

IMPROVISATION: THE PLEASURE OF SURVIVAL

Excerpt from: Orff Echo magazine, Fall 2023 issue, Volume 56, Number 1

by Doug Goodkin

"We don't improvise," said a student in a class where I was a guest teacher.

"Did you know you were going to say that to me when you woke up this morning?"

"No."

"Then you just improvised."

Improvisation is the art of responding in the moment to what the situation demands, drawing from all previous knowledge and experience. It is the act of discovering both what you know and what you didn't know you know. The above student — Brandon — was quite used to improvising through speech—we all do in every conversational encounter. But he needed more practice speaking the language of music in the same way, more confidence in arranging and re-arranging tones and rhythms as comfortably as nouns and verbs.

We all improvise our way through the day in many ways. We learn the steps to cooking the stir-fry, the route to drive to school, the procedure to e-mail our workshop notes. But what happens when the recipe calls for mustard greens and we only have kale? When there's a traffic jam? When our e-mail gets sent back undelivered? It's time to improvise.

When we've cooked long enough, we know what's similar to mustard greens and equally know we can stir fry without them. We know that there are other roads that can lead us to school. We remember that the post office still delivers mail. The most successful improvisation comes from knowing the territory.

In his reluctance to improvise, Brandon was revealing two things:

1) Insufficient experience with the language of music to understand how to speak it spontaneously.



Doug Goodkin & Friends (source: sfjazz.org)

2) A lack of trust in his own intuitive and imaginative powers, partially fostered by a school culture that cares only for duplicating previous right answers instead of exploring the necessary next questions.

Without the invitation to say things in his own words/tones/ movements, to see each thing learned not as the end of the matter, but as the beginning of the next possibility, Brandon's creative and imaginative powers might go untapped. He might turn into the kind of literal thinker who would abandon his stir-fry plans if mustard greens were not available, sit in the traffic jam, cancel the workshop because his e-mail notes couldn't be sent. He might be vulnerable to a fundamentalist thinking - religious, political or otherwise - that insists there is only one way to act, only one way to believe, only one option - to obey and rigidly adhere to rules and formulas made by someone else. He might become the kind of person unable to meet the demands of the



moment with a fresh imagination, applying yesterday's solutions to tomorrow's problems. In a time like our own where rapidly shifting conditions demand an imaginative and intelligent response, this can become downright dangerous.

Our Evolutionary Imperative

There is sufficient evidence that evolution, in both the plant and animal world, means adaptability, the capacity to respond to changing conditions. Likewise, the flourishing of human beings and human culture, from prehistoric times to our own, came about by the capacity to think flexibly and adapt behaviorally in a constantly changing world. Here's how John Medina describes it in his book *Brain Rules*:

How did we grow from a wobbly, fragile minority population to a staggering tide of humanity 7 billion strong and growing? There is only one way, according to Richard Potts, director of the Human Origins Program at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. You give up on stability. You don't try to beat back the changes. You begin not to care about consistency within a given habitat, because such consistency isn't an option. You adapt to variation itself.

Potts calls his notion the Variability Selection Theory... It predicts there will be interactions between two powerful features of the brain: a database in which to store a fund of knowledge, and an ability to improvise off of that database."

The experience cooking stir-fry, driving to school, sending e-mail, forms a database of knowledge about content, procedures, techniques. The brain is equipped to create, store, remember and call forth that knowledge as needed. With sufficient experience and attention to our experience, we note re-occurring patterns that allow us to predict. From noticing seasonal cycles of planting and harvesting and the movement of dangerous animals to following the rules of the road while driving and learning how to use a computer,

our ability to note and store key patterns, procedures and principles was—and is— half of our evolutionary strategy for survival.

