

## Developing creativity in children's musical improvisations

David J. Hargreaves

Applied Music Research Centre  
University of Roehampton  
Southlands College  
Roehampton Lane  
London SW15 5SL, UK

### Author's note :

This paper draws on some material from 'Developing musical creativity in the social world', which was presented as a keynote address at Cognitive processes of children engaged in musical activity: A conference honoring the contributions to music education research of Marilyn Pflederer Zimmerman, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, June 1999. The original paper was published in the Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education, 142, 22-34, and part of it is reproduced here by kind permission of the Editor of the Bulletin.

## **Froebel, play, creativity and music**

Friedrich Froebel developed his own radical new educational method and philosophy which was based on structured, activity based learning, and established his Play and Activity Institute in Bad Blankenburg, which he renamed Kindergarten, in 1840: this term is still used world-wide. It signifies both a garden *for* children, a place in which they can observe and interact with nature, as well as a garden *of* children, in which they are able to grow and develop in a natural and unconstrained way. Kindergarten was seen having three essential parts, namely creative play; singing and dancing as part of healthy activity; and literally gardening, ie. observing and nurturing plants as a way of stimulating awareness of the natural world.

Play was at the heart of Froebel's educational philosophy, as he saw that play made important contributions to development and learning in many domains – including the physical, social, emotional and intellectual. Like Piaget (1951), Froebel proposed that play gives rise to symbolic experiences which are important in the development of imagination and creativity: it provides a forum for the development of flexible and abstract thinking, in which they are able to work out their relationships with other children and with their adult caregivers.

One important component of Froebel's view was the importance of what he called self-activity, which has obvious parallels with the current resurgence of research on self-regulation and metacognition (see eg. Robson, 2014). Froebel suggested that 'self-activity of the mind is the first law of instruction...from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract, so well adapted to the child and his needs, that he learns eagerly

as he plays'. This view also emphasised the growth of knowledge from *inside* rather than from *outside* the child, which involves the unfolding of principles rather than merely learning rules by heart: 'what the pupils know is not a shapeless mass, but has form and life. Each one is, as it were, familiar with himself....' Accordingly, he opposed education which seeks to impose knowledge from the outside: 'We possess a great load of extraneous knowledge, which has been imposed on us and which we foolishly strive daily to increase...we have very little knowledge of our own that has originated in our own mind and grown with it' (Froebel, 1826, p.156).

Froebel saw music as an important domain in which this development takes place, and wrote his *Mutter- und Koselieder* (Froebel, 1895) – a songbook – to introduce the young child into the adult world. The 'Mother Songs' are the basis of finger rhymes, and action songs are sung whilst dancing on the spot and moving around. Stories, songs and rhymes were also seen as introducing the child to literature and to literacy. A comprehensive new review of theory and research on the psychology of musical development across the whole life span (Hargreaves and Lamont, 2017) shows very clearly that like play itself, music is a domain of activity which enables children to develop in many domains – the physical, the cognitive, the social and the emotional – and the rapid rise of neuroscientific studies of the effects of musical activity demonstrate these effects very clearly.

### **Musical improvisation**

Improvisation is a vital part of musical activity in many parts of the world, but has been neglected in Western music education as well as in psychological research. In traditional Western music education, the dominant tradition is of playing 'classical' music from

written scores: there is a strong emphasis on musical literacy and on skills such as sight reading. Little attention is paid to improvisation, and many highly qualified conservatory graduates are unable to compose or improvise (see Campbell, 1991). Ethnomusicologists have demonstrated that most musical traditions are essentially improvised, and that most composers and performers have in the past been talented improvisers. The current emphasis on notation and reading in specialist music education has distracted us from this: a reversion to the earlier emphasis might well be more attractive to many potential pupils.

