forinash and Gonzalez (1989). This type of inquiry is not focused on musical form and syntax but rather on the subjective experience of a listener, which includes thoughts, feelings, imagery, and personal meaning. This approach to analysis has been applied in GIM (Bonny, 2002) and Group Analytic Music Therapy (Ahonen-Eerikainen, 2007). When describing music or a subjective experience of music, it is necessary to refer to metaphors. This has sparked endless debates about the role of metaphor in musical description. (i.e. Ahonen-Eerikainen, 2007; Boghossian 2002; Bonde, 2000; Krantz 1987; Putman 1989; Stige 2004).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research design was *qualitative*, *abductive*, and *phenomenological*. The nature of the research was retrospective and recollective as participants were required to reflect on their experiences (Van Manen, 1997). The point of phenomenological research is to borrow other people�s experiences in order to understand the deeper meaning of it in the context of the whole of human experience (Van Manen, 1984 in Baker et. al., 1992, p. 1357). The study can be considered abductive as the principal researcher applied her previous knowledge of the use of clinical improvisation to dialogue with the data collected and with various theoretical elements. A phenomenological approach allowed a broader perspective that could capture the richness of human experience and the essential meaning of lived experience. The aim was to understand a situation from the participants� own frames of reference from multiple angles. Therefore the data was collected from a number of different perspectives: by self-reflection (heuristic descriptions); by interviewing participants about their experience of the phenomenon under study; by gathering literature about the topic; by analysing the improvised music, and by examining depictions of the topic as expressed in works of art, or in poetry (Forinash & Grocke, 2005, p. 323; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The experiences investigated in this context are considered to be more than opinions, beliefs, or intellectual analyses. They encompass many different layers and facets of the person, including bodily reactions and emotions as well as thoughts, perceptions, images, associations and memories. Experience has both spontaneous and reflective components: Spontaneous components include everything that takes place from moment to moment while the person is having the experience, either while improvising or listening to the improvised music. The reflective components include reactions, thoughts, and analyses that arise whenever the person makes observations about his or herself and his or her experience, either during or after the experience itself. Participants can either experience what is happening with a free-floating

consciousness or observe what they are experiencing by reflecting upon this free-floating consciousness on another level. In other words, there is a direct spontaneous level of experience and a meta-level, which consists of reflecting about the experience (Bruscia, 2005).

Research questions included:

1. What kind of process is experienced when one improvises with an unknown person in an unfamiliar musical style?
2. What is "in the air" during live interactive improvisation?
3. What are the links between the process of self-actualization and "peak experiences" introduced by Abraham Maslow (1968) and the experiences described by participants in relation to their live improvised/interactive musical processes?

Research Setting and Participants

The participants in this research study were six music therapy master students, most of them having a previous honours BA or B.Mus music degree and with 1-2 years experience in clinical improvisation training (Lee, 2003). They were asked to participate in live interactive musical improvisations with Kostas Apostolakis (see footnote 3-4), an accomplished musician, improvisator, composer, performer, and music teacher. Apostolakis� music drew from Indian, Andes, Celtic, and classical influences, in addition to his native Cretan and Greek roots, whereas the music therapy master students were mostly trained according to classical Western music. Therefore, the study inevitably dealt with the meeting of two contrasting musical worlds: East and West.

Data Collection

The data consisted of audio-taped improvisations, three interviews (based on phenomenological in-depth interview techniques), and the written reflections of participants who had participated in interactive live improvisation sessions. Participants were engaged in two separate 45 min interactive live improvisation sessions. Subsequent to the improvisation a first interview of approximately 15 minutes in length was conducted by the principal researcher to capture participants� reflections while they were still closely connected to the creative experience. A second interview (15 mins) took place after the second experience. The third interview (45 min) took place within the next month of the last experience. At this time the participants were to listen to the recording of the music and reflect on the experience from a different perspective according to the Ferrara�s method[5] (1984, 1991): *open listening* and *semantic meaning*. After the interview the participants were asked to listen to the improvisation recordings on their own and provide written reflections about the *syntactical meaning*, *ontological meaning* and the *final open listening*.

