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Approaching Improvisation as a Classical Violinist

"Paganini non ripete"

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Abstract

The practice of improvisation is most often absent in the education of classical musicians today, even though it had a central part in European art music in previous centuries. Nevertheless, improvisation is still an important element in folk music, non-Western classical music, and jazz, yet many classical musicians like myself find playing without notes to be both a mental and technical challenge. In this thesis, I will explore methods for approaching improvisation on the violin from a broad perspective, without being limited to a certain genre or style of music. The result is a set of playful exercises, or games, adapted for both one and multiple musicians that are intended to be a starting point for learning to improvise, particularly on string instruments such as the violin.

Key words

Improvisation, violin, classical musician, jazz, exercises, games

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Introduction

There is a story about Niccolò Paganini which dates back to 1825. Paganini was playing at the Teatro Del Falcone in Genoa and was asked by King Charles Felix to give an encore of a piece the king had liked during a performance in Genoa. But since Paganini had improvised, he was unable to repeat the performance and is said to have given this as his answer. As a result, he is said to have been expelled from the Kingdom of Sardinia for two years. The episode is the origin of the Italian expression "Paganini non ripete" - "Paganini does not repeat".²

Improvisation on the violin is a central part of many different cultures and musical styles. Yet today's classical musicians in the West are exposed to very few opportunities to improvise, especially compared to performers of European art music in previous centuries. Music historians today agree that modern ideas regarding the performance of art music, particularly those prohibiting improvisation, are a fairly recent phenomenon.³

Approaching improvisation as a classical musician may feel daunting - our identities as artists are strongly tied to a canonized repertoire where the goal is to realize the composer's intentions as closely as possible. It may be easy to dismiss improvisation as something belonging to another musical genre than the classical one, such as jazz. My interest in improvisation only started recently and it is certainly an area that raises many questions. Where does imagination come from? Can improvisation be taught? How do we find a balance between discipline and spontaneity?

I don't believe this thesis will give any certain answers to these questions, but I do believe that the freedom of being able to improvise is fruitful for all aspects of music making, and perhaps for many aspects of life as well. In this thesis, I would like to explore methods to approach improvisation that I find joyful and stimulating in my musical practice. The approach consists of exercises that were adapted for a violinist or violist (but could also be carried out on other string instruments) to be played alone or with other musicians. My goal was to make the exercises as versatile and diverse as possible, without being tied too strongly to a certain musical genre or style.



Figure 1: A sketch of Paganini in London by Richard Sawyer (1831).¹

1. Richard Sawyer, Niccolò Paganini, Drawing, 1831. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paganini_London_1831.png.

2. Giuseppe Fumagalli, *Chi l'ha detto?* (Milano: U. Hoepli, 1921), 419.

3. Robin Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 23, no. 1 (1992): 61-84.

CHAPTER 1

Background

Improvisation, it is a mystery. You can write a book about it, but by the end, no one still knows what it is. When I improvise and I'm in good form, I'm like somebody half-sleeping. I even forget that there are people in front of me. Great improvisers are like priests, they are thinking only of their God.

Stéphane Grappelli
Frets Magazine, 1981

1.1 How Do You Improvise?

Improvisation is, as Stéphane Grappelli pointed out, an elusive and puzzling concept since it concerns creative processes that largely occur on subconscious levels. Yet, we are all improvisers, even if we are not completely aware of it. In the book *Free Play* by Stephen Nachmanovitch,⁴ the author points out that: “The most common form of improvisation is ordinary speech. As we talk and listen, we are drawing on a set of building blocks (vocabulary) and rules for combining (grammar) to convey our intentions. But the sentences we make with them may never have been said before and may never be said again.” In this spirit, this paper can be considered an improvisation on the subject of improvisation.

Improvisation can thus be described in a broader sense as what we do with the information given to us through our senses in a given moment. One way of viewing musical improvisation is consequently to see it as a spontaneous expression of sounds using our musical language skills, similar to vocabulary and grammar in ordinary language. As in most performing arts, there is however also an element of *story telling* when it comes to music, or playing in a way that captures the interest of the listener. If we just express random words and uttering, we risk losing the attention of the audience.

Nachmanovitch points out that a central part of improvisation is the unblocking of obstacles in order to express what is already inside us, in the form of active intuition.

4. Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1991).

He draws an analogy to the sculptor Michelangelo, who had an idea that a statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor's job is to see it and release it by carefully scraping away the excess material.

The process of learning to improvise can thus be considered to be a process of becoming better at realizing one's inner abilities and potential, to be able to convey your ideas or stories in the moment. Now the question is, how do you improve at releasing this musical potential that is inside you, or put in simpler terms, *how do you learn how to improvise?*

I'm fairly certain that there is no definite or simple answer to this question, but one can perhaps still approach it systematically. While talking about the subject with the musician Arve Henriksen, a trumpeter who has much experience playing in different contexts, he gave me the recommendation to use the skills I learned as a classically trained violinist as much as possible when improvising, or in other words using the inner abilities I already possess. He also mentioned a set of three methods that are useful when approaching improvisation, namely: *imitating*, *copying*, and *composing*.