Improvisation is at the heart of children's spontaneous musical activity: their early singing, dancing and clapping all demonstrate the characteristics of playful activity that were identified by Froebel. MacDonald, Wilson and Miell (2012) have identified four distinct features of musical improvisation which are very helpful in trying to understand why this form of activity might be valuable for children. First, improvisation is *creative*: improvising musicians produce new music which has never been heard before, in which they use their imaginations to develop and elaborate upon their knowledge of existing forms and structures. Second, improvisation is *spontaneous*: it is created as it is being played. Musicians create improvisations by reacting, moment by moment, to immediate musical contexts, and do not necessarily try to replicate what they have produced on previous occasions. Third, improvisation is *social*: music is essentially something that is done with others, and the overall production of a group improvisation involves contributions from all of the participants: the interaction between them gives the music its essential characteristics. Fourthly, improvisation is *accessible*: it is something that anybody can do, without needing special training or experience. 'Improvisation affords an egalitarian view of musical expression and communication, based upon exchange and

negotiation of novel ideas and not necessarily upon the acquisition of advanced technical skills' (MacDonald, Wilson and Miell, p. 247).

In the next section I should like to illustrate all of these points, and to 'unpack' these ideas in more detail by analysing a brief blues improvisation by a jazz musician (myself) and my two children, who were 4 and 5 years old at the time.

### **'Woke up this morning'**

To set the scene briefly: my wife and I made extensive but unsystematic tape recordings and transcriptions of the songs and speech of our two sons Jon and Tom over their preschool years, and some of these are documented elsewhere (Hargreaves, 1986). At the time, I was fairly active as a semi-professional jazz musician, so that the idea of making recordings and giving musical performances was a common and unremarkable activity in the household. The boys became keen on tape recording their own 'shows' and concerts without much parental encouragement, and the present example was recorded in such a context. One of our activities, a kind of family party game, was to improvise a 12 bar blues song with piano accompaniment, in which each member could sing a verse based on any topic.

This particular song, which is shown in Figure 1, the turned out to be 2½ choruses (verses) long. I improvised the opening section at the piano, the words of which were inspired by our car at the time, which I saw standing outside. This was a Morris 1000 Traveller, an unusual British vehicle sometimes known as a 'shooting brake'. The amusing (to the boys) idea that the car had exploded (a rhyme with 'road') was

immediately echoed verbally by Tom, who subsequently adopted an accompanying role as the main lead was taken by Jon, age 5. Jon improvised two further verses, with appropriate support from Tom and myself. At the time neither boy had had any regular musical instruction, though both were very keen and active in unstructured improvisations on whatever instruments or utensils were available (as the neighbours will attest!).

----- Figure 1 around here -----

Both boys sang in tune, using stereotypical blues notes and phrasing: Tom's scat singing accompaniments, for example, were typical 'breaks' that might have been made by a vocal or brass section. Jon's phrasing and delivery incorporated elements which were part spoken and partly delivered in an 'American' accent, fitting with his perception of the genre. Two points need to be made about the content of Jon's improvised verse for non-British readers to make sense of it. The first is his reference to a 'jumble sale': this is an event at which householders sell their second-hand goods. In his first verse Jon follows the car theme by suggesting (accurately!) that the car was old, and for sale, which leads on to the jumble sale idea.

Understanding the second verse requires the knowledge of a comedy song for children by the British comedian Benny Hill that was in the pop charts and played regularly on radio and TV at the time. This was a ditty about 'Ernie, the fastest milkman in the West'. In the UK many households receive a daily delivery of milk: and the song was a spoof cowboy shootout between Ernie the milkman, and Dan the baker, who were rivals for the attention of a female customer. The song was sung in Hill's 'comic' West country accent, a joking reference to the Wild West, and one verse included the memorable pun 'go for your bun',

issued by Ernie as a challenge to Dan the baker. This explains Jon's thinking in the second verse.

Let me point out four features of this song which illustrate my analysis of improvisational thinking and everyday creativity. First, the whole performance is a social/collaborative improvisation in which each of the three members makes a distinctive contribution. At the same time, these contributions are interdependent: the song is indeed a conversation in which each participant takes up and reacts to the ideas of the others. The contributions are also precisely synchronised to constitute a coherent musical performance: there are just two points at which members are singing simultaneously (indicated by the brackets in Fig. 1), and in each case there is a shared meaning or reaction.