Open listening- subjective response	Listening for *syntactical meaning* �describing the sound as it is heard	Listening for *semantic meaning*:	Listening for *ontological meaning* of the music	Open listening- the meaning dimension of all the hearings of the music: *Title*
The listeners write down their *subjective responses*, including any impressions that stand out.	The listeners write down all their *objective responses*; musical sounds that are heard, including instruments, embellishments, dynamic changes, melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic features.	The listeners describe what the *meaning of the music is* thought to be, *what mood it suggests*, and *how they feel*; it includes *images* and *body sensations*.	The listeners put the music into their own life worlds and try to understand what the message of that music is for them.	The previous four hearings are *synthesized* and *integrated* to create a final description of the work. A *title* of the improvisation is given.

This format of three separate interviews was advantageous for two reasons. First, the research participants� ability to focus for greater periods of time increased. Secondly, interpretation was enhanced when the participants were viewed as co-investigators in the research (Van Manen, 1997). In the third interview participants were invited to reflect on their experiences with the purpose of determining much deeper meanings or themes. The interview method used was an in-depth, un-structured and informal one consisting primarily of open-ended questions, a series of potential questions to guide the investigator to ensure that the topic was completely explored. It is important to note that the steps of data collection and analysis were not totally separate but occurred simultaneously.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Phenomenology requires intense reflection. It involves "looking at the experience with wide open eyes, with knowledge, facts and theories held at bay" (Oiler, 1982 in Baker et. al., 1992, p. 1358). Multi-methodological instruments were used to collect the data. Improvisations and interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and identified with a numerical code system. Two methods of analysis were adapted in order "to hold to the primacy of the subjective experience"

(Riemen, 1986 in Baker et al., 1992, p. 1358): Music was analyzed by using Ferrara�s (1984, 1991) method and NVivo qualitative software analysis program was used for the text-analysis (interviews, reflections, images and musical analysis were created with Ferrara�s technique). A modified mode of the *Straussian* mode of the grounded theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1997, 1998) was employed in a constructivist frame of mind for the first of the two data analysis phases. Through the technique of triangulation, "not only was the phenomenon interpreted according to the possible social processes that occur about the phenomenon, but understanding was enhanced about possible meanings of existential human experience of the phenomenon" (Annells, 2006, p. 58; see also Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). NVivo qualitative software analysis was used as a tool to facilitate grounded theory analysis steps such as *open, axial, and selective coding*. The data was divided into concepts, and concepts into categories. Properties and property dimensions were then assigned to categories along a continuum, during the open coding phase (Hueser, 1999, p. 61 in Amir, 2005, p. 366). Axial coding involved procedures for connecting categories found in open coding. The coding process focused on matching conditions, contexts, action/interactional strategies and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Selective coding involved identifying core categories from the analysis and relating them in a systematic way to other categories. The principal researcher organized the categories in groups and grounded the theory by constantly comparing it against the data. Therefore, the insight constructed from that phase beneficially broadened the researcher�s perspective about the phenomenon when later engaging in the second phenomenological phase (Annells, 2006, p. 59). During this phase, the text was read several times, following *Van Manen�s phenomenological method* (1997), and the statements that were particularly relevant for the phenomenon under investigation were identified and highlighted. These thematic statements became the beginning threads of the thematic analysis (Borkan, 1999) and were subsequently organized as meaningful categories which described the experiences of the participants. This kind of holistic description "gives the what, when, where, and how, without the whys. It is concerned with discerning what constitutes the phenomenon" (Bruscia, 2005, p. 89).

The following sections introduce the results of the study. They are presented as a semi-narrative (through descriptive and explorative categories) in order to keep the richness of the participants� experiences intact. For the purpose of this article, the data has been reorganized into two sections: the first describing the process of meeting one another through the medium of musical improvisation, and the second describing what occurs once an important connection is established between players. In the second section, the participant�s testimonies have been linked directly to Maslow�s notion of self-actualization and peak-experiences. It should be noted that it would be beyond the scope of this article to describe the entirety of this study in detail. Although the article is focused on the idea of self-actualization in music, it does not mean that the first part of the results is less important or relevant. In fact, it describes many of the challenges and conditions necessary in order to attain the stage of self-actualization.

