

The Art of Improvisation in Music, Theatre, and Dance

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Abstract: This study explores artistic improvisation as a vital mode of creation across music, theatre, and dance, where spontaneity and structure coexist to generate meaning in real time. Far from representing an absence of rules, improvisation relies on a flexible internal grammar rooted in listening, intuition, and presence. In music, improvisation evolves from the Baroque tradition, exemplified by Bach, Handel, Scarlatti, and continuo practice, through Classical and Romantic innovations by Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt, and Chopin, to the 20th-century emergence of jazz and the avant-garde, where indeterminacy becomes a compositional tool. The Romanian context mirrors this evolution, from Enescu's interpretative freedom to contemporary experimental scenes integrating jazz, electronic, and free improvisation. In theatre, improvisation functions as both pedagogy and performance, from Commedia dell'Arte to the work of Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Grotowski, Brook, Spolin, and Johnstone. In Romania, improvisational practices expanded after 1970 and flourished in post-1990 independent theatre. In dance, improvisation manifests as instantaneous composition informed by spatial and bodily awareness, shaped by figures such as Duncan, Laban, Paxton, Forsythe, and Halprin; in Romania, it gained prominence after 1990 through contemporary choreographers. Across all disciplines, improvisation balances freedom and order, fosters interaction, and privileges presence, ultimately revealing artistic creation as a living, unrepeatable process.

Key-words: *improvisation, performing arts, music; theatre, dance, spontaneity, controlled freedom, real-time creation, interdisciplinarity*

1. Improvisation in Music

1.2. The Baroque Art of Improvisation: Controlled freedom in musical creation

In music, improvisation has always been a fundamental element of the creative act, a realm of controlled freedom where performer and composer merge. During the Baroque era, the ability to improvise represented the summit of musical mastery. Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, and Domenico Scarlatti were not only authors of scores but also masters of the improvisatory art in harmonic and

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contrapuntal terms. The practice of basso continuo, ornamentation, and concertante cadenzas illustrate how improvisation organically integrated into the formal construction of a work.

1.2. Improvisation from Classicism to Romanticism

In the Classical period, Mozart and Beethoven continued this tradition. For them, improvisation was not a deviation from rigor, but a way of renewing it. Beethoven, renowned for his improvisational moments, believed that true artistic freedom manifests when the musician thoroughly understands the rules and can transcend them spontaneously. During the Romantic era, improvisation became a form of sonic confession, a discourse of subjectivity. Liszt and Chopin transformed the improvisational moment into an emotional declaration, a direct transposition of inner experience.

1.3. Improvisation in 20th-Century Music: Jazz, Indeterminacy, and New Creative Freedom

In the 20th century, jazz rediscovered the essence of improvisation and transformed it into an autonomous compositional principle. The practice of sonic dialogue, call and response, the freedom of thematic variation, and rhythmic exploration turned jazz into an art of disciplined freedom, where spontaneity becomes structure. At the same time, the musical avant-garde, through composers like John Cage, Stockhausen, and Ligeti, reintroduced indeterminacy and chance as integral parts of composition, offering performers the freedom to shape form at the moment of execution. Thus, in modern classical music, improvisation does not contradict rigor but complements it, restoring the balance between creation and interpretation, reaffirming the living and unrepeatable nature of the sonic art.

1.4. Musical Improvisation in Romania: Between Tradition and Experimental Freedom

In the Romanian context, musical improvisation evolved along different paths, oscillating between academic tradition and contemporary exploration. In classical music, it initially manifested through variations and concert cadenzas, later being revitalized by composers and performers interested in the relationship between structure and freedom. In the 20th century, George Enescu integrated a high degree of interpretative improvisation into his violin artistry, turning each performance into a unique act. During the postwar period, interest in free improvisation grew alongside the development of Romanian contemporary music.

