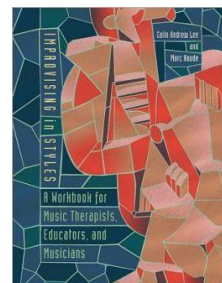


Improvising in Styles: A Workbook for Music Therapists, Educators and Musicians (Colin Lee & Marc Houde)

Reviewed by Ben Saul



Title: Improvising in Styles: A Workbook for Music Therapists, Educators and Musicians | **Authors:** Colin Lee & Marc Houde | **Publication year:** 2010 | **Publisher:** Barcelona Publishers | **Pages:** 432 | **ISBN:** ISBN: 978-1-891278-58-7

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Our age seeks many things. What it has found, however, is above all: *comfort*. Comfort, with all its implications, intrudes even into the world of ideas and makes us far more content than we should ever be.

Arnold Schoenberg,
Preface to the first edition, *Theory of Harmony* (1911)

INTRODUCTION

First there was Schoenberg, who with others both allied and independent embarked on a compositional journey that illuminated the unfolding and invigoration of all music in the subsequent decades of the twentieth century. In laying out his theory of harmony he noted that “the evolution of no other art is so greatly encumbered by its teachers as is that of music” (Schoenberg 1922: 7). Schoenberg (1922: 1) insisted that his theory of harmony was “learned from my pupils”.

Then there was the great American composer, Aaron Copland, who complained that a “regrettable gulf separates the interpreter and composer in present-day musical life. They are not interacting enough!” (Copland 1952: 57).

Also there was the pioneering music therapist, Paul Nordoff, who when he first observed the

transformative effect of music therapy later told Clive Robbins

“Here I am in Europe with a trunk full of music trying to get a symphony performed and here is a musician using music to bring a child into speech. There is no doubt in my mind which is the more important” (Robbins 2005: 8).

The warmth of the teacher-student relationship between the authors Colin Andrew Lee and Marc Houde is palpable on reading *Improvising in Styles*. Relationships between the past and the present, personal experience and abstract truth, and individual exploration and vigorous debate in community are the starting points for this publication of theirs. It is in this spirit that they have sought to bring a learning and teaching resource to music therapists, educators and other interested musicians.

Improvising in styles has been developed out of what Lee describes as a “music centred theory” of music therapy that he calls aesthetic music therapy (AeMT) (p. 6). In declaring himself a composer / therapist Lee wonders (p. 7) “What does it mean to think of clients as composers and artists? The client

as composer then becomes the blank page of the therapeutic process. This is the essence of AeMT". Does this supposition bear scrutiny? Does that not make the client the manuscript? What value can be derived from the teachings of aesthetic music therapy and how are they practically presented?

I teach music making and improvised composition to trainee music therapists. The reader can rest assured that I acknowledge the following as I begin this review.

Firstly, that I recognise the type of Damascene experience attributed to Nordoff, as it occurred to me as a young man that something such as music therapy was possible and made a better fit to my musical skills than anything else I had encountered previously in music making.

Secondly, that I recognise the importance of being both well instructed and clearly shown how to make music, where all of my music and music therapy teachers – be they in the room alongside me, on the page, on stage or in my headphones – have helped me to construct the coracle that contains my life as a musician as I go along. Coracles are ancient containers, designed over time by master craftsmen to meet a specific purpose but are also notoriously hard to propel and difficult to steer without being shown how.

Thirdly, that I have sat in many sessions where I must share the composer and interpreter role interacting with others who have better incentive to be urgent and challenging in expressing their vitality and discomfort than I, be they clients or students.

Arnold Schoenberg, armed with knowledge of the serial techniques developed by Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, grappled with the nature of and indeed the need for order in his music. I feel keenly the challenge and the compulsion of his desire that educators teach through amending their own errors, critically examining their instructions to students and seeking to improve their formulation.

It is in this spirit that I seek to offer a review and criticism of *Improvising in Styles*.

A ROAD TEST

Being able to measure the value of *Improvising in Styles* by attempting to teach with it, I am grateful to the music therapy students at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the University of the West of England who allowed me to do just that. Four musicianship groups of differing abilities and musical backgrounds were given sessions that focused on elements of the chapters on Classical, 20th Century and Song. Lee and Houde note that

"if you are a nonpianist, it is assumed that you have mastered all major and minor scales along with all triads and their inversions" (p. 8). In the UK, this would decidedly place you in the group 'pianists' and combined with the standard of musical examples given, this book would be most accessible to players of a standard Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music Grade VI and above.