Results: Descriptive Categories

1. "Anybody there?"�Searching, Waiting and Connecting

The first category portrays the beginning of the journey. It has been described as searching and waiting, meeting, connecting, or *taking-off* in music. Improvisation between strangers can be viewed as a kind of *intermusical, interpersonal, intrapersonal*, and *intramusical* encounter (Bruscia, 1987). Initially, players explore together musically. They investigate what their roles are and when they should initiate a new musical idea. They search for a good timing, analyze the atmosphere, and explore possible roles available to them. They take turns, exchange roles, send and receive messages, imitate, mirror, match, reflect, provoke, initiate, and challenge one another. In short, they explore and develop their musical relationship. They are in search of one another�s music. Ultimately, it could be argued that they are *in search* of a new way of connecting by touching one another�s core selves (Stern, 1985). On this intermusical and intramusical journey, they also meet the challenges of interpersonal and intrapersonal connectedness and disconnectedness:

> At first it was a little uncomfortable... I wasn�t sure if the sounds were going to clash... it was a lot of figuring out where we were. But then after a few minutes, we were really connecting together. I was just repeating the same notes a lot, and getting into a sort of trance. It kept building and building and then it was like, Ahh! This is it...we�re connecting! (Open listening)

Some musical improvisations are great examples which demonstrate both players being *in tune* to the development of musical form. In some cases it seems like a series of distinct musical moments, dances, or separate paragraphs or sections of a story. In other instances it seems

more like a bull-fight as both players negotiate the form:

> [0:00] The bouzouki begins a new groove with syncopation. It is picked up and followed almost immediately by the piano… [2:25] The bouzouki plays a melody in a tremolo. It sounds more like yearning than before. The piano responds with a bit more melodic movement… (Syntactical Analysis)

Improvisation includes listening and turn-taking. Players send messages, wait for answers, receive responses, and continue this process in endless cycles, as they wait for the right moment, for example:

> He was probably just waiting for me to get there. But when he saw that I was there with him, then we took off. Then it seemed he was waiting for me again, and then it was like, okay, let�s go. And then it was just so beautiful. (Open listening)

> K seems to want to create more energy while the pianist wants to stay in this calm atmosphere. They seem out of sync with one another at this point. (Syntactical Analysis)

> [31:00] The pianist settles on a repeating bass figure (Db, Eb) while atonal improvisation continues on top. [33:00] Pianist leaves silences for K to fill. Improvisation ends. (Syntactical Analysis)

Every improvisation sets its own culture and its own rules. Everything seems to begin *in the air*. But who determines what is in this atmosphere? Both players wait and wonder not only how they will respond to one another intermusically but also interpersonally. What kind of messages will be sent and received? Will both players be able to find their own place or *spot* in the music? Where will the music take them? Where do they *want* the music to take them? The next quote explores this dilemma:

> I was really ready to go in my mind, but as soon as you sit at the piano, there�s always a little feeling that says, "Okay. Don�t feel nervous, let yourself go". But at the same time, the notes are there, my body has to play, you know, for the music to happen. And so there�s always a little moment of discomfort, but it must have lasted maybe a minute or two. During the first minute, when we first started playing, I was just exploring and trying to see, �where am I going to go here, like where�s my… where�s my spot, you know? Where should I be?� or, �where do I want to be?� (Open listening)

The ultimate need in any interpersonal relationship is to be seen, heard and validated. However sometimes what happens is the opposite; instead there is discordance, mismatch and rebellion within the relationship. The following testimonies illustrate this:

> It feels like a little bit of �rebellion� as well…I�m wanting it to sound different and not totally match…I think my plan is working, as he begins slowing down his playing on the bouzouki. I add a slow syncopated beat against his repeated 8th notes… (Open listening)