1.2 Imitating, Copying and Composing

Although there are numerous ways and methods to approach improvisation, I find the elements of imitation, copying, and composition to be a good starting point because of their independence of genre and style, as well as their simplicity.

To begin with, let us consider the *imitational* aspect of improvisation. It can be used in a musical context to be able to both respond to something we hear and to give us a vocabulary that allows us to express certain ideas. Imitating does not mean we have to replicate something perfectly. We can imitate someone playing a different instrument than ours by perceiving a certain feeling of rhythm, tone, style, or other expression. But we can also imitate sounds that are not generated by an instrument at all, such as bird song or the sound of an engine. Even matters from other domains, such as emotions and images, could also be considered imitable with sound.

Copying is an element that is closely related to imitation. Whilst it might appear contradictory to consider copying as a method of approaching improvisation, it can be a useful tool to unlock doors to musical freedom. Similar to a child who attempts to copy words as a strategy to learn how to speak, we can try to copy other musicians to learn their musical language. This can be done by transcribing or by trying to copy a certain phrase or *lick*. If we play a piece exactly like someone else played it, we might not consider it to be improvisation. However, similar to when we speak, we can use phrases or idioms known to us, yet have the freedom of choosing when and where to use them, and how we want to vary them.

The final element of improvisation can be considered to be *composing* at the moment. One can argue that all great compositions (along with art and literature for that matter) once started as improvisations. This might be the most obscure of the mentioned methods - how are we able to create new musical ideas from nothing? The simple answer might be that we generate ideas from everything around us along with all our experiences. By using and training our imagination, we can come up with music that, to paraphrase Nachmanovich, "may never have been played before and may never be played again".

1.3 Freedom within Limits

It might seem contradictory to limit yourself to certain frameworks or rules when approaching improvisation. After all, improvisation should strive to be something free and spontaneous. There is, however, another way of viewing this matter, namely that by limiting ourselves to certain tools at our disposal, we are forced to be inventive and creative in reaching what we aim to accomplish when performing. Limitations can consequently open up new doors for improvisation and give us something to work against and work with. A similar argument can also be made for "mistakes" during improvisation - they are something we are forced to react and relate to at the moment, often surprisingly, thus teaching us to play in a new context.

Some rules are imposed on us by nature, such as the limits of our physical bodies and instruments, the behavior of sound waves and acoustics, together with social norms. In this sense, even "free" improvisation has its restraints. However, in most other forms of improvisation, we find some type of artificial framework or rule set, such as playing with a certain rhythm, in a certain key, or in relation to a melody. Much like children inventing a game, these structures often spark playful creativity in our minds.

During his youth, the painter Pablo Picasso had a three-year period during which he limited himself to shades of blue and blue-green, only occasionally warmed by other colors.⁵ While this event might have been a reflection of Picasso's inner mood and emotions, these constraints certainly didn't limit his artistic expression and the intensity in his paintings (see Fig. 1.1).

One can thus find the freedom to express oneself even in the face of limitations, both in music and in other activities in life. I will conclude my thoughts on the subject with an excerpt from Igor Stravinsky's book *Poetics of Music*:⁶

So here we are, whether we like it or not, in the realm of necessity. And yet which of us has ever heard talk of art as other than a realm of freedom? This sort of heresy is uniformly widespread because it is imagined that art is outside the bounds of ordinary activity. Well, in art as in everything else, one can build only upon a resisting foundation: whatever constantly gives way to pressure, constantly renders movement impossible.

1.4 Questions of Interest

This thesis will limit itself to a few practical questions of particular interest when approaching improvisation as a classical string player. They are the following:

- To what extent can improvisation be practiced?
- How can the ability to improvise develop my musical and technical abilities as a classical musician?
- Which methods and exercises are suitable for a classical violinist like me, who wants to develop my ability to improvise?

5. Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*.

6. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, A Harvard paperback (Harvard University Press, 1970), 64–65.



Figure 1.1: “The Old Guitarist” (1903-04), from Pablo Picasso’s Blue Period.⁷

7. Pablo Picasso, The Old Guitarist, Painting, 1903-04. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/28067/the-old-guitarist>.

CHAPTER 2

Violin Improvisation: An Overview

*One day perhaps we shall find an ideal
music which will be neither popular
nor classical, highbrow nor lowbrow,
but an art in which all can take part.*

Ralph Vaughn Williams
National Music, 1934

During the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century, there was a gradual disappearance of improvisation from Western art music.⁸ This disappearance has largely affected the education of classical musicians today, even though improvisation is a central part of much non-Western art- and folk music, in addition to the fact that performers of European art music in previous centuries exhibited considerable interest in improvisation.

Historians often attribute this decline to the industrialization of society that came with a need for specialization in different crafts, which eventually led to the standardized repertoire we see today in many schools and institutions. Another acknowledged reason is the increase in the notation of music and the uncoupling of the composer and performer, who during the early stages of improvisation, often were the same person. This resulted in the composer's role dominating the performer's since the music expressed the composer's intentions rather than the performer's.