Composers such as Anatol Vieru, Aurel Stroe, and Cornel Țăranu introduced elements of controlled freedom and chance, granting the performer a co-creative role. After 1990, the Romanian musical scene opened up to experimental improvisation through festivals such as InnerSound, Simn 2000, and Jazz in the Park, where musicians from contemporary jazz, electronic, and free improvisation, including Lucian Ban, Sorin Romanescu, Nicolas Simion, and Mihai Iordache, fostered a culture of interdisciplinary improvisation. These practices shaped a generation of artists able to unite the rigor of academic training with the freedom of sound expression.



Fig. 1. *Musical improvisation*

2. The Evolution of Theatrical Improvisation: Global Lineages and Romanian Developments

In theatre, improvisation represents a realm of collective creation and the study of scenic presence. It can simultaneously serve as a pedagogical method, a dramaturgical discovery technique, and an autonomous performative form. Its historical roots lie in the Commedia dell'Arte, the 16th-century Italian popular theatre form, where actors developed fixed characters and improvised situations based on skeletal scenarios. Harlequin, Pantalone, and Colombina became living archetypes, and scenic improvisation was the driving force of expressivity and direct audience interaction.

2.1. Reinventing Acting: Improvisation in Modern Theatre Schools

In the 20th century, improvisation was revalued by major modern theatre schools. Konstantin Stanislavski employed improvisational exercises to cultivate actors' spontaneity and authentic interaction. For him, improvisation was a means to access scenic truth and organically construct character behavior. Vsevolod Meyerhold advanced this principle through biomechanics, emphasizing the body's instant reaction and rhythm as compositional principles. Later, Jerzy Grotowski transformed improvisation into a laboratory method, where the actor explored the limits of body and emotion to achieve total sincerity. Peter Brook, in *The Empty Space*, speaks of living theatre as an art of presence, impossible without genuine improvisation capable of sustaining a living connection between actor and spectator.

2.2. The Rise of Modern Improvisational Theatre in the US and Europe



Fig. 2. *Improvisation in theatre*

In America, Viola Spolin founded a true school of theatrical improvisation, treating it as a pedagogical tool for developing creativity. In *Improvisation for the Theater*, Spolin stressed the importance of play and authentic response, developing a system of exercises based on acceptance, listening, and adaptation. Her disciple Paul Sills founded The Second City troupe in Chicago, establishing improvisation as a self-standing performance form. Another key figure, Keith Johnstone, in *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979), introduced techniques such as status games and yes, and..., transforming improvisation into an art of controlled spontaneity and collaborative

creation. In France, Ariane Mnouchkine and Théâtre du Soleil used improvisation as a method of collective performance construction, while in the UK, troupes such as The Comedy Store and Improbable Theatre continue to experiment with long-form improvisation based on open structures and creative collaboration.

2.3. Improvisation in Romanian Theatre: From Interwar Experiments to Contemporary Practice

In Romanian theatre, improvisation has had a more discreet yet deep history. In the interwar period, great actors such as Ion Manolescu and Tony Bulandra used forms of scenic improvisation during rehearsals to organically discover character behavior. After 1948, theatrical pedagogy was dominated by realist tradition; however, in the 1970s and 1980s, directors such as Liviu Ciulei, Cătălina Buzoianu, and Andrei Șerban introduced improvisation as a method for exploring text and scenic presence. In his La MaMa laboratory, Andrei Șerban worked extensively with improvisational techniques inspired by ritual and Eastern theatre, developing performances in which the actor was a co-creator of meaning. After 1990, improvisation became an essential element in Romanian acting schools. Professors Bogdana Darie and Liviu Lucaci developed complementary methods: Darie focusing on physicality, listening, and expressive freedom; Lucaci on action analysis and dramatic coherence. Lucaci (2017, 53) remarked that for improvisation to be effective, the theme must be clearly and concisely formulated; otherwise, confusion, frustration, and miscommunication arise, leading to failed exercises.

