

Improvising the self

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ABSTRACT: This paper details an autoethnographic study through which intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects of improvisation are considered in relation to music therapy teaching and practice.

KEY WORDS: Music therapy, autoethnography, arts-based inquiry

Within a rich creative landscape of arts, health and wellbeing praxes, music therapy exists as a relatively young profession borne out of an ancient correspondence between music and health (Darnley-Smith & Patey, 2003). Very broadly speaking, music therapists engage with persons across the lifespan in different contexts through music and sound and use various theoretical frames to understand therapeutic relationship and process. To date, music therapy has largely been dominated by Euro-centric ideas and conceptions of “music” and “therapy”, yet much needed space is starting to emerge for a more racially diverse, culturally and critically aware profession and practice (Magee et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2021; Shaw, 2019).

In my music therapy practice, I use a range of instruments including violin in order to offer opportunities for playful connection and non-verbal exchange. Improvisation - and an improvisational attitude - supports the work which often involves interactions with persons who communicate or express themselves “beyond words” (Quinn et al., 2019). I make use of different theoretical approaches depending on the person I am working with but would describe my practice as fundamentally relational, after Trondalen (2017). In understanding therapeutic process therefore, my thinking is informed by object relations theory (Winnicott, 2006; Gomez, 1998) and in particular Benjamin’s (2004;

2018) relational stance, namely her articulation of the third with focus on intersubjectivity through recognition.

Like many others in the UK during March 2020, I suddenly and unexpectedly found myself working from home in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Though I recognised my economic privilege in being able to continue working, I immediately found online interactions restrictive and compressed. Pursued by a two-dimensional version of myself, improvising with others online was unsatisfactory, with latency preventing sonic connections in “real” time. In response, I decided to see if I could explore these feelings and engage with processes that might constructively feed back into music therapy teaching and practice. I understand improvisation as self-reflexive method, methodology and personal philosophy; as a way of doing and learning as well as a way of being, and this was my starting point.

Methodology/methods

In music therapy research, self-reflexive and autoethnographic methods of inquiry have emerged, in recent years, as a generative way to explore intrapersonal processes and their impact in particular applied contexts, situations or relationships (Viega & Forinash, 2016). For music therapists themselves, an exploration of the relationship between music-making, music and self begins early in training. This interaction forms a significant part of self-knowing (Beer, 2016; McCaffrey, 2013) and involves the reflexive development of what could be called a third ear. In other words, the ability to listen and hear the self, other, and the in-between.

Before COVID-19, asking questions and creating a space to address these questions through improvisation was a daily practice (Haire, 2020a); a way of maintaining some sort of aesthetic-self equilibrium. The bodily feeling of being with the violin rather than the sounds I produce, was often the directing influence during these spaces. Frequently, I had found myself exploring ways to co-exist and correspond with an instrument overly well-known, materially distinct from me, yet interwoven bodily and culturally through my past existences.

My improvising space was simultaneously condensed and magnified during lockdown. As I was beginning to search for a way to engage with the complex personal emotional response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I chanced on the '100days' project (<https://www.100daysscotland.co.uk>) and saw that this offered a frame within which to play with my responses. I decided to record my daily violin improvisations and share them on the Soundcloud platform (<https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire>).

At this point, the leading idea was to document a process of creative self-dialogue and I was inspired by Marion Milner’s (2011; 2010) self-led explorations through drawing and journaling. Improvising and recording at its simplest offered me “something musical to do” (Annesley & Haire, in press). Beyond something musical to do, I was keen to explore

the voices of myself that were emerging unexpectedly at this time and to see if dialogue was possible. This idea also had a pedagogical usefulness behind it. Music therapists had very suddenly been pushed to experiment with various online platforms and ways of being with others through these online platforms. I had the underlying sense that my own explorations of being with myself online might have value in understanding being with others online.

100days project

“It will mean walking in a fog for a bit, but it’s the only way which is not a presumption, forcing the self into a theory.” (Milner, 2011, p. 62).