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of what improvisation on the violin or related string instruments has been like historically and in different genres. By looking at the instrumental practice from a geographical and temporal distance, I hoped to find inspiration for my ability to improvise, which I will provide a brief overview of in this chapter.

2.1 Early Music

During the Renaissance, the free variation of a melody to a given voice was known as playing or singing *ex tempore*, or without preparation. For polyphony during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the language for extemporizing was counterpoint,⁹ by adding an additional voice to an existing composition, or by singing or playing in

8. Moore, "The Decline of Improvisation in Western Art Music: An Interpretation of Change."

9. Rob C. Wegman, *Improvising early music : the history of musical improvisation from the late Middle ages to the early Baroque*, Collected writings of the Orpheus Institute ; 11 (2014).

counterpoint to a given motive, or a *cantus firmus*. The rules that applied to singing were also applied to string instruments of the time, predominantly the viola da gamba.

Extemporizing in concerts by a cembalo and a stringed instrument was also practiced around this time, as described by the musician Diego Ortiz in his *Tratado de Glosas sobre Clausulas* in 1553.¹⁰ In the book, Ortiz supplies short harmonic sequences such as the *passamezzo*, *romanesca*, or *passacaglia*, that are repeated while a melodic instrument is performing variations. These forms had a strong connection to the improvised dance music of the time. During the 1600s, there was a transition from repeated harmonic sequences to repeated bass patterns, or *basso ostinato*, which made improvisation in ensembles freer and easier.

If a cembalo was missing, a viola da gamba had to play the piece alone, by expressing the harmonies using figurations and passage work (eventually leading to the solo sonata). The art of solo variation and ornamentation on the gamba, either by ornamenting a bass line or by improvising over a *basso ostinato*, became a popular practice in England and was described in Christopher Simpson's book *Division Violist* in 1659.

During the 17th century, the violin gained popularity in instrumental music, taking over from the viol. The instrumental art of improvised embellishments flourished undiminished in the Baroque era, even though only a fraction of this practice is apparent in written or published compositions. However, some surviving versions of works by Vivaldi and Correlli with embellishments added by either the composer or a performer give a glimpse of such improvisation on the violin and other string instruments.

With the emergence of instrumental "true" concertos at the beginning of the 18th century, the first written *ad libitum* cadenzas were notated, ensuing the earlier free vocal cadenza. In the classical era, cadenzas eventually became free fantasias on the thematic material of a particular movement, as found in Mozart's violin concertos.

Part. I. *The Division Violist.*



Figure 2.1: An illustration from the preface of *Division-Violist* (1659) by Christopher Simpson.¹¹

2.2 Indian Classical Music

There are generally considered to be two distinct areas of Indian classical music: Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian) music.¹² Although the presence of improvisation is more readily found in Hindustani music, the presence of improvisation is of central importance to all Indian music. The European violin became established as an instrument in the Carnatic tradition during the late 18th century.¹³

10. Ernst T. Ferand, "Improvisation in Music History and Education," *Papers of the American Musicological Society*, 1940, 115–125, accessed November 8, 2023, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43873094>.

11. Christopher Simpson, *The Division-Violist* (William Godbid, 1659), p.3.

12. Derek Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature And Practice In Music* (Hachette Books, 1993).

13. B. Nettl and M. Russell, *In the Course of Performance: Studies in the World of Musical Improvisation*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

It would not be until the beginning of the 20th century that the violin appeared as a classical instrument in Hindustani music.

Over two centuries, the violin went on to become an integral part of the Carnatic system, ultimately seeking to mimic the freedom of the human voice and Indian singing style. In this tradition, the violin's strings are tuned relative to a variable tonic, or *sa*, and its fifth, or *pa*, in the following order: lower tonic (lower *sa*), lower fifth (lower *pa*), tonic (*sa*), fifth (*pa*). The playing posture is also different from the Western tradition, the violin is typically played sitting cross-legged on the floor with the scroll of the violin resting on the right foot (see Fig. 2.2). The *sa* and *pa* also form the harmonical context, usually sustained by a *tanpura*.



Figure 2.2: Violinist N. Rajam playing using the Indian classical posture with the violin resting on the foot.

The framework within which improvisation takes place in Indian music is the *raga*, a type of melodic framework that is variable. The basic intervals used, the *swara* and *shruti*, as well as the rhythmic cycle, the *tala* are also variable. Consequently, the musical materials used in Indian music are of a much more dynamic and unfixed nature than Western music. The *swara* are the 7 scale notes in an octave, that are further divided into *shrutis*. However, the exact size of the *shrutis* is elusive and in many instances a matter of personal choice, in a constant shifting between sharpness and flatness. The *tala* is a rhythmic cycle of fixed metrical length, for example, 16, 12, or 8 beats.

The Raga

The musical elements used in a *raga* can vary greatly and are often difficult to describe with precise definitions. Although in general terms, a *raga* is, firstly, an ascending and descending series of *swaras*. But it also the framework within which the music takes place, which often consists of three sections, the *alap*, the *jor*, and the *jhala*.