> I feel myself wanting the sound of what I�m playing to be so apart of the experience, when I feel like there�s room to be heard, I begin to sing, on the vowel "ooh". K�s playing becomes softer and softer, but I continue to play rather loudly, not really wanting to play softly. But I�m feeling somewhat powerless as to where K�s playing is leading me. (Open listening)

But discordance and rebellion are not necessarily destructive and can in fact enhance the relationship when finally consonance returns and both players agree with one another again. In music, sometimes strong intimacy is experienced when separated notes join in unison:

> [8:00] The piano plays a two-note counterpoint against K�s melody. [8:45] The music is even calmer now. K plays single notes without tremolo softly as piano continues to play quarter note melodies. There seems to be a strong musical intimacy now. The counterpoints are beautiful and when notes join in unison, it gives a powerful sense of touching one another musically. This seems to be a peak of musical connection. The music is so simple and bare yet powerful. (Synactical Analysis)

2. "We Have Arrived Somewhere"�Connectedness in the Air

This section introduces the world of self-actualization and various peak-experiences that can occur once two people feel a sense of communion or heightened connectedness in musical improvisation. Although it should be noted that to feel connected with the person with whom we are improvising does not mean that both players are always having peak experiences. Rather,

peak experiences can be part of this connection, but not a prerequisite. Peak experiences are extraordinary moments during which human being's potentials are entirely, creatively, and cheerfully actuated. They are part of a self-actualization process. Self-actualization is the utmost level of human need. It is an ongoing process, not a motionless state. As Abraham Maslow describes, it is "the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities, etc." (Maslow 1970, p. 150). He conceives the actualizing man "not as an ordinary man with something added, but rather as the ordinary man *with nothing taken away*. The average man," he believes, "is a full human being with dampened and inhibited powers and capacities" (cited in Lowry, 1973b, p. 91). According to Maslow (1970) self-actualizers have 1) a more efficient perception of reality and a more comfortable relationship with it; 2) an acceptance of self, others, life circumstances, etc.; 3) spontaneity; simplicity; genuineness; 4) a sustained novelty of appreciation; 5) peak experiences; 6) profound interpersonal relations; and 7) self-actualizing originality and creativity (pp. 153-172).

Maslow (1971) introduces different paths which lead to self-actualization. (1) <u>Concentration</u>; (2) <u>Growth Choices</u>; (3) <u>Self-awareness</u>; (4) <u>Honesty and beginning to take responsibility for our actions</u>; (5) <u>Peak experiences</u>; and (6) <u>Identification and elimination of unnecessary defenses</u>. Since there was a large amount of congruity between these paths and the participant�s experiences, this section will compare the research data with these aspects in view of demonstrating the potential of musical improvisation as a medium for self-actualization.

Concentration

According to Maslow (1971) *concentration* leads to self-actualization: "...self- actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption" (Maslow, 1971, p. 45). The research data showed several examples of moments of heightened awareness and intense involvement in music. Ultimately, intrapersonal and intramusical connection means that the improvisers allow themselves to *feel* the music, which requires maximum attention and focus. Feeling the music relates to body sensations, emotions, and images:

> It�s so different…seeing him feel the music in 7, and 11�and I�m talking numbers� but to him, he knows it�s in 7 but that doesn�t matter; he just goes with it. I was trying to go with it and just watched him go, and towards the end, I was just trying not to count and just go with it (Open listening)

Feeling the music requires a certain *letting-go*, of our need to control and allowing ourselves to play, feel music, and to simply be in music, staying in the present moment:

> I could let go and really be…I had some good moments of being at one with the music and just letting go which was really good….I guess it�s connecting with music (Ontological listening).

Some participants reported experiencing a trance-like state of mind:

> It�s a point of more focus with less effort. So, it�s like you can hear more details and can predict things more. So there�s a sense of music flowing and you being more of a responder to music and just listening and letting the music say what it needs to say and not trying to control it as much. There�s that sense of letting go, being at one with the music, it�s connecting with music itself and whatever was coming up from K and X. Just simply having open ears and being open to whatever sounds came and just responding simply to the music rather than trying to invent something and consciously creating something. (Ontological listening)

Connecting and letting go mentally in improvisation usually involves attaining a *blank* mind�that is, playing without thinking too much. A metaphor to describe this is "floating in music", as one participate reported: "I don�t swim. I�m not drowning, I�m floating. I feel good. I feel light as well."