The first thing noticed by all of the students were the errors that present themselves in the book, both in notation and description. There are six volumes of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*, neither Domenico nor Domenico Alberti created the Alberti bass, and describing A.D. 1000-1200 as the end of the medieval period caused a great distraction and mild confusion. The two chord misspellings in the description of the Stravinsky quote from the *Harbingers of Spring* (that is an E flat 7 chord and an F flat major chord – picky, but important in the context of Stravinsky's intention) is a significant error. The transcription of the *Tiny Dancer* groove that is in a different key to John's masterpiece and then bears no relation to the motives he plays within the harmonies represents the worse sin. The description of this groove as 3+3+2 is wrong, where it actually is a great example of a groove in common time that pushes onto the third beat.

If you wanted to study this groove you would discover a neatly crafted three-part motif of stepwise descending melody, inner ascending broken chord and I to IV lilting bass. You could describe this as 3+2+3 perhaps, but then listen to Bartok's version of this feel, *No. 4 of Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythms, Mikrokosmos 151, Vol. VI*, and there is a distinct difference between this and a piece that pushes against the 4/4 straight eights John's band provide.

These examples of inaccuracies are a selection, not the totality, but once the students had got past these and moved into the exercises some work began. There are exercises on how to work bi-tonally by limiting each hand to different note rows, how to continue in a style using alberti bass, harmonic accompaniment of embellished melodies, scale and arpeggio, and fixed intervals, to give some examples. These were taken up with gusto. It was reported back that such devices had been stimulating and had encouraged students to generate material outside of where their ideas and hands would normally fall.

However, as teacher and students, we found the connecting of the often good practical music-making exercises to special claims for composers and eras unhelpful as these prefaces were often

sparse, contentious, simplistic or gnomic. At the worst, in the absence of applicable instruction students are asked to consider indigestible statements such as the following:

“When analyzing his music for distillation into therapy, you get a sense that each phrase is concentrated and a pure outpouring of his soul. Finzi’s emotional and highly crafted music should be treated with great care in the clinical setting. Like JS Bach, Finzi can cut through to a client’s musical consciousness” (p. 171).

I do not know what this statement gives the student other than a confirmation that Lee or Houde have a high regard for the agnostic British composer. As a teacher I can do nothing with such highly personalised and subjective descriptions and would not begin to consider such blithe supposing with students.

Lee and Houde present a short section on the music of Gerald Finzi as part of a chapter on 20th century music, where they maintain that nationalism was a primary and defining musical framework of that period. My own personal love of Finzi’s music could indeed be a departure point in preparing teaching materials for students based on his compositions. However, I would be keen to show the specifics of his use of transformations in tempo, texture and tonality and the timbral effects of pitch combinations, exemplified in works such as *Dies Natalis* and *In Terra Pax*. These devices and transformations are comparable with those found in the works of his friends Ralph Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst, Edmund Rubbra and others. All of these composers did not so much capture Britishness but happened to share elements of musical language drawn from close friendships with each other, rivalries with other composers and an objective study of sources as varied as Tudor choral and instrumental music and English folk music, the compositions of French impressionists, European Romantic composers, and the ubiquitous Bach. Their output could now be broadly described as English romanticism. However, thinking of them as nationalistically British and that the first half of the 20th century was any more culturally preoccupied with national identity and folk traditions than any other period is not useful.

Lee and Houde reproduce whole works by Debussy and Mozart, harmonic sketches of Beethoven sonatas and large hunks of Brahms, Schumann, Bach et al. but they do not often make sure that there are tangible elements identified that we the learners can cut and propagate. Instead we

are instructed too often to “focus on the beauty of this piece” or “become lost in the beauty of its sounds and textures” (p. 119). Students tended to be nonplussed by such invitations where there was little or inconsistent structure offered for them to begin to do this.

THE CASE FOR TEACHING IMPROVISING IN STYLES

When presenting music that is personally important to you, it is harder perhaps to break up such an integrated experience with its attachments and dynamics back into the elements that you suppose made them. If this is possible, you then have to experiment with language to find a way of saying what you mean in a way that can be understood by diverse audiences. As a teacher, I can quite often assume a level of understanding and shared appreciation with students at the beginning of a teaching opportunity that actually undermines the way in which the topic might be taught. Similar assumptions can compromise the way in which teachings are offered in books such as this outside of the sphere of influence of a specialist classroom or training. Such environments, where there are supportive direct relationships, always offer the opportunity to say something, repeat it, discuss it and transform it so bespoke learning takes place.