Alap is a sort of prelude where the performer introduces the *raga*, beginning with just a few of the lower notes and gradually expanding to include the entire octave. As the *alap* progresses, it slowly increases in tempo and complexity.¹⁴ Once the *alap* is done, a new segment is introduced, the *jor*, to connect the *alap* to the climax that will be reached in the *jhala*. The *jor* introduces a steady pulse and notes become more even-spaced. The *jor* is accelerated to the *jhala*, where notes are played faster, often at double speed.

13. N. Rajam, *Vocals Through Violin*, Album Cover, November 21, 2023. <https://www.discogs.com/release/13134918-N-Rajam-Vocals-Through-Violin>.

14. Sadhana, "Improvisation in Indian Classical Music: Raag Hindustani," 2011, accessed October 25, 2023, <https://raag-hindustani.com/Improvisation.html>.



Figure 2.3: Nicolae Neacsu improvising over a melody using only a single bow hair, from the documentary "Latcho Drom" (1993).¹⁵

2.3 Folk Music

The violin, or the *fiddle*, is part of many folk music traditions, and an extensive presentation of improvisation in them would be beyond the scope of this paper. However, some general remarks can be made. The first one is that folk music often is associated with dancing, and consequently, there is a certain rhythmical framework when playing and improvising. Secondly, folk music is commonly centered around certain tunes with known melodies that are passed, historically orally, between individuals. Only occasionally are systematic approaches to improvisation found. However, the American violinist Darol Anger has described 8 techniques commonly used for improvisation in a tune:¹⁶

1. Ornamentation
2. Adding eighth notes between melody notes
3. Changing the rhythm of the melody
4. Developing motives/fragments of the melody
5. Arpeggiating chord changes
6. Adding an additional voice to the melody or harmony
7. Combining "licks", or already learned patterns
8. "Free" improvisation - playing without any rules

While there are certainly several other methods employed in different folk music traditions, the combination of these different ideas encompasses many of the basic characteristics of improvisation over a melody found in many of these traditions.

It could also be worth mentioning that several non-classical techniques for violin and other bowed instruments have been invented in different folk music spheres that have permitted the use of new sounds in playing and improvisation. Examples

15. Tony Gatlif, Latcho Drom - Balada Conducatorului, Video, 1993. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wS_W-dOYeo.

16. Darol Anger, "8 Paths of Improvisation: on the violin," accessed October 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxXwBrPfnBE>.

of such techniques include *the chop*, pioneered by bluegrass fiddler Richard Greene in the 1960s, where the player drops the bow vertically onto the strings to make a crunchy, percussive noise. Another example is the unnamed technique developed by the violinist Nicolae Neacșu in the Romanian band "Taraful Haidouks", where a bow hair is tied around the G-string on the violin. The bow hair is subsequently pulled by rosin-covered fingers on the bow hand to produce a creaking pitch (see Fig. 2.3).

2.4 20th Century Jazz

The violin began its journey through jazz music in New Orleans in the early 1900s, often by having parts in arrangements for ragtime orchestras.¹⁷ It was not until the 1920s that it began to gain popularity as a solo instrument, largely through the efforts of violinists Eddie South, Stuff Smith, Joe Venuti, and eventually Stéphane Grappelli. These players developed new styles of playing that suited the developing field of jazz music, encompassing styles such as ragtime, blues and subsequently swing in the 1930's and 40's.

Some of the characteristic techniques established and refined by these violinists are the following:¹⁸

1. *Ghost notes* - notes that are muted to the point where they are more percussive sounding than clear in pitch
2. *Enclosures* - a target note is preceded by leading notes both above and below it
3. *Jazz slides* - slides/glissandos are used as ornaments even after a target note has been played
4. *Jazz bowing* - bow changes are treated as accents and usually played to emphasize the off-beat (the "and")

In the 1950s and 1960s, jazz violinists such as Jean-Luc Ponty started using a more modern vocabulary on the instrument by using bebop phrasing and experimenting with electronic effects using pedals and the electric violin. Another influential jazz violinist of this era was Leroy Jenkins, a pre-eminent figure in the 1970's free jazz scene.¹⁹ Jenkins mixed classical technique with his free-form aesthetic, using innovative extended techniques such as playing the violin with a bow made of a fishing line or attaching a kazoo to the bridge of the instrument.

2.5 Contemporary Music

In our own time, composers and performers have explored new ways of producing sound on the violin. This has particularly been the case in the context of free improvisation, where there is a shift from a focus on harmony and structure to other dimensions of music, such as timbre, texture, melodic intervals, and rhythm.²⁰

Some examples of such extended techniques are the following:

17. B.D Kernfeld, *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz v. 1 (Grove, 2002).

18. Tim Kliphuis, *Gypsy Jazz Violin* (Mel Bay Publications, Inc., 2015).

19. Ben Ratliff, *The New York Times*, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/26/arts/music/26jenkins.html>.