Growth Choices

Growth choices are also a part of self-actualization. Life is a series of choices. Each choice has its positive and negative aspects. Self actualization is the process that makes each decision a choice for growth. The research data often showed examples in which participants had to make *musical* choices, whether it be choosing between *jumping into the unknown* or staying in the *safety zone* � in other words, between growth and safety, or between progressing and regressing. To desire safety is to stay with the familiar but to risk becoming stagnant. To prefer growth is to open ourselves to fresh and challenging experiences and to jump into the unknown and risk the possibility of being disappointed or even hurt. The next quote from the ontological listening reflections illustrates this:

> It adds a lot of spiritual quality...I can�t really describe it...and the rocking back and forth...
> it�s like a rocking chair and yet there�s energy...I feel more focused...a kind of
> feeling...jumping into... like a frog jumping into a pond. (Semantic listening)

> The music was short, especially the ending; it felt like there was much to say, but it ended just
> like that. I think that�s life as well. I never know what will happen tomorrow... I don�t know
> what will happen in the next moment or next hour. I used to have an �agenda-like� style, but
> for the past two month I thought it was OK to have a relaxed life style. I don�t know how to
> prepare myself for life. But I know that I should enjoy it and make every moment of my life
> count! I�m learning how to slow down and really look around me, and to appreciate what�s
> going on in my life. (Ontological meaning)

As in everyday life, musical growth includes the presence of tension and release. Tension rises
and falls according to choices made. The next example demonstrates long period of tense music
resolving to a lighter atmosphere.

> The piano brings back parallel 3rds in the top register. It repeats descending phrases (EDCAGFFF)
> a few times then stays on F, repeating the note in 16ths. This is the final climax, the release of
> tension. It�s a joyful feeling. Much lighter in contrast to the previous 10 minutes of dark modes.
> The pulse dissolves. The music ends. (Synactical Analysis)

It is often difficult to know whether one of the players decides to shift the mood, or if it is the
musical form itself that guides the shift. However, just as life brings us opportunities for growth,
we are capable of creating our own opportunities. It appears to be a two way process in both
cases.

Self-Awareness

The third road leading to self actualization is self-awareness. Self-awareness means to become
more aware of what we like and dislike and how we respond to the outside world. It appears to
be linked directly with intrapersonal connections. Intrapersonal connections can be experienced
for example between a player�s own visual and auditory responses to music, his or her
thoughts, images and feelings, body and emotions. It can also be experienced between the
player�s personality and music (Bruscia, 1987). In musical interaction, this kind of multifaceted
process, leading to a heightened self-awareness, can bring much gratification and personal
meaning, and can even help the player in finding a new direction in life.

> I now see more of *me*� the *other* me that�s never allowed to come out. I now need to find the
> balance between the two, but I look forward to the new life ahead of me. I know life isn�t easy.
> There�s pain within the joy, there�s beauty within the ugly. But I got to believe what I want
> and who I am in order to go on, and I am ready for that (Ontological meaning)

> I see myself... walking on liquid... going forward... I am walking on this road... Just walking
> towards... I�m OK... a white line... black pattern... I�m getting smaller and smaller... It�s a nice
> pattern though... It�s not dirty... Missing me becomes a point... Although the background is
> black... the colour is changing. It�s beautiful... I see the beauty in the ugly, joy within pain...
> sometimes the easiest thing. ... It�s encouraging. It�s beautiful to see myself on top of every
> color. I see me... ME! (Ontological meaning)

Intrapersonal connections can sometimes be explored between the player�s past experiences
and music:

> Many memories came back and most of them were good, very good, memories! I also noticed
> that I am getting better at accepting change (in this case, the dissonance and uncertainty of the
> direction in the music). Looking back at the description, �mountain� was the word I used a lot,
> and also the �pure white light�. Right now, listening back to the music, I can�t really
> understand why I saw white lights. But I think that part of me was looking for a clear direction;
> something that would show me the way. But at this present moment, I think I have found the
> way. It�s refreshing to revisit the path. (Ontological meaning)

Honesty and Responsibility

Honesty and beginning to take responsibility for our actions are crucial elements in the process
of self-actualization. We do not have to do things only because we feel we need to please others
or to look good. The research data included examples where participants begin to look within

for the answers. They become in touch with their inner selves and learn to trust their own judgments and act accordingly in their musical choices. The next passage is an example of a participant making direct links between the music and issues faced in daily life:

> I often do too much to make sure I cover whatever I need to cover in class, with my students, with my piano playing and in my music. Maybe I have a complicated personality because I am a Scorpion. Well, pleasing everyone in your life isn�t an easy task. But why do I have to please everyone? Is it possible to please everyone? �Simple� is the new word that I will put in my vocabulary, as a word of wisdom. I believe that the word �simple� will bring me more joy and fewer complications in my life. (Ontological listening)

Peak Experiences

This section has been further subdivided in order to show specific links between the participants� testimonies and each characteristic associated with peak experiences. Peak experiences are joyful and exhilarating moments in our lives. According to Maslow (1971), "peak experiences are transient moments of self-actualization" (p. 1). Some people enjoy more peak experiences than others, particularly those Maslow called *transcending self-actualizers*. However, all people have experienced some peak experiences even though many often tend to take them for granted. For example, one�s reaction while watching a stunning sunset can be an example of a peak experience. Often they are triggered by forceful and inspiring incidences: "It looks as if any experience of real excellence, of real perfection … tends to produce a peak experience" (1971, p. 175). They are often inspired by intense feelings of love, the irresistible gorgeousness of nature, or revelation to amazing art or music. During peak experiences people are more integrated, more complete, more aware of themselves and their surroundings, more accepting of one another, have less anxiety, and use their energy constructively. The research data described how participants were actually able to feel the music, how they were able to let everything else go, be carried by music, experience release, and the present moment more clearly and accurately. They were also able to experience calmness, centeredness, openness, energy, purity, groundedness, timelessness, and playfulness. These are all elements associated with peak-experiences. The following comments from participants correspond with each aspect:

Calmness and Openness

> Something has "opened"… that feeling of expansion and openness… I think somehow at the top of my head things seemed open… I think in the moment maybe I was, I don�t know, I felt calm. I felt just… settled into what was going on. (Open listening)

Centeredness

> I feel more focused now. In the beginning, I felt that my energy was kind of all over the place at first, and now I feel like it�s more centered. I feel more centered and aligned. (Open listening)

Energy

> It�s really hot, because my heart is pumping really fast. In the drumming, you could feel the passion… it was really good, it was like positive energy even though my heart was pumping really fast. It was exciting! I liked that. (Open listening)

Purity

Purity, as described by the participants, was experienced in a variety of ways. Sometimes it was music with a clear tonal center that brought a sense of purity:

> I didn�t want to go into atonal music… Just the fact that there were three of us, I preferred staying in the key, but I know that, a couple of times, there were atonal parts and I thought "oh!"…The first improvisation was really good, I really liked it just because it had a tonal centre. It was in D and I could always go back to D. It was fine for me. Some people like dark and heavy music because it seems to have healing qualities, like having the sense of being washed, or having the dust cleaned off of you. But I was really happy to have that tonal centre, to have that tonal feeling in me. That�s why atonal music doesn�t fit in that picture for me. (Open listening)

For the next participant it was the concrete structure of the music that was purifying:

> In terms of meaning, it sounds refined; it�s not "wishy-washy". It has a concrete structure. It has clear chords and a clear form. Then you can hear individual voices very clearly but at the same time it�s a whole; one thing. It�s actually very soothing, the nice sounds (not atonal, but major and minor chords) are really clean to me. It�s purifying to me. It feels good, definitely feels good. (Open listening)

For this participant the rise and fall of tension and the pulse of the improvisation were purifying:

> During the piece I felt a lot of life, a lot of spirit, some purity I guess... I think today there was a lot more purity in some of the music we were playing, it felt clean... and I had feelings of excitement because of the different climaxes we would build...and it was much more natural in that way...the waves, the sensation of a wave, where the tension rises a bit. But it�s a good tension, a tension that breathes, just go with it. That waviness in my body I think was part of it.... Freshness, it felt fresh in my body, because I could feel a pulse that I don�t feel all the time. (Open listening)

Groundedness

> The down beats gave me a sense of grounding, a sense of direction, that we were going forward. (Open listening)

Timelessness

> Enlightening! I just can�t believe how long I was in there. It felt, seriously... it felt...I though, "Oh maybe we�ve been here for forty minutes or so, forty-five minutes". I don�t know. It was really good, really good. (Open listening)

Playfulness

> There were aspects that were fun and playful. The drumming was very playful, but inspiring, up-tempo; very motivating, which got him singing, so I started to sing as well and that was very much like we had traveled some place, to some island somewhere. (Open listening)

Identification and elimination of unnecessary defenses

A final path to self-actualization is to identify our defenses and to get rid of those that we do not need anymore. As we grow, we become more aware of the ways in which we distort the reality and our own self image. In time we become aware of transferences, repressions, and projections. The next example describes one of the participants� reflections during the ontological listening:

> I think there are still many things in my life that I will probably never try. There are too many *musts* and *shoulds* in my life. Although I must say that I am getting better at accepting new material. But if I were asked to sing with the music, I would be very uncomfortable, because if I were to sing, the music would *have* to sound right. If not, I would not be doing the *right* thing. I don�t like doing things incorrectly, so I choose to walk a safe path. But inside of me, I admire people who are adventurous, because I know that somewhere in my heart I would love to be a part of that. Just like the bell sounds in the music that I played... I can�t help just be part of it! (Ontological listening)

Discussion

Although the topic of musical improvisation is still considered a fairly new area of inquiry in the academic community, it appears to have been a subject of interest for many artists and intellectuals for a long time. Perhaps researchers have hesitated due to the fact that the nature of improvisation is *mysterious* and *intangible* at its core. The mystery and power of improvisation becomes apparent when two musicians from completely different backgrounds play freely together and still manage to create an intimate bond or interpersonal connection, as was the case in this study. The essence of the process of improvisation seems to be ungraspable by empirical means. However, this does not mean that nothing can be said about it. In fact, all domains of inquiry bring different ideas and perspectives on this process.

This study was concerned mainly with defining and describing what takes place *in the air* during live interactive improvisations between two strangers. As an emerging theory, it also considered if the data had any connections to Abraham Maslow�s (1968) peak experiences and concept of self-actualization. Several examples from the research data illustrated the different phases and aspects of self-actualization. This account in the narrative style was to give the reader a holistic picture of the feelings, images and thought processes of the participants. According to the descriptive categories, it appears that the medium of improvisation can be viewed as a means to self-actualization. But did anything else take place during these improvisations? Now that peak-experiences have been identified, we are left with a new question: how can we explain the connectedness that so quickly took place between two strangers? What was its nature? And what kinds of conditions were needed for it to take place? Finally, what is the role of the *other* on our individual journeys of self-actualization?

A possible explanation for the presence of connectedness is that the research data may have referred to elements in the realm of archetypes, the collective unconscious, synchronicity and intuition which are some of C. J. Jung�s most important contributions to modern psychology (Coward, 1996; Lindorff, 1995; Hamm, 1997). Burrows (2004) applies some of these constructs in attempt to explain the nature and process of musical improvisation. He suggests that there could be some forms of *musical archetypes* which could be universally understood by musicians who improvise freely in a group. He suggests that there could be direct parallels between emotional/spiritual archetypes and archetypes found in musical form; that somehow, music can express in sound relationships the same patterns inherent in the human psyche and the collective unconscious. This leads Burrows to believe in the possibility of a spiritual nature associated with free improvisation. Indeed, some of the states performers achieve during musical improvisation transcend words and seem to point to something deeper, in the core of our beings. As he suggests, deconstructing music and attempting to explain it in linguistic or logical terms would never do justice to the sacred aspects of a musical encounter between two people.