Second, leading on from this, we might consider the questions of leadership in and ownership of the song. In one sense the 'teacher', myself, takes the lead by providing the scaffold – the piano accompaniment and introductory idea for the improvisation, and by making appropriate vocalisations – 'oh yeah' – at various points. Within this scaffold, however, the leadership is taken by Jon: and so we might suggest that group leadership can be shared and taken over by different members at different points. Similarly, all three members of the group share the ownership of the song: but Tom's contribution is of particular interest here. His is an accompanying, subsidiary role: but even before the song is completely finished, he attempts to regain attention by asking for his apple to be peeled. The concepts of shared leadership and ownership in group improvisations and composition are particularly important when it comes to assessment, which is usually done on an individual basis. In the present context, any such individual assessment could only be accomplished in the context of the group as a whole.

The third point concerns the cultural framing of the activity. As I have pointed out already, the sequence follows some immediately recognisable and stereotypical blues conventions. The song as wholes falls into recognisable 12 bar sequences: the notes sung by the boys include 'blue notes' such as minor thirds and sevenths: and the phrasing and general delivery are typical of the genre, including the 'breaks' at appropriate points in between verses. It is quite striking that this particular genre or 'cultural frame' is so clearly established in a pair of British preschoolers (although their home environment may not have been completely typical in this respect). Furthermore, the contents of the song are borrowed directly from everyday culture, including a pop song and a particular type of car.

This leads directly on to the fourth point: that improvisations involve a balance between structure and arbitrariness, or between constraint and freedom. The structure, or constraint, is provided by the blues form itself, and the various conventions associated with it: the group as a whole manages to produce a coherent improvisation which conform to this form. At the same time, however, there is a good deal of arbitrariness and spontaneity about it. The Morris Traveller formed the starting point because it happened to be standing outside, and this led on to other topics, also from everyday surroundings, by a process of association and feedback. Within certain limits, the direction of the improvisation can go in any one of a number of directions, and always involves unpredictability.

The successful negotiation of this balance between constraint and freedom is at the heart of creativity. Creative improvisers or composers are those who are able to work within



given cultural frames or forms, but who are also able to use the arbitrariness and freedom in a new and productive manner. When this balance is seen within a collaborative group context, it becomes clear how complex the phenomenon of improvisation really is. I hope that the ‘unpacking’ of this short improvisation has illustrated some of the depths of this complexity. A great deal is going on within this brief collaboration, and it is very likely that similar processes – and the four features outlined above – are part of productive group interaction in other activities as well.

### References

Campbell, P.S. (1991). Unveiling the mysteries of musical spontaneity. *Music Educators Journal*, 78, 21-24.

Hargreaves, D.J. (1986). *The developmental psychology of music*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Hargreaves, D.J. & Lamont, A. (2017). *The psychology of musical development*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

Froebel, F. (1895). *The Songs and Music of Friedrich Froebel's Mother Play (Mutter Und Kose Lieder)*, ed. Susan E. Blow. New York: D. Appleton & Company.

MacDonald, R., Wilson, G. & Miell, D. (2012). Improvisation as a creative process within contemporary music. In: *Musical imaginations*, Eds. D.J. Hargreaves, D.E. Miell, & R. MacDonald. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Piaget, J. (1951). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Robson, S. (2014). *The relationship between responsibility for children's choice of activity and evidence of self-regulation and metacognition*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Roehampton.

**Figure 1. ‘Woke up this morning’**

David (35 years)	Jon (5 years)	Tom (4 years)
Woke up this morning I saw a Morris Traveller in my road Woke up this morning That Morris Traveller ( <i>laughs</i> ) -----> Did explode	<--- ( <i>laughs</i> )	There’s a Morris Traveller exploding
	Woke up this morning I saw this car on the road It said it were for sale But it looked like <--- ---> ever so old I woke up the next morning Went to the jumble sale And when I came back I’d Have to carry so many things That I tumbled down the road	<---explode--->
Oh yeah		<i>scat blues break (trumpet)</i>
Yeah	And then a cowboy came With his gun He said I’m gonna shoot ya But I made him into a bun He liked being bread But he didn’t like it when I ate him up So that was the end of the cowboy Who changed into a loaf of bread	<i>scat accompaniment</i>  <i>scat accompaniment</i>  Dad please will you peel my peel my apple?