20. Bailey, *Improvisation: Its Nature And Practice In Music*.



Figure 2.4: Violinist Evan Price playing his arrangement of a Django Reinhardt improvisation, using the "Four String Joe"-technique. The method was popularized by Joe Venuti in the 1940s, although its origins are unknown.²¹

1. *Bowing the body* - Parts such as the soundbox, neck, tailpiece, or bridge are bowed rather than the strings.
2. *Tapping techniques* - The body of the instrument is tapped with fingers or the hand.
3. *Scratch notes* - The bow is pressed down hard on the strings to produce a rasping sound.
4. *Wind effect* - Air is blown into the f-holes of the instrument.
5. *Plucking techniques* - Playing pizzicatos above the nut or behind the bridge, forceful buzzing pizzicatos, or pizzicatos with the nail. The violin can also be strummed like a guitar.
6. *"Four String Joe"* - The bow hair is detached at the frog and wrapped around all four strings to play them simultaneously (see Fig. 2.4).

Many improvising violinists today tend to mix and cross several styles, such as blues, jazz, classical, and world music. This is likely a consequence of the accessibility and exposure to musical material from all over the world, which has been made possible in recent times.

It would be difficult to emphasize certain contemporary violinists as pre-eminent or especially pioneering in the area of improvisation without subjectivity. I will therefore end this chapter by mentioning some musicians who have inspired me personally through the years and sparked my interest in improvisation. The first one is Fiona Monbet, a violinist who not only seems to have the ability to improvise in any genre but possesses the mastery to paint with the whole palette of colors on the instrument. There is also Mathias Lévy, whose notes flow with astonishing dexterity and intensity, captivating the listener. When it comes to ensembles, a favorite of mine is The Turtle Island Quartet, who have managed to bridge the gap between classical music and jazz by injecting *groove* into chamber music. Finally, there is Stéphane Grappelli, who might not be alive anymore, but whose recordings and playing style have permeated and inspired countless living violinists, including me.

²¹ Evan Price, Django Reinhardt - Improvisation No 2, Video, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojDUOGphcDI>.

CHAPTER 3

Practicing Improvisation

Music is a game. It's playfulness. The game of music is a game that I love. Seeing music in that light is how I have found the spirituality in music. More and more I think it's a game.


Didier Lockwood
Musicians' Corner, 2014

In this chapter, I will provide examples of improvisation exercises that I found particularly fun and rewarding while working on this thesis. I will refer to them as exercises, but I think of them more as games, to be played and interacted with. The exercises are inspired by material from different cultures and contexts, as my goal was to approach improvisation in a multifaceted and open-minded way, without being tied to a certain genre or tradition. I strove to vary the incorporation of copying, imitation, and composing elements, as described in Section 1.2.

I consider these exercises to be of more of an inspirational rather than formal nature, and I expect them to be transformed and expanded dynamically as I continue my exploration. If you want to try them out yourself, don't feel forced to perform the exercises in the exact manner I prescribed. Feel free to improvise with them so to speak. I highly encourage readers to develop and improvise their own exercises in accordance with their affinity, needs, and pleasure. Some of the exercises have corresponding audio samples, providing examples of how the exercises *could* sound, but are not in any way templates of how they *should* sound.

3.1 Solo Exercises

Exercise 1: Find the Note

 **Sing a random note or multiple notes, then try to find them on the violin as fast as you can.**


Variations

Increase the number of notes you sing before playing them. You can also choose to restrict yourself to a certain position on the violin. Some apps play random notes with adjustable tempos.

Reflections

This is a fairly simple exercise, yet it trains the fundamental ability to play what you hear, something not commonly practiced in classical music education. When doing this exercise, I find myself listening for recognizable intervals or relations to tonal centers, but mostly I try to go by and let the fingers guide me.

Exercise 2: Imitating Birds

 **Freely improvise with sounds that imitate birds.**

Variations


Imitate other animals, or sounds from other objects (a train) or landscapes (a forest).

Reflections

Connecting music to mental images can be a useful tool to come up with improvisational ideas. You also have to be inventive and creative when you reproduce non-instrumental sounds on your instrument, perhaps using unconventional techniques or even creating new ones. It is also a freedom to play something on the violin without having to think about the musical context, and instead shifting the focus towards sounds.

🔊 *Audio 1*

Exercise 3: Scat Singing

 **With a metronome set to ♩=60, sing a phrase with a swing feel, then try to repeat it on the violin.**

Variations


Experiment with the length of the phrases. You can also try to perform call and response, alternating between singing and playing every phrase. Finally, you can also try to sing and play at the same time.

Reflections

This exercise was inspired by a video by jazz violinist Eva Slongo. When we sing, we get a natural feel for phrasing and rhythm that is desirable to mimic on our instrument. When combining the two means of expression, we are thus reinforcing the connection between them. This exercise is also a good opportunity to practice the techniques described in Section 2.4, as they tend to imitate the way jazz phrases are sung.

▶ *Audio 2*

Exercise 4: Improvising within a Scale

 **Choose a scale. Play a continuous stream of notes of the same length, but avoid repetition of the same intervals.**

Variations


Try out different subdivisions in your chosen tempo, such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as triplets.

Reflections

As classical musicians, we are often used to practicing scales ascending and or descending stepwise. While this is certainly useful for playing classical repertoire, we can most often play more melodically when mixing intervals. Getting other scale patterns in your fingers is thus a helpful tool to play a solo in other genres.