For 100 consecutive days, I improvised and recorded myself. Sometimes I noted down reflections if something was particularly intriguing; on most days I did not, I just made sounds. Improvisations ranged from around two minutes to five minutes in length and in all but one I used my violin. My initial written reflections: *Moving forward blindly, not listening as I go¹*, echoed Milner’s (2011) beginnings noted above. I became aware too of the sense of vulnerability about sharing the improvisations, which had not been conscious when planning the project. I felt a tension between putting something out there that was more aesthetically finished and sharing the rawness of an improvisation.

I documented the first improvisation (day 1) in a blog, “Finding space to play” (Haire, 2020a) and did the same after the end of the process in another blog, “Articulating process” (Haire, 2020b). In this latter blog I pulled out the contrast between sounding process and sounding articulation. A sense of this balance became important as the project played out. Something about the movement and articulation of ‘process’ (articulated process, say), seemed to speak to how I might form a sense of coherence or meaning in improvisations.

Day 1: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-1>

This first improvisation was the only one where I interwove three lines. Hearing it now, it sounds derivative and yet still affecting. The dialogue between each line is clear and the sense of fullness in beginning, alive with possibility still moves me. Overall, there was minimal response to my sharing on Soundcloud, mostly from persons with whom I had some prior connection. However, after the first few days a music therapist, Peter Kemp, responded:

1 Material from my own journal entries are detailed in italics throughout.

I have been enjoying your 100 day challenge improvisations and blog. I listened to them back-to-back today and during the 3rd improv I really felt drawn in and wanting to play [...] Day 5 felt really self-contained though and I just wanted to listen and perhaps respond musically afterwards - or maybe just leave it at the listening. Ah... the silent, listening presence. We can't really multi-track that can we? I await day six and will listen with viola or violin in hand this time and see what unfolds. Thank you for sharing these, it's really helped me to feel a sense of reconnection.

I was struck by these comments and felt glad that my explorations had prompted a sense of meaningful connection at this time. I was especially drawn to the question about what made some of the improvisations open to dialogue, and others more “self-contained”. This could be described in Western musical terms. For example, the intervallic² openness of day 3 with fifths and long harmonics perhaps invited another voice, and maybe the unpredictable shorter rhythmic focus of the col legno³ articulation in day 5 resisted dialogue. However, I felt that there was something beyond simply the sounds; more to be expressed about why day 3 invited dialogue and day 5 less so? The response from another music therapist brought alive the idea of relational intention in playing, and in listening.

Day 3: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-3>

Day 5: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-5>

The question of intention began to guide the subsequent improvisations and I decided to listen back each week to the previous seven improvisations to see how they compared to each other. This prompted bodily rememberings and some written responses: “*Strange to listen back - I write - like dreams I know I've dreamt with that vague sense of knowing. I can feel the lines and yet don't know them concretely*”. This spoke to the kind of liminal experience that was occurring during each improvisation, and this was of interest to me although I was not sure why at this stage. I felt that I had questions about pushing too hard to try and find sounds in these early improvisations, yet something beyond my conscious intention was happening each time, and this began to emerge in my dreams.

Improvisation, both an everyday and highly sophisticated act (Iyer, 2020; MacDonald and Wilson, 2020), depends on not knowing beforehand what is going to emerge. Sometimes a prompt or a theme can provoke an improvisation or provide a starting point yet, with this 100days I was expecting to create without catalyst each

2 I am using this term to indicate the space (interval) between notes as considered in Western tuning.

3 “Col legno” is an Italian term which is used in Western classical music to indicate striking the violin strings with the wood or stick of the bow.

day. Like running from standing without walking first. As I continued, I found myself engaging with profound questions about what was not being sounded. In the compression of lockdown, I was coming up against aspects of myself that I didn't know what to do with, or where to put, yet I noticed that these thoughts or feelings weren't always being sounded in the improvisations. Although I had set out to work through these, I noticed I was using my play space to retreat from and avoid these feelings.

Perhaps there was an intense and long embodied familiarity with the violin which allowed me to easily mask the disruption, to trick myself into believing I was searching while actually just repeating worn-out bodily experiences. Equally, in sharing these improvisations, I felt a pressure in being on show (even if only a few people might listen). I felt a sense that the improvisations must be somehow interesting to the listeners outside.

