

Classical Improvisation Facilitating Enhanced Performer-Audience Engagement and a Mutually Developing Impulse Exchange with Concert Audiences

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Abstract : Improvisation was part of Western classical concert culture and performers' skill sets until early 20th century. Historical accounts, as well as recent studies, indicate that improvisatory elements in the programme may contribute specifically towards the audiences' experience of enhanced emotional engagement during the concert. This paper presents findings from the author's artistic practice research, which explored re-introducing improvisation to Western classical performance practice as a musician (cellist and ensemble partner/leader). In an investigation of four concert cycles, the performer-researcher sought to gain solo and chamber music improvisation techniques (both related to and independent of repertoire), conduct ensemble improvisation rehearsals, design concerts with an improvisatory approach, and reflect on interactions with audiences after each concert. Data was collected through use of reflective diary, video recordings, measurement of sound parameters, questionnaires, a focus group, and interviews. The performer's empirical experiences and findings from audience research components were juxtaposed and interrogated to better understand the (1) rehearsal and planning processes that enable improvisatory elements to return to Western classical concert experience and (2) the emotional experience and type of engagement that occur throughout the concert experience for both performer and audience members. This informed the development of a concert model, in which a programme of solo and chamber music repertoire and improvisations were combined according to historically evidenced performance practice (including free formal solo and ensemble improvisations based on audience suggestions). Inspired by historical concert culture, where elements of risk-taking, spontaneity, and audience involvement (such as proposing themes for fantasies) were customary, this concert model invited musicians to contribute to the process personally and creatively at all stages, from programme planning, and throughout the live concert. The type of democratic, personal, creative, and empathetic collaboration that emerged, as a result, appears unique in Western classical contexts, rather finding resonance in jazz ensemble, drama, or interdisciplinary settings. The research identified features of ensemble improvisation, such as empathy, emergence, mutual engagement, and collaborative creativity, that became mirrored in audience's responses, generating higher levels of emotional engagement, empathy, inclusivity, and a participatory, co-creative experience. It appears that during improvisatory moments in the concert programme, audience members started feeling more like active participants in a creative, collaborative exchange and became stakeholders in a deeper phenomenon of meaning-making and narrativization. Examining interactions between all involved during the concert revealed that performer-audience impulse exchange occurred on multiple levels of awareness and seemed to build upon each other, resulting in particularly strong experiences of both performer and audience's engagement. This impact appeared especially meaningful for audience members who were seldom concertgoers and reported little familiarity with classical music. The study found that re-introducing improvisatory elements to Western classical concert programmes has strong potential in increasing audience's emotional engagement with the musical performance, enabling audience members to connect more personally with the individual performers, and in reaching new-to-classical-music audiences.

Keywords : artistic research, audience engagement, audience experience, classical improvisation, ensemble improvisation, emotional engagement, improvisation, improvisatory approach, musical performance, practice research

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