▶ *Audio 3*

Exercise 5: Double-Stop Melody

 **Choose a scale and a double-stop interval. Improvise a melody with these two elements, always playing two notes simultaneously.**

Variations


Try out thirds, sixths, octaves, fourths, and fifths, or more tricky intervals like tenths. You can also improvise a melody with a combination of several double-stop intervals.

Reflections

Double-stops are another element of classical violin playing, that is expected to be practiced with ascending and descending, stepwise motion. However, I often identify a lack of progress and motivation when doing this type of practice. When instead improvising a melody, I find my left hand being much more relaxed and my ears more open.

▶ *Audio 4*

Exercise 6: Feeling the Pentatonic Scale

 **Find a backing track in any minor key. Play a solo in the pentatonic scale of the tonic.**

Variations


Add notes to the scale, such as the flatted 5th, the 9th, major 7th (E-flat, B natural, and G-sharp in the key of A-minor).

Reflections

This exercise was inspired by videos with the musician Rotem Sivan. The pentatonic scale is a very useful tool to approach improvisation since it works well over many diatonic chords in the same key in genres such as jazz, pop, and rock. When doing this exercise, I try to focus on creating melodic lines, and on tension and release - especially when adding notes to the scale for variation.

■ *Audio 5*

Exercise 7: Mini Raga

 **Pick a scale and play a (tanpura) drone with its root note in the background. Improvise with notes from the scale in the style of a raga (see Section 2.2).**

Variations


Begin with a free tempo (alap). Optionally build on with more rhythmical sections (a jor and a jhala). Finally, you can add a rhythmic cycle (tala) to the jhala with a chosen number of beats.

Reflections

This exercise provides a fun way to explore any tonality. Using a drone in the background makes you aware of the intervals between the melody and the root note, but also makes intonation easier. Having multiple "sections" in mind also forces you to plan ahead and think about the overall structure of your improvisation.

■ *Audio 6*

Exercise 8: One String with Drone

 **Improvise freely on either the A, D, or E string, while simultaneously playing a drone/bourdon using the open string below.**

Variations


Try playing either very fast or very slow.

Reflections

I like this exercise for multiple reasons. Firstly, it forces you to practice on the whole string, which is often avoided, especially on the A and D strings. Secondly, by adding a drone you become more aware of what notes you are playing when improvising, by feeling their relation to the drone's root note. Finally, I found this exercise a good opportunity to practice being relaxed when performing shifts, only using my head on the chin rest when shifting downwards.

■ *Audio 7*

Exercise 9: Two Note Blues

 **Play along a twelve-bar blues backing track in any key. You are only allowed to play 2 notes of your choice.**

Variations


Allow the notes to be played in any octave, or increment the number of chosen notes. Try to play in keys that you are not too comfortable in.

Reflections

This exercise was recounted in an interview with Fiona Monbet, who in turn learned it from her teacher, Didier Lockwood. It is a great example of how restrictions can open new doors in your playing. In this case, you can for example focus on rhythm and how you use the bow to generate a groovy sound in a blues, a musical form that is found in many different contexts.

■ *Audio 8*

Exercise 10: Improvising over a Tune

 **Pick a tune with chords and a melody you know by heart. With a metronome giving the beat, improvise within the structure of the tune.**

Variations

Try out tunes from different genres, such as folk melodies, pop songs, or jazz standards.


Reflections

Being able to improvise around a melody is a fundamental skill in many genres, yet it can be tricky to know how to approach the concept. I find the techniques described in Section 2.3 to be a good starting point and apply them to a tune you like. This exercise also makes you more aware of the harmonic context of the melody line, something often omitted when playing a melodic instrument such as the violin.

■ *Audio 9 (see Appendix A)*

3.2 Exercises for Two (or More) Musicians

Exercise 11: Pass the Note

 **Stand with your back against your musician friend and vice versa. One plays a note on their instrument and the other tries to find it as fast as possible. Then you pass a new note back to your friend.**


Variations

Increment the number of notes passed each turn, or include double-stops.

Reflections

This is an ear-training exercise that is very similar to Exercise 1, but being two musicians has the benefit of both being fun and allowing you to be more versatile with the rules.

Exercise 12: Counterpoint with Half and Eighth Notes

 **One musician begins by playing two half notes. When finished, eighth notes are played instead, while the other musician joins by playing half notes, followed by eighth notes, and so on.**

Variations


Either decide on a tonality beforehand or rely solely on your ears. If you are more than two musicians, you can add quarter notes and whole notes.

Reflections

This exercise was inspired by a video by the musicians Adam Neely and Ben Levin. I find that there are two main ways of approaching this exercise. The first is free counterpoint, which allows you to be progressive harmonically but leads to more chromaticism and dissonance. The second option is to be more imitative of the melodic material, leading to something sounding more like a canon.

🔊 *Audio 10*

Exercise 13: Improvising Grooves

 **One musician starts by making up and repeating a short groove. The other musician improvises freely on the groove.**

Variations


If you are more than two musicians, either do collective improvisation or add fills, beats, or harmony to the groove.