Furthermore, the idea of synchronicity, in the sense of *meaningful coincidences* as described in Fournier and Ulansey (1997) has been explored in music by John Cage, who�s compositions involved a high amount of improvisation (Hamm, 1997). Cage explains in his own words his views on the value of synchronicity in music: "We are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion. . . . Now structure is not put into a work, but comes up in the person who perceived it in himself. There is therefore no problem of understanding but the possibility of awareness" (p. 286). The research data pointed to several occasions of synchronicity, and moments of meaningful coincidences.

Also related to Jung�s construct of intuition is the idea of *flow*, a term coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Bogdan, 2003). He describes flow as a feeling of wholeness present when one acts with total involvement. It precedes conscious thought. During moments of flow, the sense of time is perceived differently and there is little distinction between self and environment. Through a heightened connectedness with the world, the person seems to simply know what comes next without having to think about it, as though one was taking dictation. Csikszentmihalyi believes that this flow applies not only to the idea of play but to artistic and religious experiences. This concept has also been described by Nachmanovitch (1990). Flow seems to be what all jazz musicians aspire to achieve in a performance. It is often described as being in a state of passivity, simply listening to and *obeying* the music. The research data showed several examples of this kind of flow where the improvisers simply allowed music to carry them when they where *floating with music*.

Finally, the results of this study benefit the practice of music psychotherapy. There is obviously something significant in the air when two people enter into an improvisational encounter. Improvisation involves searching and waiting for one another, connecting, meeting, taking off, building and releasing, floating in music, and finally feeling and being in music. This entails that the actual music created by a client and therapist should never be underestimated or thought of as unimportant to the therapeutic process, for it can provide many clues about a person�s psyche and his or her relationship to the world. It can therefore act as a non-verbal means of gaining information about someone, similar to observing body language. But more importantly, it can act as an alternative gateway for communication between two people, which can be useful especially in cases where verbal communication is inhibited or impossible. Although music is a medium much less tangible than that of words, it often seems to be able to capture something even more authentic about a person. As the results of this study have shown, musical improvisation is more than two people creating music together; it also involves a journey of self-actualization.

Notes

[1]Principal researcher, developed the research proposal and monitored the research project, conducted the data collection, data analysis and abductive theoretical integration.

[2]Research assistant, assisted with the literature review, musical analysis, and editing.

[3]I want to acknowledge Dr. Athan Apostol for introducing this research idea. On a winter afternoon he came to the Laurier Center for Music Therapy Research and introduced his Buzuki teacher Kostas Apostolakis. Dr. Apostol had experienced and observed that something extramusical occurs while Kostas improvises. At least, some listeners while being part of those improvisations seemed to describe their experiences as being somehow *heightened* � or

something that even *changed their life*. Dr. Apostol wondered if I were interested in setting up a research study in order to gain more insight into "what happens in the air" when music takes place. We scheduled a meeting in which Kostas met my Music Therapy Masters students, musicians with a previous honours music degree. As Kostas�s music represented Byzantic idioms and participating music therapy students were mostly trained according to Classical Western music, the study also became a meeting point between two musical worlds, East and West.

[4]I want to acknowledge Kostas Apostolakis for participating in this study. Kostas Apostolakis is a composer, musician, and performer. His approach to music draws from India, the Andes, Celtic, and Classical influences, in addition to his native Cretan and Greek roots. In 1990 he founded a music school in Toronto. He has been playing in various venues throughout Canada, and recorded with several artists. Kostas�s Music School is located in Danforth, Toronto.

[5]Ferrara (1984), a musicologist, applied reflexive phenomenology to the analysis of music and identified five stages in analyzing a contemporary piece of music on first hearing. This seminal work has inspired a number of music therapy researchers to adapt this protocol to varying degrees for use in music therapy (Forinash & Grocke, 2005, p. 324).

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