We encourage music therapy students to begin to organise continuums between sensing and thinking, particularly in their music and clinic work, as they train. Educators in music therapy should offer opportunities to enhance this with attendant focus on manageable development using stimulation based in rigorous and tested methods: not solely presenting technical methods of generating material, of course, but also not swamping the student with emotive swells. This sort of balance is more present particularly in the chapters on Jazz and the Blues, which are the stand-out lessons of *Improvising in Styles*. Overall though, across the book this balance is skewed towards enthusiastic ebullience, and learning opportunities are confounded through attempting to present music, composition and improvisation held in style, the satisfaction of self-expression and subjective receptive aesthetic appreciation. I would suggest that form and structure are the containers actually needed.

As an example, any study of the *Brahms Op. 118, No. 2*, can teach us particular things about movement within and away from the hierarchies of home key, balance of multiple voices across the hands at the piano, forms within forms,

accommodation of movement and maintenance of shape and flow in a piece of broadly ternary form that also widens or jags open in each section based on varied binary forms, dependent on your view. In one of the many student analyses of this work online, Cumberbatch (1999) notes the principle of developing variation Brahms adopts, which he uses “not only to expand musical structures and ideas, but also to interrupt and subvert normative progressions and figurations” (para 5, line 1). The ideas of developing variation and the power of internal subversions are interesting for the music therapist. These can be presented to music therapy students as a fantastic device for shaping improvisations and understanding the flow of sessions. Brahms was meticulous in his description of how he thinks the music should move and flow in these microcosm forms. Of note in this review, his student, Gustav Jenner, recalled particularly that Brahms was interested in “the spirit, not the schema” of established forms (Frisch 1984: 34 as cited in Cumberbatch 1999).

There is great value in considering what the music therapist Sandra Brown (1999) notes on the value of thinking about the detail of emotional experiences in performance and therapy framed in *calando*, *un poco animato*, *più lento* and similar transformative indicators. She suggests that these show the signs of growth and vitality that can be developed in the music therapy relationship (Brown 1999: 65). Lee and Houde’s statements “[i]t is the richness of the harmonies that make the music so powerful” and “[t]his music should be played with rubato and great feeling” (p. 146) frustrate both Brahms and Brown as they in turn dilute and contradict what is evident in the manuscript and give the student no foothold to start exploring this music. Furthermore, they dispute Brown’s summary of Nordoff’s legacy and, in my opinion, the spirit of where the music therapy relationship should be or get to where the client, not the therapist should “take responsibility for form and structure” (p. 66).

CONCLUSIONS

Analysts such as Cook and Epstein note that style grows out of form and the stylistic clarity of the Classical and Romantic periods occurred because “form was important to the classical composers and that their style was largely designed to delineate form clearly” (Cook 1987: 14). Understanding Schoenberg to be composing using motives, motivic form and developing variations (Epstein 1987: 19) allows the student to learn about atonality in the same way they might learn about Bach,

Mozart or any other composer from any other period by studying the relationships between musical elements these composers developed. The fundamental problem of the book being reviewed is that this is often disregarded, for example, where Lee and Houde state the following:

“Atonality without form is meaningless and thus will provide a meaningless therapeutic process. Used carefully and with consideration, atonal improvisation can be a wonderful therapeutic / musical tool. Used without thought, it can be unsettling and intimidating” (p. 199).

Using any musical device, from a cadence to a sonata form without thought will potentially be unsettling and intimidating. Understanding the nature and effect of atonality should be based on clear, detailed musical thinking and not generalisations.

It would be useful to be clear that my feeling is the ideas underpinning aesthetic music therapy are limited in their ability to help develop imitable effective music therapy work. There may exist for the authors a clinically useful relationship between performing musician and clinician as practising music therapists. Many music therapists will think hard about the balance between these two parts of their lives and their effect on each other. Indeed, movement towards a clearer explanation for how music is therapeutically effective, based on what we know as performing musicians, analysts and students of the history of musical development is needed. Too often this book does not achieve this. The challenge to produce such a text may remain unmet. Speaking of what we gain from our knowledge of the history of music, Stravinsky said

“How shall we reasonably explain what no one has ever witnessed? If we take reason alone as a guide in this field, it will lead us straight to falsehoods, for it will no longer be enlightened by instinct. Instinct is infallible. If it leads us astray, it is no longer instinct” (Stravinsky 1947: 25).

Where instinct is integrated with reason and the student is invited to consider both the mechanics and dynamics of compositions, rather than perhaps attempting to introject whole entire objects, perhaps any piece of music from any tradition can potentially teach us much about both the movements and the essences of music making that we can use as music therapists. It is incumbent upon educators in this field to show us how to grasp the nettle and then begin.

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