Reflections

This exercise was inspired by performances by the Turtle Island Quartet. They often rotate the roles of either having the beat, playing harmony, doing "fills" or soloing between the members. When giving the beat on the violin, I find it useful to use extended techniques such as chopping or tapping the instrument, as described in Section 2.3 and 2.5.

■ *Audio 11*

Exercise 14: Melody and Accompaniment

 **Pick a tune with chords and a melody you are familiar with. One musician improvises the melody with ornaments and the other one improvises accompaniment over the chords. Shift the roles and repeat.**


Variations

Try out different ways of accompanying the melody, such as playing broken eighth notes, harmony, and adding a beat or sixteenth notes with chord shapes in your left hand.

Reflections

This is similar to Exercise 10, but by being two (or more) musicians, the accompaniment always hears its relation to the melody, and it also becomes an exercise of playing together. Being able to play accompaniment from chord symbols on the violin is a useful skill in many types of genres when the usual accompanying instrument is absent or busy playing a solo.

Exercise 15: Free Improvisation

 **Go completely free, anything is allowed!**

Variations

If you want some kind of guidelines or structure, play with elements such as dynamics and textures. Or make up your own rules!

Reflections

As a classical musician, I find free improvisation to be a very liberating and fun activity. Admittedly, I was slightly skeptical about the concept and its progressive value. However, after trying it out a few times, I realized that it is an excellent way to keep your ears open to what is going on around you and respond by imitating, copying, or composing something. It also allows you to be creative with different timbres, means of sound production, and dynamics depending on the auditory context.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

*But there is no ultimate breakthrough;
what we find in the development of a
creative life is an open-ended series of
provisional breakthroughs. In this
journey there is no endpoint, because it
is the journey into the soul.*

Stephen Nachmanovitch
Free Play, 1991

4.1 Can Improvisation be Taught?

When reflecting on the question of whether improvisation can be taught, a natural follow up question arises: what have I learnt during my exploration of improvisation? It is generally accepted that there is no universal metric for measuring the quality of art, or its *beauty*. This is certainly the case when it comes to musical improvisation, where there is no written music to serve as a reference, and where each performance is meant to sound different from another depending on its performers' instincts. Thus evaluating my progress during the last months becomes a highly subjective as well as spiritual matter. Regardless, I will do my best to present my thoughts on the subject.

First of all, tying back to the ideas of Stephen Nachmanovitch, I find a major achievement of my journey- to have been the unblocking of inner obstacles, in addition to expectations on what improvisation should sound like. Actually *daring* to improvise in different contexts is an important first step. As a classically trained violinist, there is a certain ideal of both reproduction and control, as in being able to accurately repeat a phrase and to play it in an expected manner, without "mistakes". Whilst these ideals are not unimportant in improvisation, I found that embracing the feeling of inconstancy and insecurity unlocked new doors to being free while playing, without judging oneself too much.

Secondly, I find that improvisation can certainly be practiced, but mainly within a certain form or idiom. In folk music, one can become better at inventing variations on a melody. In jazz, one can learn how to play phrases within certain chords. In Indian music, one can improve the ability to build intensity towards a musical climax. There are certainly endless ways of approaching and expressing these skills, and what is

good or bad is often a matter of personal taste. Nevertheless, I find that the more one is familiar with and aware of the canvas within which one is painting, the freer one can be when improvising. Or to use an analogy, the better you know the language of a musical region, the better you can communicate with musicians and listeners who speak the same language. Luckily, some vocabulary (e.g. the pentatonic scale) is similar across multiple genres, meaning that the ability to improvise in one setting often context over to others.

Finally, I have through my exploration of the improvisational landscape also gained a better understanding of my identity as a musician. In the classical world, there is often a linear attitude towards developing as a musician. Progress is usually measured in metrics such as technicality, accuracy in rhythm and intonation, and how well the composer's intentions are realized. These elements are certainly not unimportant in improvisation, however the focus instead tends to be on finding and expressing one's own voice. With this change of perspective, I found my classical background to be of help rather than a hindrance, as it has provided me with additional technical tools and versatility to express myself when improvising. Inversely, improvising has helped me become less dogmatic in my approach to performing classical music. At the end of the day, the important things to me when playing music, are being in the moment, the emotions one is feeling, and the message one is conveying. I strongly feel that the time I spent approaching improvisation in recent months has deepened my connection to these musical elements, and has opened my eyes and ears towards a new path to music making.

4.2 Where Does Imagination Come From?

During my time performing improvisational exercises, I often found myself reusing the same musical patterns or figures over and over, stuck on the same track. This gave me the feeling not of improvising, but rather of *copying myself*. I realized that whilst imitating and copying phrases and styles can be performed rather subconsciously and by intuition, composing (or making something up) requires more of a conscious participation, or *active intuition*. This raised the question posed earlier in this thesis, namely how do you make up or imagine a completely new musical phrase or idea?

I might not have found an answer to this question, but I found a few ways of confronting and dealing with it practically. The first one is by using a music-theoretical approach. By rationally knowing what notes belong to a certain chord or key, the process of improvising becomes a process of attempting to combine these notes in different patterns and rhythms that work in a harmonic context. It is certainly possible to improvise without knowing any music theory, but when I didn't have any clear sense of what to play, I found music theory to be a valuable tool.