But an equally important strategy for survival is the plasticity of the brain, the way it continually re-shapes itself from experience and reaction to experience. That accounts for our ability to have a Plan B when the lion unexpectedly shows up at the waterhole at the wrong time, the rains fail to come to water our crops, the traffic lights are broken or the rainbow ball is spinning on our computer screen. Such flexibility is at the core of our brain's survival strategy. We need an intelligence that blends intuition, imagination and improvisation, not as a pleasant side-dish, but as the main course of our development.

In the past, those changing conditions moved at a glacial pace—perhaps a 100,000 years before the climate began to shift in prehistoric times, a few thousand years before the alphabet was invented, another couple of thousand before the printing press appeared, some five hundred years before literacy spread, a hundred years before school became mandatory and universal and cars appeared, fifty years before computers showed up. We often had plenty of time to adapt and make small changes to meet the changing conditions.

Now we are faced with something completely new in human experience— a hyper-speed rapid rate of change. Technologies that transform cultures have created more changes in the past twenty years than in the two hundred years preceding that. A computer five-years old is already considered obsolete and new i-Phone number comes up most every year. Schools are training children for jobs, companies and workplaces that don't yet exist. The pandemic took away most everything we thought we could count on and along with the alarming rise of extreme weather - 115 degree heat - 60 degree cold, floods, fires and more - have made all plans provisional. **In these conditions, improvisation in all fields of human experience is not a luxury reserved for creative artists, but a new necessity in our daily life.**



Thus, training children to be **deep, broad and flexible thinkers** should move to the **center of all education**, far beyond a frothy fill for the talented kids in the jazz band.

Today's schools should be - must be - a place to nurture both sides of the brain's potential. Learning the essential knowledge, concepts and techniques and exercising the ability to improvise and create from them. Knowledge simply isn't complete until it's re-worked, re-visited, re-created and put to use. **It is in the conversation between the concrete, known database of knowledge and the imaginative use of that knowledge applied to the constant variation of an unpredictable world that the art of learning - and teaching - lies.**

Improvisation in the Music Class: The Secret Song

That's the big picture. But what does this mean for schooling? How might we actually move improvisation front and center in our teaching when we ourselves have not been taught like this? When it comes to Orff Schulwerk, what does it look and feel like to create a curriculum of what my teacher Avon Gillespie called "possibility seeking?"

It begins with a firm belief in the innate musicality of each and every child. To give an example of how this faith translates to the lesson in the music class, I turn to "The Secret Song"— a class that can be used with any age, but one I developed as an introduction to the Orff instruments for five-year-olds. The Orff instruments are set around the room, each in the pentatonic scale. The children enter the class, I gather them close and speak in a whispered voice:

"Who likes secrets? Well, I have some secrets for you today but instead of telling them to you, you have to discover them. Did you know that inside these bars of wood on the xylophone is a Secret Song waiting for you? It is hidden like gold in the earth and you only need three things to dig it out:

1) A hand or two with mallets to lift the sound out.

2) A listening ear that can hear what you play.

3) A mind that can recognize when the song has appeared and can remember it after you've played it a bit.

I'll demonstrate and raise your hand when you think my secret song has come out of hiding. (Play) Did you notice how I ended? While you're playing, don't forget to pay attention and find the moment when the song wants to end and go back into the bars to rest. So now choose one of the xylophones placed around the room and good luck finding your song! You have about five minutes and then we'll come back and share them.

And so they do. The results are always illuminating and sometimes, astounding. Every child comes back with something that has some quality of musical coherence. Some songs are mathematically based, some are kinesthetic, some suggest a song with words, some are boldly experimental, some tell a kind of story. Each not only proves my faith that every child is musical, but reveals precisely how they are musical, shows something of their character, personality and the way that they think.

Without a single lesson in xylophone technique or musical concepts or composition principles, the kids come through. When Carl Orff famously said, "Let the children be their own composers," he left it up to us as to how to make that invitation real. The imagery of the Secret Song has proven to be just right. For all ages.

This is an excerpt from Orff Echo magazine, Fall 2023 issue, Volume 56, Number 1

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