

Special Session – Improvisation as a Teaching and Learning tool

It is often noted that many conservatoire students consider the study of harmony, counterpoint and structural analysis as a theoretical exercise, in which the insights gained are not applicable for performers in the real time of music-making. Furthermore, the state of mind associated with the practice of music analysis is often perceived as contradictory with spontaneity and a state of flow associated with creative performance. Thus, in many respects, the traditional teaching of music theory does not facilitate performers to access a huge body of knowledge that may serve them in their search for creativity in performance (especially when it comes to players of melodic instruments).

The presentation dealt with questions such as: How can theoretical awareness be used as a catalyst for a more creative and communicative performance? How can performers bridge the two mind-sets of 'analysing' and 'creating', and what role can be played in this context by improvisational skills?

The aims of the presentation were to explore ways to facilitate performers' ability to fuse intuition with know-how, to search for convincing structural and harmonic readings of a piece, to internalise the piece's 'inner plans', and to develop improvisation-based strategies to unfold their reading in the real time of the performance. This, in order to support the ability to take risks and reach a more creative state of performing-mind.

The presentation focused on five examples from the unaccompanied Suites for cello by Bach: Minuet 1&2 and Gigue from the first suite in G major, Bouree 1&2 from the 3rd suite in C major, Prelude from the 2nd suite in d minor and the prelude from the 3rd suite in C major. Two students were asked to explore and perform different structural and harmonic readings of the work, and represented them by an improvised base line of reduction, performed by one of them simultaneously with the full text performed by the other. The reductions as represented by the improvised base lines underneath the actual

text have led the other musician performing the full text. The search for the reduction took place on several levels of depth, governing short or long-term events. This approach may be considered as an extension of the Schenkerian approach, except that it is driven by the harmonic rhythm and interpretative decisions. At the next step, a third participant extemporised a line above the deep reduction level and below the original text, as means for gaining a deeper mastery of the harmonic structure and the motivic language of the piece.

The discussion that followed examined how the performers' different readings of the short- and long-term harmonic structures can be embodied by means of bowing, vibrato, dynamics and articulation, as well as the shaping of timing. It referred also to possible applications of this approach to a chamber music context and the enhancement of active listening between the ensemble's partners.

The discussion and demonstration went on to the question of how, by using improvisational techniques; performers may create a stronger basis for risk-taking and freedom within the piece's stylistic and structural constraints, and develop their own narrative of the piece being performed.

In the last part of the presentation, two members of the Prima Volta ensemble, flutist Simon Gilliver and trombone player Miguel Tantos, who graduated the Guildhall School of Music & Drama four years ago and have been working intensively on classical improvisation, performed duo improvisations on elements provided by the audience, proving a thrilling mixture of risk-taking and humour, which resulted in an engaged and excited audience.