Another useful approach I found to compose in the moment was to use patterns. When playing the violin, there is a common habit of using fingerings (avoiding the "weaker" 4th finger) and positions on the fingerboard that one is comfortable in. This is likely one of the reasons why I got stuck in certain patterns when improvising. To break out from these loops, I played with transposing the learned patterns to different strings or to different positions. I would also try changing the order of the notes in the patterns in different permutations, as well as adding another note to them, perhaps with a finger that didn't feel as natural as the others. This would often lead to new phrases I hadn't played before.

The final approach to coming up with new ideas can be described as an experi-

mental exploration. The idea is to use one's imagination to simply try out different things without knowing how they will sound beforehand and see how they work in a harmonic context. For example, I experimented with raising or lowering scale notes by a half step, adding harmonics, and chromatic lines. I could also have an idea of how I wanted a phrase to develop, such as ending on a high note, without not knowing exactly how I would get there. This experimental practice might not have sounded great in many cases, although it gave me a clearer sense of what *actually* sounded good as well as sparked new musical ideas.

4.3 Balance between Discipline and Spontaneity

Another question I was confronted with when working on this thesis, was the question of discipline, especially in the regard of how much you can stray from musical norms and traditions. When starting my improvisational journey as a classical musician, I often stumbled upon the advice to write my own cadenza, for example for a Mozart concerto. However, I found this to be an especially difficult task, raising many doubts in my mind. To what degree can I leave the classical style? Can it be a completely non-classical cadenza? What will my classical teacher, fellow students, and potential audience think of it?

In the end, I decided to include the classical cadenza as an improvisational exercise, since I found the room for spontaneity overshadowed by the realm of discipline in the format. Nevertheless, the balance between the two antipodes was present in all my exercises, to different degrees. My current impression is that we are bound to certain traditions whether we like it or not. To use the previous analogy of improvisation as a language, using unexpected words or unorthodox phrases can certainly make our storytelling more interesting, but if we use too much of it, we fail to make the audience understand us. Or to reuse the metaphor of music as a game, we obviously have to follow the game rules, otherwise, it would be considered unjust. But when we employ methods or techniques that make us question the rule set, perhaps ones on the border of being allowed, we often get an interesting result and response.

Nevertheless, it is not always obvious where the limits of the rules of different musical genres lie. I found that it is helpful to sometimes allow for spontaneity and to try out notes and rhythms beyond the conventions of a genre just to discover its limits. Reversely, it is also enlightening to sometimes be strictly disciplined and to stay completely within the rules, perhaps with minimal impulses (as in the "two-note blues" exercise). Thereafter, it is easier to resolve the two opposite intentions to find what one perceives as a balance point between the two, in a sort of dialectical process.

4.4 Continuing the Journey

As Stephen Nachmanovitch pointed out, creative processes are most often non-linear without any real endpoint. Whatever path you take seems to lead to numerous new paths that are possible to follow. I feel that this is certainly the case with improvisation. After learning about a new improvisational tool, such as tapping the body of the violin with the fingers, the sphere of musical possibilities appearing seems endless - one can play with rhythmical patterns, accents, timbre, and so on, encompassing the whole world of a percussive instrument. All this is achievable without even mentioning the bow or any notes - the usual characteristics of violin playing.

After getting started with improvisation, the next step in my journey will therefore be a rather contingent one, and largely dependent on my curiosity and inclination in the moment. Nevertheless, I feel fairly certain of one thing, and that is that improvisation, like much else in music, is most rewarding when performed with other people. It sparks both creativity, the motivation to learn and try new things, and playfulness. While I believe practicing improvisation alone is also important (and has been a central topic in this thesis), I have come to realize that a major part of its purpose is to be a bridge toward being able to improvise with others. I will therefore continue to seek new improvisational contexts to further explore new dimensions in the musical landscape and myself, and I encourage any reader who is curious about the subject to dare to plunge into the unknown and do the same.

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APPENDIX A

Chord Sheets

Det finns en väg till himmelen

Psalm 303
Folkmelodi upptecknad i Sköldinge

Musical notation for the song "Det finns en väg till himmelen" (Psalm 303). The score is written in 3/4 time and consists of three lines of music. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The chord symbols are: Dm, A, Dm, Bb, F/A, C7/G, F, F, Gm, Am, Bb, Dm/F, G, A, Dm.

APPENDIX B

List of Recordings

- Audio 1 - *Imitating birds*
- Audio 2 - *Scat singing in A-minor*
- Audio 3 - *Scale improvisation in E-dorian*
- Audio 4 - *Double-stop melody in D-major*
- Audio 5 - *Feeling the A-minor pentatonic scale*
- Audio 6 - *Mini raga in D with flat 3rd and 7th*
- Audio 7 - *One string improvisation with D-drone*
- Audio 8 - *Two note blues in F*
- Audio 9 - *Improvisation over "Det finns en väg till himmelen"*
- Audio 10 - *Counterpoint with Isa*
- Audio 11 - *Improvising grooves with Isa*