Continuing, I felt the question of how to balance between "dreaming and doing", as Milner (2011) puts it. . . . After day 28 however, I wrote: *"Today I came across my sound, my notes, rather than searching for - or trying to find."*

Day 28: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days27>

Identifying the feeling of "coming across my notes" rather than searching for them spoke of an effortlessness in playing, an inevitability perhaps, or a more relaxed sense of movement or flow. This was how I had felt at the time of playing day 28, yet listening back, did the improvisation hold this sense?

Christopher Bollas (1987) writes convincingly about "aesthetic moments" as a means of accessing profound unthought experiences which can be opened into through particular engagement with the arts. Yet, these aesthetic moments often take us by surprise and are difficult to pre-empt. Was I looking to engineer aesthetic moments every day? Perhaps this was one reason I felt the pressure of performance. Soon after day 28, I wrote: *"Is this an exploration of living through improvisation? Each day feels like a year. . . . The need to hide yet be heard was repressive."*

After day 29, the phrase kept repeating internally: *"I have nothing to say this day"*. As I moved through the days, I reflected: *"I think my listening is becoming tighter."* It was difficult to tell whether my sonic ideas were becoming more sophisticated, whether they were still interesting, or whether I was repeating a sounded tightness of pressure to deliver something. I can hear this discussion clearly in Day 40, where the repeated multi-note stabs seem to repel yet then soften and some sense of frustration is heard in submitting to the repeated percussive sounds.

Day 40: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-39>

Some bow hairs broke during this improvisation, which is rare for me when playing. The

sense of constriction can be heard in the articulation. Following this improvisation, the phrase “*I’m killing improvisation*” kept shouting at me. Moving forward I had the feeling that I needed to wait. It seemed a significant period of not knowing; not knowing what I was doing, or whether the search was still focused on the initial questions. Had this project become too self-indulgent? I felt like I had reached a point of depth and obscurity and the pull to know what to do next was stifling.

The next day, I played the piano.

Day 41: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-40>

Whilst I felt (and still feel) ambivalent about this piano improvisation, I appreciated embodying the unknowing I was feeling with an instrument I have a different relationship with. Hearing the different timbre of the clear attack and delay on each note while letting the sustain pedal muddy the collection of tones, was enjoyable. Using a different instrument broke a cycle of sameness and I was able to stand back a little from the project. Realising this at the time, I could have spent longer staying with the piano and improvised with it for a few more days, yet there was something pressing that I needed to return to with the violin. Perhaps this was an indication that the dialogue with this particular instrument best represented the questions I wanted to ask. Certainly, there was something much more profoundly established relationally with the violin and this seemed to be tied up in my search.

Do theories of object relations translate to developing relationships with musical instruments? The violin as a material object was also represented as an inner object for me and corresponded with as such. At this point in the project, I understood that there was something profound and habitual being challenged that I needed to let speak. However, finding an integrated point that allowed what was unthought to be sounded was causing me problems. My body also knew the violin and yet bodily consciousness was being ignored in favour of what might sound “right” or somehow inoffensive. Bollas (1997) writes: “... *what we deeply know is only ever partly thought, and strangely defies the codes of thought we have valued so highly in Western culture.*” (p. 65).

Around day 45/46, an awareness emerged about how I was letting a track (or not letting the track) go. I wondered if recording an improvisation every day was mechanicalizing and fixing the precise thing I was looking to set free. As I continued through the 100 days, I began to monitor myself more, and the initial sense of space for dialogue had ebbed away. The pattern of facing the air, and then trying to play freely continued to be stifling. For Day 50, as a way to interrupt the now established habit of not sounding fully and trying to push open space to play, I threaded paper through my strings. Could I engineer something unexpected? I wanted to sound foreign to myself!

Day 50: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-49>

As I moved towards day 60, I had the feeling that I was letting my vulnerability show more now, yet I was also exhausted. I had started off with a clear sense that this project was about voice and relationship; a kind of connecting of my own inner and outer experiences. The question of what makes an improvisation open to dialogue had spurred me on. During this middle period, I felt very tired of my own voice and wanted to introduce unexpectedness, or spontaneity. I found it almost impossible to dialogue constructively with myself and felt the improvisations as bland and lifeless. I had reached a playless point and instead of integrating “dreaming and doing” (Milner, 2011), I was separating these. On day 78, through stopping, I reclaimed a wondering stance.