In the independent theatre scene, improvisation has flourished over the past two decades. Groups such as Improvisneyland, Backstage Boys, Obligó, and Just Push Play have created a vibrant comedic improvisation scene, bringing this art into direct contact with audiences and contributing to spectator education through spontaneity, dialogue, and participation. In institutional theatres, younger directors such as Radu Afrim, Leta Popescu, and Catinca Drăgănescu frequently use improvisation as a tool for script construction in devised theatre and collaborative performances. Today, Romanian theatrical improvisation stands at a stage of maturity, emerging as a language of collective creation, a means of social exploration, and a form of aesthetic resistance within a dynamic cultural landscape.

3. Improvisation in Dance: From Ritual Expression to Contemporary Practice

In dance and choreography, improvisation is defined as a process of instant decision-making and exploration of the body in relation to space, time, and energy.

It requires controlled freedom, heightened attention, and deep awareness of physical presence. From ritual and folk dances, where movement expressed collective experience, to contemporary dance, improvisation has always been a means of knowledge and expression. In classical ballet, discipline and repetition marginalized spontaneity; yet modern dance, through Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman, and Rudolf Laban, revalued free movement as the expression of inner life. Laban's theory of "effort" provided an analytical foundation for improvisation, defining it as a conscious act of the body. Postmodern dance pushed this freedom even further. Steve Paxton, founder of contact improvisation, proposed a tactile exploration of weight and balance, where two or more dancers build movement through physical response. Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer redefined dance aesthetics, presenting improvisation as a method of composition and investigation of gravity. William Forsythe, in *Improvisation Technologies*, theorized improvisation as a tool for analyzing and generating movement. Anna Halprin explored the therapeutic dimension of dance, while Deborah Hay and Nancy Stark Smith transformed improvisation into a philosophical and reflective practice.

3.1. Choreographic Improvisation in Romania After 1990

In Romania, choreographic improvisation emerged after 1990 with the rise of independent contemporary dance. Choreographers such as Cosmin Manolescu, Mihai Mihalcea, Vava Ștefănescu, and Simona Deaconescu used improvisation as both a creative method and a means of researching corporeality.



Fig. 3. Improvisation in Romania

Within the National Dance Centre Bucharest, workshops on instant composition, performances with open structures, and contact improvisation practices have promoted an artistic environment where the body becomes a generator of meaning. These often interdisciplinary practices have connected Romanian dance to international trends, integrating improvisation as both a mode of thinking and an instrument of expressive freedom.

4. Grammar of Improvisation: Freedom, Interaction, and Presence

Across music, theatre, and dance, several shared principles can be identified. First, spontaneity supported by technical preparation, improvisation demands an informed freedom grounded in profound knowledge of the artistic language. Second, listening and interaction, each improvisatory act is constructed through communication, whether between sounds, bodies, or spoken lines. Third, balance between structure and freedom, improvisation is a flexible order, a system of implicit rules that ensure coherence without a fixed plan. Finally, total presence, the here and now dimension, forms the essence of any improvisatory act, as the artist simultaneously experiences creation and reception.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the improvisatory act represents a common core of the performing arts. In music, it restores the link between composer and performer, in theatre, it redefines the relationship between actor and text, in dance, it renews the connection between body and space. In every case, improvisation transforms uncertainty into creative resource and the fleeting moment into aesthetic experience. It is not an escape from rigor, but a way to transcend it, an art of balance between order and chance. In an artistic world often dominated by reproduction and repetition, improvisation reminds us of the living, unrepeatable nature of the creative act. Through the spontaneous articulation of sound, gesture, or movement, it unites these three disciplines into a shared language of freedom and presence, making art not an object but a process, not a fixed form, but a living experience. In essence, improvisation is a practice of knowledge and freedom, a way through which the artist transforms chance into harmony and the fleeting instant into enduring meaning.

Improvisation is imagination embodied. What imagination is to the dreamer, improvisation is to the actor. It is an exercise in freedom, a freedom practiced not

only in the mind, as with imagination when we wander through the illusory world within, but a freedom expressed through the body, with all senses awakened, in dialogue with our partners on stage and the audience present in the room, in harmony with the surrounding space and with the objects we encounter (Lucaci 2017, 52).

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