

BOOK REVIEW

Children's Guided Participation in Jazz Improvisation: A Study of the 'Improbasen' Learning Centre. Series: SEMPRE Studies in The Psychology of Music, by Guro Gravem Johansen. Routledge, 2021. xiv+190 pp., hbk, £120, ISBN: 978-1-138-32297-4. doi: 10.4324/9780429451690
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Can young children play improvised jazz together? The answer provided by Guro Gravem Johansen's study is an emphatic yes. While jazz is often constructed as an adult music genre, children are arguably among the most active and receptive of musical learners. The private Norwegian learning centre Improbasen offers beginner's instrumental tuition within jazz improvisation for children aged 7–15. To a very great extent, this is a book about one man's approach to jazz pedagogy. Johansen thoroughly describes jazz teacher Odd André Elveland's methods for instructing children in jazz improvisation. Johansen's ethnographic study of the teaching and learning at Improbasen highlights several features, spanning from the micro-interactions within lessons to international concert tours and touching on critique of traditional jazz pedagogy as well as on the socially transformative potential of gender inclusivity.

Drawing on the psycholinguist Nick C. Ellis, Johansen distinguishes between *explicit* and *implicit* learning dimensions, and she structures her study of Improbasen accordingly. The explicit learning dimensions in the present context, referring to such learning content that is deliberately focused on, articulated and made concrete, are typically presented within a musical context so that learning tunes, chords and scales is “always intertwined with a situational presence of a rhythmic groove and form” (p. 86). Lucid and vivid ethnographic “vignettes” provide detailed and sometimes quite astonishing accounts of young children's processes as they internalise the melody, chords and scales of jazz standards such as “All the Things You Are” or “Stella by Starlight” and learn how to improvise over them.

The children are thus guided and socialised into an established practice. Elveland's emphasis on chords and scales is discussed in relation to the common criticism against chord-scale approaches in jazz pedagogy. He argues that this approach is relevant for developing aural skills such as inner hearing and inner aural imagination, making the children able to hear and anticipate tonal connections – provided that aural training is integrated with theoretical understanding and technical ability.

Johansen points out how Elveland lets the children “simultaneously experience the material in an integrated, embodied, and musical – often non-verbal – way” (p. 108) and how his teaching, through its emphasis on non-verbal communication, focuses on the “experiential and holistic” dimensions of the pupils' processes (p. 114). While the rhythmic frameworks of beat and form are not mentioned explicitly by the teacher, the focus of lessons is often to develop the pupils' awareness of these frameworks. As a rule, Elveland tends to talk minimally during lessons in order to keep a musical flow of the activity and let the children develop their aural relationship to their instrument and use their ears to find the right notes. Importantly, two abilities are prioritised: to be able to continue playing even if you miss a note, and to know where you are in the musical form. As a preparation for interplay with other children, during individual lessons Elveland often continues to play the piano when the pupil makes a mistake, thereby challenging them to use their ears to relate to the functional harmonic chord progression and find their way back.

Judging from the ethnographical descriptions, the teacher's piano playing during lessons tends to be rather complex and perhaps at times challenging to the pupils, including complex poly-rhythms and melodic fills. Elveland comments on this: “They haven't heard much jazz when they start to play, so this way, they will hear some, at least. But I also try to lay out ideas to the pupil,

without being too directive. I want to hint at communicative things and make sure they come ‘under the skin’ of it, without directly telling” (p. 122). Johansen points to the deep and lasting concentration she observes in a child during such musical interplay with the teacher, referring to it as “*A magical moment*” (p. 123). During concerts, Elveland’s piano playing typically focuses on providing a firm, dominant, “bassy” groove in order to let the children experience and relate to a consistent musical flow, then gradually building down the rhythmic scaffold as their abilities increase.

Elveland deliberately avoids addressing questions of rhythmic phrasing, partly for technical reasons since he finds that the micro-dynamics involved have to wait until the pupils have developed a solid instrumental technique and ability to play legato. Emphasising the importance of musical enculturation and immersion in order to learn idiomatic jazz phrasing, he contends that his Norwegian pupils “don’t listen so much to jazz” but that, in comparison, they do not copy but *improvise more* than Japanese children he met and taught (p. 129). Improbasen’s methods are very little about steering or guiding the pupils’ improvisatory choices but to give them a lot of time to discover and explore what it means to create music; in Elveland’s words: “I let them play for a very long time the first times they improvise, to see if that change comes, that they begin to make music instead of just pressing the keys, doing as they are told. Most of them can sit there and fool around for a while, and then they start to notice that what they create is music” (p. 131).

There is an obvious potential contradiction between guiding by providing tools and aiming at nurturing independence by *not* guiding. Johansen addresses how lack of verbal explanation – while guided by an aim to make the children independent and able to figure out problems themselves – may sometimes cause impatience and frustration in the pupils. Elveland’s strategies to enhance pupils’ individual confidence seem to include a certain pressure at times, and this is made the subject of critical scrutiny. Nevertheless, several of the ethnographic “vignettes” point to how the children turn out to be perfectly able to indulge in musical conversations, both within the framework of jazz standard tunes and in communication-based interplay in collective “free” improvisations, where a shared meaning making clearly emerges. There are also indications of significant knowledge exchange between children as they experience the playing of peers from, e.g., Japan and Austria; Johansen points out that since “great” jazz performers over history are predominantly men, this peer-to-peer identification may be especially important to girls.

Johansen recognises the need to address issues of authenticity; in response to discourses in music education that often reject idiomatic material from “adult” music in favour of autonomy, authenticity and self-chosen music, she distinguishes between *context authenticity* (e.g., feeling that you actually play jazz) and *subjective authenticity* (including a sense of ownership). She describes an interesting encounter between different jazz pedagogies, where the Improbasen approach is questioned by other teachers, in part because they consider it to be based on too difficult and complex music for the children to understand and feel an ownership to, and in part because they question Elveland’s comparatively dominant way of playing along with the pupils.

While these other teachers seem to adhere to a pedagogical ideology where little interference from adults would make the pupils’ expressions more authentic “*as expressions from children*” (p. 166), Johansen argues, on the other hand, that the musical vocabulary and framework that Elveland’s pupils work with are clearly not too complex, since the children *are* able to play within them, and that when they do, they are authentic “*as children in the middle of a learning process*” (p. 170). The rhetoric of her argument is quite loyal to the Improbasen approach, concluding with 13-year-old saxophonist Christine’s comment on the view of jazz as “adult music”: “I think I manage to play what I do quite well! I think it would be much harder for an adult to learn what I am learning, because children learn much easier, like language and stuff” (p. 170).

Through its descriptions of how learning to improvise enables children to develop the ability to *think in music*, Johansen’s book is not only a powerful plea in defence of difference and diversity in jazz improvisation education, but also regarding improvisation as a central activity in music pedagogy generally. Reading this book has brought smiles to my face several times – due to

remembering and re-experiencing something quite similar. I recall how almost 40 years ago as a student in the jazz educator programme at Malmö Academy of Music I participated in a project that aimed to teach children aged 8–13 to play improvised jazz together (“Hotta från åtta” [“Improvising jazz music from the age of eight”], 1983). It was no easy task, and Johansen’s book has made me reflect on the challenges I recall in new and productive ways. There is no doubt that her detailed and well-reasoned account of Improbasen’s methods for teaching children jazz improvisation – peculiar as they may undoubtedly seem to some – provides valuable food for thought to music education research in general and to jazz educators in particular.

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