Day 78: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-77>

In this improvisation I felt clearly how I needed different musical voices in order to enrich and reveal my own. In the easing of lockdown, I had met the previous day with my string trio and improvised with them in person. This, almost too overwhelming experience, had rocked the isolated existence I had become used to yet the joy of it was almost too much to bear!

The last twenty days passed in an unconsidered blur. I did not make any notes and had a strange sense of limping towards day 100 in order that I could take a breath and think about the process. I had stopped listening and I was ready to stop playing. Day 100 sounds a broken-ness that I felt, listening back I heard sadness and pain and the need for rest, and I sensed having made it. Yet, day 99 held freedom and reciprocity in anticipation of getting to the end.

Day 99: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-99>

Day 100: <https://soundcloud.com/nickyhaire/100days-100>

Discussion and conclusion

The 100days project has been confronting. An existing practice of improvising every day was troubled at by the relentlessness of recording and sharing something every day. This sharing stoked self-pressure to show I can play the violin each day. *Show who?* My fear about playing to the “out there” was not allowed to be sounded and so gradually tension and tightness overshadowed possibilities for internal dialogue. There were many times that I deleted and began re-recording an improvisation before I had finished for example. In not listening to this internal fear during the project, I wasn’t able to acknowledge where it was emerging from and so I was not always engaging or sounding wholly. Paul Williams’ (2007)

thoughts are useful here:

Improvisation... cannot be said to be synonymous with creative activity. For something original and authentic to arise, not only is space required but also the functions of another mind with which generative dialogue, external or internal can take place. The principles underlying the conditions for generative thought include, importantly, the use of intuition. Intuition is related to projective identification, as both involve a yielding up of oneself to the other through which subjectivity is re-formed. Intuition permits contact with unconscious emotion, the most elemental form of human communication (p. 351).

So, for Williams (2007), improvisation first of all needs space and space was something that paradoxically felt lacking during lockdown despite social distancing from others. In my own internal space, life was busy, and many selves were voicing concurrently. I could not escape. A temptation I encountered throughout this 100days project was to fill the space further in order to drown out or dispel the cacophony. Yet, improvisation, generating something from nothing, requires a kind of active stillness from which to sound; a space that could be described as a “fertile void” (Biondo, 2019), open to - rather than empty of. A space, where listening wholly is possible.

Williams (2007) describes how within this space “the functions of” more than one mind is needed in order for something “original or authentic” to occur. This other mind must be alive internally when improvising as a solo musician. Silence, in this sense is living and loud and from this spacious sounding silence an original sound is formed. It is original in the sense that it has not been felt before. It is new in this moment. When heard, this sound becomes reciprocal. The difficulty in making a listening presence tangible was touched on when Peter responded to my improvisation on day 3: “Ah... the silent, listening presence. We can't really multi-track that can we?” No, the answer might seem, yet within each recording during the 100days, there could be said to be a silent listening intra-personal presence which variously was or was not heard (or listened to) during the process.

When teaching music therapists how to improvise, enabling a deep self-listening is a fundamental beginning. This requires a holistic awareness where through improvisation a bodily unconsciousness can be played into consciousness. The kind of improviser someone is, is framed and facilitated by individual cultural and biographical experiences (Sutton, 2019), and in music therapy practice both an acknowledgement of sounds other than those familiar to you and a broad understanding of what music is and can be, help to create a potential play space (Winnicott, 2006) in which to explore and enable growth through relationship with other. In creating space for listening wholly to oneself, improvisation with someone else can occur.

Had I not been bound by 100 consecutive days and let improvisations come on their own terms, this would have felt an entirely different process, and it would have

perhaps taken much longer to emerge. In some ways, this project simply marks another step in a continuing process. This exploring through doing has initiated the development of a method of inquiry I refer to elsewhere as *thinking through improvisation* (Haire, 2021a; 2021b). With audible resonance to free association, thinking through improvisation as method, methodology and personal philosophy, has enabled deep exploration of self and selves within sound, in turn deepening awareness of relational processes in music therapy practice.

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